A CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY FOR WHAT AND FOR WHOM?

[UMA TEORIA SOCIAL CRÍTICA PARA QUÊ/PARA QUEM?]

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Resumo: Uma teoria social crítica para quê/para quem? Esta questão é a chave-de-leitura que o artigo usa com o objetivo de problematizar as relações e a dependência entre teoria sociológica, *práxis* política e institucionalismo forte. O argumento central do artigo consiste em que a tradição sociológica ocidental no século XX assumiu uma compreensão sistêmica de sociedade enquanto base epistemológico-política para sua constituição, legitimação e influência política, o que levou ao institucionalismo forte, isto é, à correlação e à autojustificação entre ciências sociais e instituições políticas, de modo que instituições científico-políticas tornam-se sobrepostas à *práxis* política dos movimentos sociais, bem como neutras e imparciais em relação às lutas de classe, despolitizando a constituição, a legitimação e a evolução dos sistemas sociais. Assim, o segundo argumento central do artigo consiste em que uma teoria social crítica para o estudo da constituição e da crise da modernização ocidental contemporânea deve abandonar sua defesa e sua conexão com o institucionalismo forte, auxiliando movimentos sociais em sua crítica epistemológico-política à tecnicização e à autonomização dos sistemas sociais.

Palavras-chave: Sociologia; Política; Institucionalismo; Democracia; Criticismo social.

Abstract: A critical social theory for what and whom? This question is the key for this paper in order to problematize relationships and the dependence relating sociological theory, political *praxis* and strong institutionalism. The paper's central argument is that the Western sociological tradition in the 20th century assumed a systemic understanding of society as epistemological-political basis of its constitution, legitimation and political influence, which led to strong institutionalism, that is, the correlation and self-justification between social sciences and political institutions, so that scientifical-political institutions become overlapped in relation to political *praxis* of social movements, as neutral and impartial regarding class struggle, depoliticizing social systems' constitution, legitimation and evolution. The paper's second central argument is that a critical social theory for the constitution and crisis of contemporary Western modernization must abandon the defense of and connection with strong institutionalism, supporting social movements in their epistemological-political criticism to social systems' technicization and autonomization.

Keywords: Sociology; Politics; Institutionalism; Democracy; Social Criticism.

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Sociological theory has long been committed to institutionalism, in the sense that the study of social dynamics, institutional structures and even social mass behavior would influence and determine social evolution in very fundamental aspects, in very basic structural senses (sometimes social evolution as a whole). Therefore, the scientific study of these institutional-collective movements and practices would allow the improvement of political institutional power not only in order to plan social evolution and social behaviors, but also *to control* social evolution and social-political forces, minimizing their political capability to change social order from outside the institutions and their legal staff, from outside the scientific legitimation and guidance, by marginal political spheres and subjects. This is true in relation to Comte, Durkheim and Weber, as well as to Marx. And this is true in relation to many contemporary sociological theories as well, as those of Parsons, Habermas and Giddens, at least in one important sense. This is true, finally, in relation to contemporary liberal political theorists such as Nozick and Rawls. From the moment in which they conceive of society as based on and divided in social systems which streamline social evolution and *status quo* from structural movements and dynamics, these sociological (and philosophical) theories attribute to institutions the function of programming and orienting social evolution, the constitution of social systems and the *praxis* of social subjects. Here emerges what is known as *strong institutionalism* concerning the constitution, legitimation and social boosting of political and economic institutional decisions and the theoretical-political centrality of their formal procedures and legal staff, in a way that denies the very social and classist constitution of the institutions or social systems. Therefore, strong institutionalism entails the institutional centralization and monopolization of the constitution and legiti-mation both of institution's internal structuration and grounding and social evolution as well. Here, institutions or social systems

become the very fundamental arena, criteria and subject both of their internal constitution and of social evolution as a whole.

This paper provides a critical analysis of this strong institutionalism in sociological-philosophical theory, according to which the basic theoretical goal is to strengthen institutions or social systems in order to frame and guide social evolution and social subjects from the institutions' centrality in terms of constitution and legitimation of the social order. It will be argued that the correlation between systemic theory and institutionalism as the basis for studying and framing the contemporary process of Western modernization in particular and of current democratic societies in general directs sociological-philosophical theories to the abandonment of the political *praxis* of the social movements and social classes as the background from which institutions and social evolution are streamlined and defined over time. Indeed, one of the most impressive characteristics of strong institutionalism is the fact that institutions – their internal dynamic, procedures, practices and legal staff – appears to be a very neutral, impersonal and impartial sphere-subject which is not determined by the struggles between social classes, as if they were overlapped in relation to particular social subjects, with conditions to guide and intermediate all of them – institutions become neutral and impartial with regard to social subjects and class struggles. Contemporary sociological-philosophical theories, in analyzing current societal constitution and dynamics, the current process of Western modernization, understand them as centralized in and defined by concurring and conflictive particular social systems, not as a result of struggles for hegemony between concurring social classes, which leads to the idea that political institutions centralize and monopolize the legitimation of social normativity, becoming very objecttive and formal with respect to each social system, but at the same time restricted in terms of a macro-structural social orientation and interventive *praxis* due to the individualization of society and of social subjects, due to the self-referentiality, self-

subsistence and autonomy of social systems, and regarding political *praxis* and social normativity as well.

In other words, contemporary sociological-philosophical theories give normative-political centrality to institutionalism in terms of the constitution, legitimation and social performance of the evolution and structuration of society since they understand the contemporary process of Western modernization from a common starting point – the idea that Western modernization is a process of systemic self-differentiation, self-referentiality and self-subsistence regarding political *praxis* and social normativity, which means both the affirmation of the particularization of contemporary societies – they are constituted by different social systems, as they have not macro-social subjects like social classes – and the theoretical refusal of a social-political analysis based on the correlation between society as a very interdependent totality and macro-social subjects. Therefore, it will be argued that it is important for contemporary sociological-philosophical theories to recover and renew the notions of *society* as an interdependent totality streamlined and defined by conflicting *social classes* as a theoretical-political alternative to systemic theory and its correlative strong institutionalism with the aim of facing the current constitution and crisis of Western modernization both nationally and internationally.

The renewal and reconfiguration of the sociological-philosophical theory for the contemporary process of Western modernization involve two important normative-political steps that are interdependent and correlative: first, the weakening of strong institutionalism as the basis of the constitution and legitimation of social evolution by the affirmation of the class struggles as the epistemological-political key to understanding institutions or social systems; second, the politicization of institutions or social systems, which means that their legitimation, framing and changing are social-political matters that cannot be centralized and monopolized by the very institutions or social systems, becoming an inclusive

democratic *praxis*. The central task of contemporary sociological-philosophical theories is the deconstruction of strong institutionalism concerning the constitution, legitimation and evolution of social systems, which is the basic conservative argument with respect to the contemporary process of Western modernization.

Social Theory and Strong Institutionalism

From the 19th and the 20th century onwards, sociological-philosophical theory has assumed an institutionalist role, in the sense that it was developed from the idea that the fundamental task of social sciences was the study of social systems or institutions and of social subjects with the goal of improving and strengthening political institutions as the basis of the constitution, legitimation and evolution of society as a whole. This notion implies a very close relationship between science and politics, between institutional science and political institutions, which was conceptualized as technocracy, that is, the scientific, technical and logical construction and legitimation of social analysis grounded a kind of strong institutionalism in political institutions, which led to institutional centralization and monopolization of justification and conduction of social evolution and to the institutional control of social subjects. In this sense, institutions, from the intersection and correlation between science and politics, became the epistemological and political core of society, beyond social movements, social classes and even the spontaneous democratic political *praxis*. Only from institutions and their internal procedures, practices and legal staffs, the same institutions and social evolution could be conceived of, defined and guided over time. What could be the reason for this? How such connection between science and politics led to and legitimized this strong institutionalism? What is the epistemological-political basis of strong institutionalism?

The sociological tradition of institutionalism is based on the idea that institutions or social systems are the epistemological-political core of social constitution, dynamics and evolution. These

institutions or social systems would be a set of formal rules, practices, procedures, codes and legal staffs which would validate the institutions' internal constitution and legitimation (defining the institution's self-understanding, its programming and functioning), at the same time that they would legitimize and guide the specific social field represented by each institution or social system. Thus, institutions – their constitution, grounding and evolution – would become a scientific *praxis* assumed by a very internal institutional community – including sociology and sociologists, economy and economists, political science and political scientists etc. –, which means that the institutional legitimation becomes not only technical and logical, but also neutral and impartial concerning social classes and politics. In other words, the sociological (truly the scientific) tradition of strong institutionalism conceives of institutions or social systems as logical-technical spheres, as depoliticized and non-normative instances which would be beyond current politics and class struggles. In this case, institutional constitution, legitimation and evolution is not a democratic (political-normative) matter and *praxis*, since it does not need inclusive social participation and deliberation; institutions belong to institutional communities, to institutional legal staff. They are streamlined only from a technical-logical procedure and grounding, by a technical legal staff. It is here that strong institutionalism emerges: institutions or social systems are a self-referential and self-subsisting set of rules, practices and legal staff which can autonomously and effectively be grounded from internal, centralizing and monopolizing the very social field they represent, therefore becoming this social field.

The systemic understanding of social evolution was widely adopted by the Western sociological tradition in the 20th century (see Gouldner, 1972; Habermas, 1988). It is characterized by the idea that the process of Western modernization – the consolidation of European cultural, economic and institutional modernity as the overcoming of traditional society – can be understood as a process

of systemic institutional self-differentiation, self-referentiality and self-subsistence insofar as modern society is constituted by different and sometimes conflicting social systems, each of them representing a very particular social field – for example, modern bureaucratic-administrative State and capitalist market. Western modernization as a process of systemic institutional particularrization and autonomization implies the fact that each of these social systems becomes particularized with regard to social evolution as a whole, centralizing and monopolizing the social field which it represents. Here, two important points of the systemic understanding of the process of Western modernization can be perceived. First, a social system is not a social-political subject or a social-political class, but a formal and procedural structure, a set of rules, practices and legal staff which establishes the way and the sense of the constitution, legitimation and evolution of the social field which it represents. Second, and as a consequence, a systemic institution is constituted by technical-logical procedures, practices, codes and legal staff, which means that a social system is not a political subject, matter and *praxis*. Therefore, the social, political and normative roots of social systems is denied (in conservative liberal positions) by systemic theory – or, at least, minimized (as, for instance, in the socio-logical-political positions adopted by Habermas and Giddens) – in a manner that leads both to strong institutionalism regarding the programing and functioning of social systems (as with respect to the social impact of institutions) and, mainly, to the fact that political *praxis* and social normativity are excluded from the systemic institutional *internal* constitution, legitimation and evolution. A sociological-political theory based on the systemic understanding of the process of Western modernization powerfully leads to strong institutionalism, that is, to systemic institutional self-subsistence, self-referentiality and autonomy concerning democratic political *praxis* and social normativity (see Weber,

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1984; Hayek, 1987; 1995; Parsons, 2010a; 2010b; Habermas, 2012a; 2012b; 1997; Giddens, 1996; 2001).

To the systemic understanding of social evolution, it is an important fact that social systems or institutions, in Western modernization, become a set of formal and procedural rules, practices and legal staff, since this allows the correlation between scientific objectivity, systemic autonomization and institutional *praxis* regarding the constitution, the legitimation and the evolution of each systemic institution, of the relations between systemic institutions, as of the social, political and normative link between them. This correlation means that social systems or institutions have a scientific constitution, grounding and evolution, because they are firstly technical and logical structures that would be streamlined by a scientific staff and in a scientific way (technical-logical, neutral-impartial procedures, practices and codes) that would have the conditions to understand and to program this kind of self-referential and particularized institutions. Therefore, in talking about economy, one is talking about a scientific *and technical* field that needs a scientific legal staff as epistemological-political subject for its grounding and programming. The same is valid for political and juridical institutions. Institutional functioning – in the systemic theory – is always internal, self-referential, self-subsisting and autonomous with regard to the general context of society, becoming a technical and logical *praxis* executed by a technical and logical staff. As a consequence, the self-limitation of each social system regarding others appears as the fundamental epistemological-political basis of the mutual relationships between different and even conflicting social systems, and to political *praxis* as well. This means that a self-referential, self-subsisting and autonomous social system or institution cannot be intervened by other social system, or by alien mechanisms, codes, practices and subjects. Only from internal procedures, practices, codes and legal staff each social system or institution can be understood, programmed, legitimized and streamlined through

time, not from the outside and by alien principles and subjects. This is where the social systems' logical and technical constitution, grounding and evolution lead to the institutional depoliticization and non-normative constitution, closing each social system both to democratic political *praxis* and social normativity. It is from here that strong institutionalism denies political *praxis*, centralizing and monopolizing social evolution into each self-referential and self-subsisting social system as the only technical-logical criterion and valid subject of institutional legitimation and social validation. This tendency is clearly and directly perceived in contemporary conservative liberalism, and this is a consequence – even if an indirect one – of the contemporary use by the New Left of the systemic theory in order to understand and conceive of the current process and situation of Western modernization (see Hayek, 2013; Nozick, 1991; Habermas, 2012a; 2012b; 2003a; 2003b; Giddens, 1996; 2000; 2001).

Indeed, two of the most important concepts found in the approach of the contemporary New Left are the concepts of *social system* as a very closed, autonomous and self-referential set of formal procedures, codes and legal staff, as said above, and that of *complex societies* marking the understanding of current societies. These concepts are used within a very strict correlation. The New Left also characterizes Western modernization by the emergence and consolidation of different and particularized social systems, each of them centralizing and monopolizing the constitution, grounding and evolution of its specific social field. It is clear that relationships are established among them, but they are fundamentally closed to alien principles and subjects; they are self-subsisting, self-referential and autonomous regarding other social systems in particular and social context in general. Thus, the first thing that should be understood in studying and discussing each of the social systems is the fact that they are technical and logical fields. For example, economy cannot be framed as a whole by political and normative principles, because it has a technical-

logical constitution and grounding which is not political or normative, but *economic*. Here economists and capitalists have the priority in terms of economical constitution, legitimation and evolution. The same can be said about political-juridical institutions: each has a very specialized constitution, legitimation and evolution that cannot be substituted by political-normative foundations and subjects. This is the reason why Habermas and Giddens dedicate much of their work to criticize not only communist societies, but also the Welfare State model of interventive and compensatory institutionalist politics (see Habermas, 1991; Giddens, 1996). As André Singer says in his book *Sentidos do Lulismo* (*The meanings of Lulism*, in a direct translation), the left of the 1970s and 1980s was a concerned and staunch critic of the model of the Welfare State, ignoring it as much as conservative liberalism (see Singer, 2012, p. 237-241). Today, the left is paying the bill, since we are facing a delegitimation of the normative-political constitution of public institutions and even of their (normative-political) relationships with economy led by conservative liberalism (and accepted by New Left!) (see Nobre, 2013; Singer, 2012). In the 1970s and 1980s, Habermas and Giddens argued that conservative liberalism was right in its criticism of the Welfare State's bureaucratization and interventionism regarding the market, thus advocating a new configuration of the relationships between the State and the market, in the sense that politics must respect the systemic (technical-logical) constitution, legitimation and evolution of the market, at least in a strong way. In this point, conservative liberalism was right in its opposition to the social-democratic project of Welfare State interventionist politics (see Habermas, 1997, p. 36/162; 2003a, p. 12-13; Giddens, 2000, p. 17-18/122-123; 2001, p. 40-42).

It is here that the concept of complex society as defining the contemporary constitution of the process of Western modernization becomes a very powerful (even if indirect, as in Habermas and Giddens) form of legitimation of the strong institutionalism

regarding the institutional constitution, legitimation and evolution. Indeed, Habermas and Giddens use this concept in order to understand and to conceive of contemporary social-political dynamics as a contraposition to the traditional left, which used the concepts of *society as a normative-political totality* constituted and streamlined by the *class struggles*. By the concept of complex society they refer to the fact that contemporary societies are not political-normative totalities imbricated in their parts, as much as they are not constituted and streamlined by conflictive macro-social classes. Society as an imbricated totality constituted and defined by conflicting social classes was a fact in the case of traditional societies and the beginning of the process of Western modernization, but it no longer holds in the case of the societies of the 20th and, mainly, of the 21st century. Contemporary societies are characterized, as referred above, by a very accelerated and consolidated process of individualization both in institutional and political terms: in the first case, the emergence and consolidation of the process of systemic institutional self-differentiation, self-referentiality and self-subsistence have divided society into particular, closed and specific social systems, each of them becoming the basis of constitution and legitimation of the social sphere which it represents; in the second case, political individuals and groups have lost or even gradually abandoned their class belonging and collective self-comprehension, becoming very individualized and no longer recognizing themselves as part of a social class or even of the society as a whole. In contemporary times, there is no such thing as a social totality, as social classes – this is the meaning of the concept of contemporary complex society. Therefore, political *praxis* and social normativity are not the basic fundaments of the constitution, legitimation and framing of social evolution, the same way that social institutions cannot be understood and framed by the affirmation of the class struggles as epistemological-political key-concepts of a critical social theory. The systemic understanding of institutional constitution, legitima-

tion and evolution must be taken into account when we want to understand, frame and change social systems (see Habermas, 1997, p. 140; 2012a, p. 9-11; Giddens, 2001, p. 46-48).

It should be observed, then, that social systems or institutions are not political and normative instances; they have a technical-logical functioning and programming that defines the kind of approach to their constitution, legitimation and evolution. Social systems are impartial, neutral and technical institutions which centralize and monopolize the understanding and grounding of their specific social fields, becoming the basis of the constitution of their specific social fields. Such impartial, neutral and technical process of institutional self-constitution means that the institution overlaps with particular social subjects, insofar as it cannot be misinterpreted as a product of class hegemony, as a result of class struggle. Firstly, as was already said, social systems are not normative-political fields and subjects in a double sense: an institution is a set of rules, practices, codes and legal staff which obeys a technical-logical configuration and legitimation; it is not equivalent to a normative-political macro-social subject. Therefore, the market, for instance, cannot be confused with and directly associated to something else as the capitalist class. Economy – the basis of understanding and legitimation of the market – is a science, a technique with objective procedures, principles and practices from which it becomes an institutionalized field of knowledge and technique which has priority in terms of the market's definition, as of political institutional configuration regarding the market's sphere. Likewise, very individualized societies cannot be reduced to a normative-political understanding or to a Manichean social division between conflicting social classes. We are in the era of political, social and cultural individualization, differentiation (see Hayek, 1948; Nozick, 1991; Habermas, 2003a; Giddens, 1996; 1997). As a consequence, political *praxis* and social normativity are important principles of the organization and constitution of contemporary societies, but they are not the only ones. The

technical-logical constitution of the social systems is found in the same position as they, defining the fact that social systems must be framed by systemic principles in first hand (see Habermas, 2003b, p. 25; Giddens, 2000, p. 109-110). Here, strong institutionalism acquires the legitimacy to close and autonomize the constitution, legitimation and evolution of social systems over time, denying a normative-political constitution of the very institutions. In the positions assumed by the New Left, the critical social theory, the moment it assumes the systemic comprehension of the process of Western modernization, becomes institutionalism, leading to strong institutionalism as the basis of political-economic constitution and grounding.

Social Theory's political core-role: Institutionalism and revolution

Strong institutionalism, which is based on the systemic understanding of social evolution and of institutional constitution, leads critical social theory into losing its normative-political rooting and its link with *praxis* – which was a very urgent concern for Habermas and Giddens. Indeed, the very basic goal of Jürgen Habermas's theory of modernity was, since the 1960s, to reconstruct a philosophical-sociological theory which could assume an emancipatory-critical sense and approach in order to frame and to rethink Western modernization (see Habermas, 1997; 2012a). It is in this sense that Habermas tries to conciliate a normative foundation with a systemic theory – this conciliation/correlation would allow a sociological diagnosis streamlined and sustained by a notion of social normativity which would enable the intersection of a critical social theory and an emancipatory political *praxis* in relation to the contemporary process of Western modernization and as a theoretical-political alternative to conservative liberalism and to communism. However, as was said above, the systemic theory is based on a notion of Western modernization which is characterized by the emergence and consolidation of closed,

particularized and technical institutions that centralize and mono-polize each social sphere into their internal formal, technical and logical procedures and legal staff. This leads to the depoliticization and non-normative constitution of social systems – they become logical and technical instances, procedures and subjects insofar as they are streamlined only by such technical-logical functioning and programing. So, despite Habermas's conciliation between a norma-tive model of European modernity and a systemic model of Western modernization, his application of systemic theory to un-derstand and frame Western modernization leads to a direct acceptance of the fact that social systems are basically technical, logical and depoliticized instances, so that a normative-political *praxis* can *sensitize them only from the outside*, performing only an *indirect political intervention* into the social systems (see Habermas, 2003b, p. 105-106/147-152). Here, a double point becomes very clear in defining the failure of Habermas's critical social theory in grounding a radical politics to face the crisis and the pathologies of contemporary Western modernization: First, social systems are technical and logical structures, as they are streamlined from a technical-logical programing and staff; second, as a consequence, a normative-political *praxis* cannot intervene into or replace the social systems' technical-logical functioning and programming. So what could actually be the use of a normative-political *praxis*?

Indeed, it is not good for many things if we accept the social system's technical-logical functioning and programing, that is, a normative-political *praxis* has no sense if we accept the idea that social systems are depoliticized and non-normative spheres beyond social classes, class struggles and class hegemony. Contrarily to that, systemic theory as the basis of understanding and framing of the Western modernization leads both to the social system's depoliticization and to the strong institutionalism concerning the institutional constitution, legitimation and evolution: each social system, as a technical-logical instance characterized by formal principles, practices, codes and legal staff, can at the same time

avoid normative-political framing and justification and centralize and monopolize its internal dynamics and grounding, isolating itself from external contexts, principles and subjects, becoming autonomous, self-referential and self-subsisting with regard to these exterior contexts, subjects and principles. Social systems appear as non-political instances in a double sense, therefore: first, they are technical and logical structures, assumed by a self-authorized legal staff; second, they have no political constitution and configuration, because they are not the result of political forces and classes. However, as formal and technical institutions they overlap with social classes, class struggles and class hegemony, they are beyond politics and political subjects, so they cannot be associated to any particular political group and project. Each social system, as a set of formal rules, practices and legal staff, guards and streamlines its own constitution and form of legitimation over time, beyond political *praxis* and subjects. Social systems, in the systemic theories, become neutral and impartial concerning the social-political forces, struggles and hegemony.

This is the reason why systemic theory allows the institutional self-justification, self-referentiality and self-subsistence of political *praxis* and social normativity. In other words, systemic theory leads to institutional stabilization against its own crisis and pathologies over time, by its depoliticization, technical-logical constitution and grounding. Within social systems, political *praxis* and social normativity have no place and no importance, because social systems work by technical-logical principles and practices, as they are legitimized and managed by the institution's internal technical-logical staff. By a technical-logical constitution and grounding, a social system can avoid its framing from a normative-political *praxis*, which means that a social system can affirm its technical-logical constitution and grounding against democracy's normative-political constitution, restraining it, limiting it in its pretension to frame and guide social systems' programing and functioning. At the same time, by its technical-logical constitution and grounding,

a social system can reduce its functioning and programing to an internal technical-logical staff, centralizing and monopolizing its own structuration and legitimation by closing itself to alien contexts, subjects and principles. As a consequence, a social system can always stabilize itself from its internal codes, practices, dynamics and legal staff, becoming self-referential and self-subsisting, which means that it becomes independent and autonomous regarding other social systems, regarding also political *praxis* and social normativity. This is the reason why Jürgen Habermas's critical social theory cannot ground a radical political *praxis* to frame, guide and even modify the social systems' constitution and functioning from outside based on normative-political principles and subjects: because it conceives of social systems as technical-logical instances with a non-political and non-normative constitution and grounding. Here, there are no political structuration and political subjects which determine and streamline social systems' constitution and legitimation, so that they become neutral and impartial social structures defined by an objective, technical and logical staff and procedure.

Therefore, Habermas's and Giddens's critical social theory lead indirectly to the opposite result as intended by them: not to the constitution and grounding of a radical democratic political *praxis* which faces the pathologies of Western modernization, but to the systemic stabilization by its autonomization, self-referentiality and self-subsistence regarding democratic political *praxis* and social normativity, which implies the depoliticization and non-normative constitution and grounding of social systems. The bureaucratic and economic powers have a very specific code, which is not political or normative, but technical-logical. Likewise, by the fact that macro-social classes do not exist anymore in contemporary complex societies, but only individualized and anonymous social subjects, none of them can assume a notion of social normativity from which it can perform a social-political *praxis* in the name of all society, excluding the systemic institutional self-referentiality,

self-subsistence and autonomization. So, in both situations – the technical and logical constitution and grounding of social systems, as the individualization and anonymity of social subjects –, institutions become the very basis of their internal constitution, legitimation and evolution, as of their own social fields. Social movements and citizen initiatives have legitimacy to criticize and even to frame the rooting and effects of social systems, but they cannot replace social system's technical and logical constitution, grounding and evolution with political-normative principles, as they cannot replace a technical-legal staff with their spontaneous political *praxis*.

It is here that Habermas's and Giddens's division of Western modernization into a normative and a systemic theory reveals its very problematic core and consequences, particularly the fact that there is a part of Western modernization that is always technical and logical, non-political and non-normative, which is very absurd. Indeed, Habermas's and Giddens's overcoming of a pure systemic theory as the basis of analysis of Western modernization by a mixture of systemic theory and normative theory does not tackle the incapability of a pure systemic theory to criticize Western modernization from a political-normative standpoint. The problem of systemic theory is not, as Habermas and Giddens think, the *pure* systemic theory, separated from a binding notion of social normativity, but, as we are arguing, the problem is the systemic theory itself! Institutions or social systems cannot be reduced to a formal, technical and logical set of rules, practices and legal staff, since they are not closed, self-referential, self-subsisting and auto-nomous spheres of social evolution as a whole and in relation to political *praxis* and social normativity. There is not, on the one hand, a technical-logical modernization represented by formal social systems and, on the other hand, a normative modernization represented by European cultural modernity which is political. In other words, the division between, on one side, technical-logical institutions and their legal staff and, on the other side, political-

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normative subjects does not hold. Habermas's and Giddens's division of Western modernization in a technical-logical and a normative-political sphere, in technical-logical subjects and normative-political subjects, leads to a contraposition which cannot be resolved by a democratic political *praxis*, since this contradiction and differentiation between social systems and lifeworld, technical-logical institutions and civil society, technical-logical elites and social movements, depoliticize and technicize the constitution, legitimation and evolution of social systems in so strong a sense and way that political democracy and social normativity become incapable of framing and guiding systemic institutions. It means that such a division makes systemic institutions absolutely self-referential, autonomous and self-subsisting, by understanding them as totally different institutions with respect to politics and social normativity. Indeed, modern systemic institutions are not political-normative, nor a product of class struggles and hegemony. They evolved over time by their technical-logical constitution and legitimation, by their self-authorized legal staff, not by a political struggle for hegemony. Likewise, institutional changes by political *praxis* cannot replace the social systems' technical-logical mechanisms (as bureaucratic power and money) and legal staff (political parties, courts, economists/capitalists) with political normative-principles and spontaneous political subjects. As a consequence, all institutional transformations are basically performed from within the social systems, by their formal, impartial and neutral procedures, practices, codes and legal staff, and this entails a very powerful limitation of the political democracy.

By eliminating politics and social normativity from the constitution, legitimation and evolution of social systems, by conceiving them as formal, neutral and impartial sets of rules, practices, codes and legal staffs, Habermas and Giddens caused a very powerful damage to the *political-normative* criticism and framing concerning these social systems. The moment they conceive of modern social systems (bureaucratic-administrative State and capitalist market)

as characterized by technical-logical mechanisms, by non-normative and non-political dynamics and subjects, they constructed and assumed, directly or indirectly, a rigid barrier between democratic politics and systemic institutions, between technical-logical staff and social movements and citizens' initiatives, between technocracy and democracy, which is exactly the opposite that was intended by them in their social theories. What could be the reason for that? Both democratic political *praxis* and social normativity cannot disrupt systemic institutional self-referentiality, autonomy and self-subsistence. The political-normative criticism and framing of social systems could only be possible through their political-normative constitution, their class constitution, as a result of class struggles and hegemony. However, in the moment that social systems are understood as formal, impartial and neutral institutions with a technical-logical configuration, they lose their political-normative constitution, they become independent and overlapped with relation to class struggles and hegemony. Therefore, they cannot be criticized and framed by normative-political principles, but only by technical-logical principles, which means that the systemic constitution, legitimation and evolution can only be performed by the same social systems from inside. Likewise, the subjects of institutional changing are technical and logical ones, internal and not external (political-normative) to institutions.

This is the most important point against Habermas's and Giddens's critical social theories: They attribute a very basic technical-logical constitution, legitimation and evolution to social systems and institutions (as bureaucratic-administrative State and capitalist economy), so that criticizing and changing them can come neither from a normative-political standpoint and *praxis* nor from normative-political subjects. The social systems' closed and self-referential logic and dynamic can always affirm their self-referentiality, autonomy and self-subsistence as justification to their isolation, their depoliticization, becoming closed to political democracy and social normativity. Indeed, such a mixture of

normative theory with systemic theory means that social systems as formal, impartial and neutral institutions or structures can have a political-normative constitution or framing, but must be analyzed and framed by their technical-logical constitution, that is, by their non-political and non-normative constitution. Social systems are basically technical-logical structures, although they are also normative structures which generate normative-political expectations and claims. But we can see here that such conciliation between normativity and systemic theory with the aim of understanding and framing the constitution, legitimation and evolution of modern social systems weakens a political-normative criticism and framing of social systems' structuration, action and effects on society, on the social subjects and even on ecology. In this sense, as we are arguing in this paper, Habermas's and Giddens's critical social theories cannot adequately explain the fact that a formal, impartial and neutral institution or social system can affirm itself as a structure which is basically technical-logical and self-referential, self-subsisting and autonomous regarding the social context from which it emerges. They cannot explain the fact that a social system is a non-political and non-normative institution which, on the other hand, guides social evolution and political institutions from a normative-political basis! In other words, technical-logical structures deny their social-political rooting and constitution, by affirming their non-political and non-normative constitution, but at the same time they judge and limit the political *praxis* and the social normativity based on a political-normative basis: "It is wrong to intervene in the technical-logical constitution of the systemic institutions because of their self-referentiality..."; "Society *must be adequate* to capitalist market's dynamic and necessities...". These situations show the political-normative constitution, effects and relations of the social systems, they show an intrinsic and dependent correlation between social systems, social normativity and political *praxis* – something that a pure formal,

neutral and impartial structure characterized by a technical-logical constitution and grounding cannot explain and determine.

This leads directly (in conservative liberalism) and indirectly (in Habermas' and Giddens' critical social theories) to the legitimation of a very strong and unsurmountable barrier between society *versus* systemic institutions, social normativity *versus* technical-logical systemic constitution, social movements and citizen initia-tives *versus* social systems' self-authorized legal staff, and finally between political democracy and technocracy, which depoliticizes systemic institutions' constitution, grounding and evolution. Here, as Habermas and Giddens acknowledge, politics and social normativity are in the same place that social systems. Moreover, they claim that politics and social normativity are not in social systems as formal, technical-logical structures. So, there is a political-normative field and a technical-logical (non-political and non-normative) field, and one cannot substitute and intervene in the other, even if a technical-logical dynamic colonizes the nor-mative-political constitution, legitimation and functioning of the lifeworld! Indeed, the pathologies of Western modernization, even if they entail the systemic colonization of the lifeworld (and, therefore, the fact that social systems have a functioning dynamics that invades and destroys the normative-political constitution of the lifeworld), cannot be resolved with a normative-political intervention into the technical-logical constitution of the social systems, and that is an absurd consequence of Habermas's and Giddens's critical social theories in the moment they conciliate social normativity (as a property of the lifeworld) and systemic theory (as a condition to the institutional constitution) as the basis of the analysis and political framing of Western modernization. The systemic colonization of the lifeworld, they affirm, is unfor-tunately a constant fact, as the indirect normative-political inter-vention, a normative-political sensitization from outside into the social systems' dynamic. However, that does not mean the repla-cement of social systems' technical-logical constitution and

grounding for a normative-political constitution and grounding. Here, critical social theories' role of systemic stabilization appears very clear, despite Habermas's and Giddens's attempt to construct and ground a *critical* social theory for a recovery and renewal of a *radical* democratic political *praxis* which could face the pathologies of social systems!

Systemic stabilization is, to Habermas and Giddens, a considerable problem of contemporary societies, since it entails that social systems can affirm their self-referentiality, autonomy and self-subsistence with respect to political democracy and social normativity by assuming a technical-logical constitution. Habermas's and Giddens's criticism of technocracy intend to deconstruct such a merely technical-logical social constitution, grounding and evolution of the social systems. But the problem, as is being argued throughout this paper, is the fact that they did not substitute the systemic theory with a political theory. Contrarily to that, they sought to conciliate a normative-political theory with a systemic theory in order to conceive of Western modernization as a process at the same time normative and systemic, spontaneous and institutional, but in a way and in a sense in which systemic institutional constitution and grounding maintained its non-political and non-normative constitution. By refusing to conceive of social systems as political institutions defined by class struggles and hegemony, they technicized their understanding and constitution, closing them to political democracy and social normativity in a strong manner: from now on, social systems can only be sensitized and intervened in indirectly by political *praxis* and social normativity, so political *praxis* and social normativity can never replace the technical-logical constitution of social systems, because they are technical-logical institutions, and not normative-political structures defined by class struggles and class hegemony. And this is our fate – they say again! Systemic changes can only be performed from within social systems, by their internal procedures, codes, practices and legal staff – here, there is nothing political

and normative, but just technical. Here again, technocracy is seen as the basis of social systems. This is a very impressive characteristic of a critical social theory which aims to overcome technocracy. In other words, Habermas's and Giddens's critical social theories, in the moment they conceive of social systems as technical-logical structures, basically lead – despite their critical intentions – to technocracy, to the systemic justification and stabilization. This is where the necessity to recover and renew the normative-political constitution, legitimation and evolution of the social systems appears very strongly: in the fact that they are a result of class struggles and hegemony, which means also their social link and rooting, not their self-referentiality, autonomization and self-subsistence.

How is it possible to recover and to renew the normative-political constitution, grounding and evolution of social systems? Within the view assumed in this paper, the answer lies in denying the separation between system and lifeworld. Firstly, this separation cannot be sustained from a sociological-political analysis: There is no purely technical-logical institution which has formal, impartial and neutral procedures, codes, practices and legal staff—at least it is not true in relation to political-economical institutions both in the right and in the left (see Piketty, 2014; Von Mises, 2010; Hayek, 2013; 2006; Nozick, 1991; Habermas, 2003a; 2003b; Giddens, 1996; 2000; 2001). Furthermore, the political-economic institutions do not function or are programmed from technical-logical principles, as well as their social-ecological impacts: economy is political economy, not technical-logical economy; the State is a political State, not a technical-logical bureaucracy, not a scientific technocracy. They are based on a normative-political understanding of their constitution, grounding and evolution, as regarding their social rooting and relations. As a consequence, not only the social systems' normative-political organization, but the very social systems are a result of class struggles and hegemony. The dynamics of social systems is deter-

mined by political-normative decisions which are grounded on political-normative hegemony, on the correlations of classes, on the confrontations between them, so each social institution is basically a political project which must acquire political hegemony to become preponderant between alternative projects. This separation between system and lifeworld effaces the political-normative constitution of social systems, the fact that they are a political project resulting from the class struggles and hegemony, depoliticizing them; at the same time, this separation effaces the lifeworld's ability to assume a political-normative constitution in relation to social systems' technical-logical constitution, grounding and evolution, which entails the weakening of the lifeworld as offering an alternative normative-political project of society and institutions.

Secondly, the overcoming of the separation between system and lifeworld, separation which was the basis of Habermas's and Giddens's social theories, means the affirmation of an absolute political-normative constitution of the very social systems, which also signifies their direct rooting into a political project streamlined by class struggles and defined by class hegemony. So, as is being argued, institutions are always political institutions (especially political and economic institutions), and this is the point that contemporary political *praxis* must take into account when discussing the crisis of the project of Western modernization. What could a political-normative constitution, grounding and evolution of social systems mean? What would be its consequences? It means that social systems are a political-normative *praxis* performed by power relations and social, cultural and political hegemony between individuals and social groups, between classes: this fact of social relations' political role can be perceived throughout history by the cultural comprehension and social clashes which were hegemonic in each society, and between societies as well. Here there was a normative-cultural self-comprehension that streamlined the political understanding of social evolution and institu-

tional constitution – a normative, cultural and political comprehension that determines the way and dynamics of societal struggles and evolution. Now, such hegemonic normative, political and cultural self-understanding has resulted from the concurring self-comprehensions of social classes. The class struggles, therefore, led – as they lead – to a hegemonic (even if mixed) political project which determined and directed – as it determines and directs – social evolution and institutional constitution.

It should be stressed that there is not a purely technical and naturalized comprehension of social systems, as if they were impartial, neutral and overlapping with class struggles and class hegemony. The separation between system and lifeworld conceives of systemic institutional constitution, grounding and evolution in a way and sense that stylizes a model of Western modernization that goes beyond politics and social struggles, becoming basically technical-logical, non-political and non-normative structures. This also implies the inexistence of a univocal and direct process of Western modernization separated from political clashes, cultural specificities and class hegemony in each historical and societal moment. Due to that, a technical-logical systemic institution loses its historical-political rooting, insofar as its autonomization, self-referentiality and self-subsistence lead to its depoliticization, so that it becomes a pure result of an evolutionary process with no political subjects, contents and dynamics, with no political clashes from which they gain dynamicity, sense and definition. By denying such systemic, technical-logical comprehension of institutions, we recover and renew their fundamental political constitution, grounding and evolution, their basic political-normative rooting – the fact that they are defined by political struggles between conflicting classes. More importantly, the overcoming of a technical-logical understanding of the constitution, grounding and evolution of social systems, the overcoming of systemic theory as the basis of the understanding of Western modernization allows us to contextualize them into a political project which is defined and

streamlined by a permanent and pungent class struggle which leads to the hegemony of political institutional projects of construction and evolution of society. The overcoming of that separation enables us to reaffirm political *praxis* and social normativity as the fundamental categories for social analysis and for political institutional changing.

Therefore, social theory cannot help in systemic institutional stabilization, but in the improvement and orientation of a democratic political *praxis* that faces social systems' technical-logical constitution, legitimation and evolution, that is, the depoliticization of social systems, of the political-economic institutions based on technocracy, which is renewed again today as a hegemonic alternative to the crisis of Western modernization. Overcoming the contraposition between system and lifeworld means the construction of a critical social theory for social movements and citizens' initiatives—a critical social theory for the working classes against capitalist classes. And that is a very important and urgent point both to a current critical social theory and to the democratic political *praxis* which can frame and determine the understanding and the way to the resolution of the crisis of Western modernization. Indeed, here, in this historical-political moment of contemporary societies, we cannot foster a kind of sociological-political analysis that requires an institutionalist role based on the systemic comprehension of institutional constitution, legitimation and evolution, because, by doing that, we assume a very strict commitment with the depoliticization of social systems, which is, as we are arguing, the fundamental theoretical-political basis of conservative thinking. By refusing the technical-logical constitution, grounding and evolution of social systems, we are denying their depoliticization, linking and rooting them into the societal context and dynamics, as a normative-political part of society and defining social path, sense and structuration. This, therefore, leads to the fact that social systems are normative-political institutions defined and streamlined by

class struggles and hegemony. So, the critical social theory, assuming a very political-normative understanding of institutions, can situate itself in a theoretical-political position that is able to confront the constitution, legitimation and evolution of institutions from normative-political arguments, practices and subjects, taking the side of political-normative subjects, of the working classes: Systemic institutions depoliticize their constitution, legitimation and evolution, becoming a matter of institutional elites and technicians, so the politicization of social systems leads democracy to the social systems as *political-normative* institutions, a political democracy made and streamlined by civil society's political subjects.

Of course, the fact that critical social theory works from a dialectics between institutionalism and political spontaneity cannot be ignored, since it acquires meaning from this normative-political basis. The social theory is elaborated in order to understand and improve institutions regarding their internal constitution, grounding and evolution and concerning also their mutual relationships and social impacts. This is a fact, as said above, that has defined the link between science and politics in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the great problem of this association, and therefore of social theory's strict connection with strong institutionalism, based on the systemic understanding of society and social systems, is the institutional closure, autonomy and self-subsistence in the moment that social systems acquire a technical-logical structuration which is totally opposed to and differentiated from the society as a normative-political totality. This led to the institutional depoliticization and, as a consequence, to the weakening of the democratic political *praxis* regarding the problematization and changing of social systems. At this point, our theoretical-political proposal of conceiving social systems basically as normative-political institutions defined and streamlined by class struggles and hegemony can be rendered explicit: if social theory is aimed at criticizing and improving institutions, then such social

theory's institutional link *is a political-normative link* that needs an inclusive and participative democratic political *praxis,* as the normative-political legitimation of social systems. This view overcomes the elitist and technical sense of systemic institutions by removing their false technical-logical, non-political constitution, legitimation and evolution. Social systems are normative-political institutions determined and streamlined by political *praxis*, by political subjects, by class struggles: their impartiality, neutrality and formality cannot be sustained as a basis for contemporary democratic politics (see Esping-Andersen, 1999; 2003; Hicks, 1999).

Conclusion

As was argued throughout the paper, from a criticism of Habermas's and Giddens's understanding of Western modernization as a process of systemic institutional self-differentiation, self-referentiality and self-subsistence, their separation between system and lifeworld as the basis for grounding and applying a critical social theory to the specificities, dynamics and pathologies of Western modernization, only overcoming the separation between social systems and lifeworld can correct the weakening of the democratic political *praxis* caused by the systemic understanding of Western institutions (mainly the bureaucratic-administrative State and capitalist market). Such use of systemic theory in order to understand and frame the process of Western modernization leads to a strong institutionalism, that is, to institutional closure, autonomy and self-referentiality concerning its constitution, legitimation and evolution, depoliticizing and technicizing it. This can no longer be a theoretical-political basis for a critical social theory which intends to foster a radical political *praxis* to face contemporary conservatism regarding the framing of current social-economic crisis that affects both particular countries and economic globalization (see Piketty, 2014; Bellamy Foster; Magdoff, 2009; Boltanski; Chiapello, 2009; Duggan, 2003). The

overcoming of the separation between systems and lifeworld, therefore, is the basic task of a new critical social theory, and it effectively means the theoretical-political refusal of conceiving of institutions (both political and economical) as a set of formal, impartial and neutral procedures, practices and legal staff which have a technical-logical constitution, grounding and evolution opposed to democratic politics and social normativity. Because, if it is true, as Habermas and Giddens believe, what is left to political *praxis* and to a critical social theory? Only systemic stabilization!

The overcoming of Habermas's and Giddens's separation between social systems and lifeworld as the basis of the construction and use of a critical social theory also implies the formulation of a new understanding of Western modernization – something very different from what was formulated by Habermas and Giddens (Habermas's and Giddens's model of Western modernization is the same as that of contemporary conservative liberalism). Western modernization cannot be conceived of from a systemic theory, as systemic institutional self-differentiation, self-referentiality and self-subsistence, as a technical-logical institutional structuration and evolution that are non-political and non-normative, that are beyond political struggles and class hegemony. That is also a very important task for a new critical social theory. A new model of Western modernization implies firstly the theoretical-political refusal of systemic institutional self-differentiation, self-referentiality and self-subsistence, which individuallizes and isolates each of the social systems regarding society as a whole, removing the social systems' political-normative constitution, grounding and evolution. This also means understanding society as a normative-political totality that is not divided in closed, autonomous, self-referential and self-subsisting particular institutions, but constituted by concurring and conflicting social classes with specific political projects within society: here, it is the hegemonic social class that institutes the political project of society that will be constructed over time; here, it is the class's political opposition

that will frame and streamline the hegemonic political project of society fomented over time to all society. Above all, society is a political-normative totality defined by the dynamics performed by class struggles and their political hegemony and counterpoints. Here, there is no technical-logical institutionalism, or impartial, neutral and procedural dynamics of social systems with regard to the political projects of society, the political projects of institutional constitution, legitimation and evolution. As Piketty said in his *The Capital in the XXI Century*, all is politics and political (see Piketty, 2014, p. 27). The critical social theory, the moment that it separates social systems and lifeworld, attributing a technical-logical constitution, legitimation and evolution for social systems, depoliticizes institutions, separating and individualizing them with respect to society as a whole and to the political *praxis* and class struggles as basis of the societal dynamic, structuration and evolution.

According to our view in this article, the renewal and recovery of politics as the basis of social analysis and action regarding the constitution, legitimation and evolution of social systems is something very important and urgent. The systemic institutional understanding of Western modernization – the understanding of the State's and the market' constitution, legitimation, evolution, reciprocal relationships and even social rooting from their depoliticization and technicization, from their closure and self-referentiality regarding democratic political *praxis* and social normativity – is hegemonic today as the conservative theoretical-political alternative *par excellence* with respect to the framing of the current social-economic crisis. Indeed, political conservatism is winning the political clashes concerning the understanding and reformism in relation to the crisis of the Welfare State and of capitalist market by the progressive foment and defense in the public sphere and, even in the social sciences, of the systemic understanding of institutions, of the technicality of these institutions, according to which they should be understood, legitimized

and defined from a technical-logical constitution, from a very objective scientific approach: here, economy as an objective science, based on technical-logical procedures, contents and recommendations instructs political institutional reformism and guides it in order to respect the market's technical-logical constitution, grounding and evolution. In the conservative theoretical-political positions, political clashes and class hegemony regarding the normative-political comprehension of society, of the class's political projects in relation to society and institutions disappear; they are erased through the depoliticization and technicization of social systems and political institutions. We are left with the idea that there are no political classes and social struggles between themselves related to hegemonic political projects for society and institutions. Everything is seen from a technical-logical comprehension, from a scientism which eliminates political *praxis*, social normativity and social classes of institutions and of society as a whole. Where only formal, impartial, neutral and procedural institutions exist, there is no place for politics, *praxis*, democracy; the only political place which remains is assumed, centralized and monopolized by strong institutionalism. So the contraposition to the conservative systemic understanding of Western modernization is also a very basic task for critical social theory, and that means to frame social systems from normative-political principles, practices and subjects; to affirm politics and class struggles as the bases of institutional constitution and legitimation, as of social evolution and dynamic, as alternative to systemic institutional comprehension.

So, for what and for whom is a social theory important? Firstly, *a social theory for the construction of a new kind of understanding of Western modernization* that can empower social movements, citizen initiatives, the working class in general to face the growth and hegemony of conservatism's systemic institutional comprehension of the process of Western modernization. This is a social theory that can reestablish political *praxis* as the basis of cons-

titution, legitimation and evolution of society and institutions. Such a social theory politicizes the institutional constitution, legitimation and evolution by refusing its self-referentiality, autonomy, isolation and self-subsistence, by refusing social systems' technical-logical programing and functioning. Secondly, as was said above, *a social theory for the working class* which politicizes society's constitution, legitimation and evolution, centralizing all societal dynamics into political *praxis* as political *praxis* is needed. Here, the social theory affirms the political forces and their clashes for hegemony as the basis for the consolidation of a hegemonic project of society and institutions, which presupposes the permanent struggle for hegemony between conflictive social classes as the theoretical-political motto to institutional and societal structuration and streamlining over time. According to this social theory, the institutions or social systems are not technical-logical structures with no political-normative constitution and no political subjects as their basis; they are not impartial, neutral and procedural structures regarding all social subjects, centralizing and monopolizing social normativity as an institutional matter and content. Above all, a social theory based on the understanding of Western modernization as a political-normative project stream-lined by social struggles between social classes implies the fact that political *praxis* is the permanent and decisive field from which society and institutions acquire movement, sense and content. This is a very important challenge to an emancipatory social theory which can at the same time politicize the understanding of Western modernization and empower the working classes against conservatism and social movements and citizen initiatives against the conservative understanding of institutions.

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