**CAPITALISM, SOCIALISM, AND DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: "SYSTEM" AS THE FUTURE OF MODERN SOCIETY?**

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# CALL FOR PAPERS

The theme of this year's conference pertains to affinities and complementarities between *systems theory* and *critical theory* for purposes of analyzing modern societies in the twenty-first century as social systems whose stability, functioning and future increasingly is in doubt. Conventionally, critical theory and systems theory have been regarded and treated as mutually exclusive treatments and modes of analyzing of societies undergoing transitions from premodern to postmodern conditions. Yet, as suggested – for instance – by Adorno's extensive reliance on the concept of "system" in many of his writings, by the well-known Habermas-Luhmann controversy of the early 1970s, or by undeniable parallels between the modes of theorizing pursued by Niklas Luhmann (in terms of his critique of sociology as the social science of modern society) and by Moishe Postone (in terms of his critique of traditionally Marxist critiques of capitalism), there is an affinity between systems theory and critical theory that deserves to be explored, not least as it is undeniable that modern societies resemble "non-human", heteronomous *systems* to a growing extent, as opposed to forms of social organization that emanate from and reflect modes of interaction, sociality and (non-regressive) forms of solidarity between humans as social beings. This affinity is evidenced in an expanding related literature, especially in Germany, but also in research agendas that are being pursued by scholars in other countries, such as Australia and Brazil.

By contrast, in the U.S., despite the erstwhile influence and prominence of Talcott Parsons, and the growing recognition of the contributions of Niklas Luhmann, systems theory has remained marginal in recent decades. Critical theory, as it took shape *as "critical theory"* in the United States during the 1930s (despite its origins in Germany during the 1920s), and in the aftermath of Habermas's reconfiguration of this tradition's research program, has been more prominent than systems theory, but still is far from penetrating and influencing mainstream approaches to research in the social sciences and humanities in a discernible fashion. In fact, the latter have become increasingly ahistorical, as well as oblivious to distinctive features of U.S. society among modern industrialized societies, and thus more or less complicit in the accelerating erosion of *modernity* (as exemplified in material democratic values and principles, an emphasis on progressive education, constructive perspectives in the future as qualitatively superior to the

past and present, etc.), in favor of promoting formal processes of *modernization* according under the aegis of neoliberalism. Meanwhile, in the UK, both critical theory and systems theory have been tolerated, but also regarded as of minor (or no) use for illuminating the condition of modern societies in the early twenty-first century. The result has been an ability to acknowledge and confront what has been called the dark (or darker) side of modernity in ways that would translate into sociological practice and theory.

The present is a time of proliferating crises and the accelerating collapse of notions and standards that took hold during the second half of the twentieth century, and which erroneously came to be taken for granted in the social sciences and humanities. Consequently, opportunities are being overlooked and lost to theorize both persistent and increasingly important issues and trends in – and key features of – modern societies. The 2019 ISTC conference will focus on the need to develop a kind mindset that will be required for social theorists to "face facts" to a greater extent, especially where and when "facts" are undesirable and in conflict with theorists' established working assumptions and preconceived notions, with the latter constituting barriers to grasping the contradictions, paradoxes and irreconcilables that were characteristic of modern societies from the start (at the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century), and which are more and more difficult to ignore. We must acknowledge the costs associated with the established practice of overriding/pre-interpreting facts – particularly those that are, or appear to be, *unpleasant* and *undesirable* – on the basis of previously adopted stances, theoretical positions or frames, implicitly accepted notions of good and evil, especially of the normative and political stripe, e.g., that humans are "inherently good" and "well-meaning" and concerned with the welfare of all, etc. We must ask whether and how in light of recent developments around the globe, such as the resurging appeal of authoritarian approaches to governance, social theorists' perspectives on individuals, human nature, the link between individuals, social groups, and society, politics, culture and economics must be examined and reformulated, compared to the views that took hold during the decades following World War II.

In order to provide a foil for addressing this nexus of issues, participants are encouraged to focus especially on the field of tensions described in terms of *capitalism, socialism and democracy* (or *business, labor, and government*; or *economy, society, and the state*), and how the meaning of – and differences between – these concepts have changed over the course of the last century. As usual, ***all submissions that fall into the general area of social theory will be considered***, and papers are not required have to address directly the critical theory-systems theory link – but it will be preferred if they do address in some form ***the issue of modern societies increasingly turning into "systems"*** – and how in this sense, "capitalism", "socialism" and "democracy" ALL appear to be increasingly outdated concepts, or concepts in need of major revision. To the extent that we continue to rely on these concepts without rigorous critical reflection, they are likely to fulfill important ideological functions – implicitly or explicitly – e.g., in the interest of legitimating neoliberalism and of delegitimating democracy and modernity. The clash between agendas of undermining or destroying the social as a productive feature and force in human civilization and the values according to which individuals are being socialized and supposed to structure their lives and relations to "other" – other humans, nature, the planet, etc.) appears to foster emerging and intensifying hostile attitudes toward what used to be called capitalism, socialism, and democracy. This hostility may result from societies increasingly turning into non-human systems and from individuals' concern that the challenges looming in the future will require draconian approaches to "solutions" – along authoritarian or proto-totalitarian lines – the more so the longer we refrain from contemplating and pursuing constructive strategies to increasingly planetary challenges.

Debates on integrating critical theory and system theory relating to the need to develop ***new*** categories would benefit from novel approaches to established methods in theoretically informed ways, in sociology especially with regard to field research. If we are to re-think categories such as *capitalism*, *socialism* and *democracy*, social research would benefit from appreciation and reliance on "field," and re-

categorize the above concepts from bottom up, in strict dialogue with particular theoretical frames. To overcome stagnation in grasping established and emerging social issues, via integration of critical theory and system theory, employing qualitative field research as a tool would keep sociological knowledge stay close to current social trends and their interpretation, from both a social-theoretical and a critical point of view.

## Possible Session Topics:

- The End of Modernity?
- The End of Progress
- The Future of Capitalism
- Administered World
- Society of Rackets
- Ecology and Dystopia
- The Challenge of Facing Facts in Social Theory
- The Meaning of Democracy Today
- The Rise (or Resurgence?) of Authoritarianism
- Socialism in the 21st Century
- Critical Theory Today
- Confronting Systems with Qualitative Research
- Systems Theory after Parsons and Luhmann
- Combining Systems Theory with Empirical Research Agendas
- Qualitative Research and Critical Systems Theory

- "What is the Case? or What Lies behind it?" -- Three Decades Later
- *Systems Theory* + Critical Theory = ?
- Social Movements between Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy
- Race, Class, Gender between Society and System
- *Critical Theory* + Systems Theory = ?
- The Fate of Art in the Face of System
- Aesthetics vs. Function
- System as the New Paradigm of Control
- Systems Logic and Identity
- Authoritarian and Totalitarian Trends
- The Cutting Edge of Systems Theory Today
- The Cutting Edge of Critical Theory Today
- Critical Systems Theory and the Classics
- The Anachronism of "Optimism vs. Pessimism"
- Global or Planetary Social Theory?

Please email an abstract (required), paper, and/or session proposal
to istc2019@socialtheory.org no later than
### March 15, 2019
For online information, see **http://socialtheory.org**

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