

Standing on the Shoulders of Parsons

**Toward a Postmodern System Theory
of Experience and Action**

Richard Jung¹

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¹ Center for Systems Research, Kouřimská 24, CZ 84 01 Kutná Hora, Czech Republic;
+420 607 587 627, Richard.Jung@post.Harvard.edu ; www.RichardJung.cz or www.univie.ac.at/aoc .

Standing on the Shoulders² of Parsons: Toward A Postmodern System Theory of Experience and Action.

In this presentation the progress toward a Postmodern System Theory of Experience and Action will be described. The theory, motivated by the Kantian aspirations of Parsons, but informed by other or subsequent developments in science and philosophy, attempts to provide within the format of postmodern system theory a coherent framework for the study of individuals and their interaction.

This is a daunting project in complexity, depth and scope. I have the system worked out and its basic items and relations encrypted on the computer in numerous interconnected outlines. Some fragments of it have been previously published and shall be referred to. Here I merely wish to convey the overall architecture and give a feel for its continuity and departures from previous work.

The author's relationship to Parsons³ and the idea of postmodern systems theory⁴, noted in the title, shall be briefly explained.

² To climb on the shoulder of a giant requires a disregard of risk characteristic of a maniac, an effort resembling the labors of Sisyphus, and such agility as only Houdini was reputed to have. To stand on his shoulders is an equilibristic act. Giants are known to lurch, to abruptly change direction, to take flights of fancy, to turn somersaults, to thrash around trying to kick or attacking packs of rats and to become disoriented by swarms of buzzing mosquitoes. Most dangerously for a prospective rider, they tend to fall. Is it a folly to try to stand on the shoulders of a fallen giant? Is it punishable hubris to aspire to such an involuntary assistance by one of the great?

³ I have been introduced to the work of Talcott Parsons in Norway in 1950 by his student Kaspar Naegele and met him shortly afterward, my first scholarship I won by an essay about his work, have worked in the late fifties for two-three years as his assistant, and met him frequently till shortly before his death. I kept up with his writing and most recently tried to consider his work as a whole, when requested to write my personal recollections of him as person and an evaluation of his opus (cf. [05g](#) Talcott Parsons - vzpomínky a úvahy). It was then that I decided that I should henceforth acknowledge that much content and especially the leitmotif of my attempt to construct a theory of experience and action I have accepted from him. There were of course other influences too numerous to mention. What I present here is a construction for which I alone am intellectually responsible.

⁴ Postmodern systems theory (cf. [05f](#) Postmodern systems theory) recognizes individual identity as the reflection of the continuity over a limited time span of the surface of a system in physical or in semantic space. It conceives of the Self as the center (or locus) of subjectivity of the individual system. The Self is a space-time traveler. The niche of the Itinerant Self is a bubble in space-time. Its world is not only in modal and substantive flux; its own locus is in a specious here and now. Postmodern system theory constructs individual as well as collective being as transitory⁴ lacunae in indefiniteness. It regards

The prior epistemological decisions and the subsequent conceptual construction of a theory of experience an action shall be described. From the all pervasive fog of indefiniteness there condense swaths of form. They do not resist dual construction.⁵ Depending on our practical or intellectual purpose or inclination, we may prefer a naturalist or a humanist construction. If correct, these constructions are in principle transformable into each other. *The first* constructs the swath as a system (an n -ary relation), *the other* endows it with significance (constructs it as a functional relation with a dependent essential variable). Accordingly, one can attempt *either* an explanation *or* an understanding of a given swath.

When we attempt to construct for the swath its characteristic space-time, we may choose *either* a physical (ultimately thermodynamic) *or* a semantic (ultimately informatic) spacetime. We can construct within the respective spacetimes *either* a bounded system of energy with a center of objectivity (an It) and its transitions as a Res movens *or* a bounded system of meaning with its center of subjectivity (a Self) and its transitions as a Res agens. A system of interactions between objects will be seen as an ecological system, while a system of interactions between subjects will be seen as a social system. A system is of interest here if it exhibits vital imbalance. While, on the whole, the onto- and the phylogenetic evolution of living objects is co-determined by a genetic code and undergoes Darwinian evolution, the evolution of subjects is co-determined by a didactic (memetic) code and undergoes Lamarckian evolution.

In focusing our interest on interactions between subjects, we first construct the individual subject as a system of meaning with an inner and an outer environment. The dynamic (tensor) state of its boundary is interpreted as the subject's intensions within its semantic space-time. All experiences and actions of the subject are interpretations of the deformations of its boundary.

These can be analytically decomposed into sub-systems of orientation governed by the minimal principle of uncertainty, sub-systems of decision governed by the minimal principle of risk and sub-systems of motivation governed by the minimal principle of tension. The three sub-systems set boundary conditions for each other. Their interplay (the system of intention), is governed by the minimal principle of in-authenticity.

experience, formulated as deformation of the surface of a system, as a substratum of being. It conceives of the search for knowledge as a modal metabolism of being. The post-modern general system is seen as a formal epistemological device for transformations of experiences.

⁵ Shades of Descartes' ontological dualism and descendants of Spinoza's epistemological *sive* (and/or *or* either/or). The conventional term is dual description, which ignores what we should have learned from Buddha and Kant, among others. It assumes that we have already removed the veil of Maya, and are somehow in direct and intimate contact with real reality.

The system of intention and the three sub-systems are each constructed to show the dual face of experience and action. These are not the outer or inner environments of the system, but the two aspects of its boundary: the outer surface (its shell) and the inner surface (its hull).

Within the sub-system of orientation, a complete set of fundamental concepts for the assignment of meaning to the inner and outer experience of subjects, their actions (relations to their inner and outer environments), and their various social transactions is elaborated.

The conceptualization is compatible with the prevalent ideas about psychological and social systems. It recognizes social systems as systems of experiences and actions within and between communicating individuals (within and across species) who orient themselves to variously encoded mutual expectations (intentions, *i.e.*, experiences & actions) of each other.