

# **The Structure of Social Action In Memory of Talcott Parsons**

**Richard Jung**<sup>1</sup>

Universität Augsburg and University of Alberta

Annetta Pedretti (Ed.).  
*Problems of Actors and Actions*.  
London UK and Zürich CH: Princelet Editions, 1984.  
Vol. 1, p. 207-222.

First presented as a paper to the Systemgroep Nederland Conference on Problems of Actors and Actions, Amsterdam NL, April 1983.

Reprinted in *Systems Research*, 5 (1988), 3: 255-259.

Available in Polish as “Struktura działania społecznego ku czci Talcotta Parsonsa.” (Translation by Andrzej Kublik.). *Prakseologia*, 4, 105 (1989): 231-242 .

Available in Czech as “Struktura sociálního jednání (Na paměť Talcotta Parsonse).” (Translation by Tomáš Hájek.) *Studia Humanistica (Časopis pro filozofickou antropologii)*, 5 (1992): 71-82.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kouřimská 24, CZ - 284 01 Kutná Hora, Czech Republic;  
420 607 587 627, [Richard.Jung@post.Harvard.edu](mailto:Richard.Jung@post.Harvard.edu), <http://www.RichardJung.cz/>.

 207<sup>2</sup>

# The Structure of Social Action: In Memory of Talcott Parsons

Richard Jung

Universität Augsburg and University of Alberta

## INTRODUCTION

A general conceptual or theoretical clarification of the notion of action, in particular **social action**, especially in the context of systems theory and cybernetics, is at the present time not complete without a consideration of the contribution of Talcott Parsons.

## THE LIFE AND WORK OF TALCOTT PARSONS

Talcott Parsons died on May 8, 1979, after having given his last lecture and seminar at the Institute for Sociology of the Ludwig Maximilian's University of Munich. A photograph taken on this occasion shows him in his typical pose, a finger rose in admonition while making an intellectual point, very much like a fervent preacher.

He was born 1902 in Colorado Springs, a son of a Congregationalist minister who was very active in the 'social gospel' movement of the day, later to become president of Marietta College in Ohio. Parsons first studied biology at Amherst College with the intention of continuing in medicine, but soon turned his main interest to institutional economics, as represented at the  208 time by Hamilton. A year at the London School of Economics, where he attended lectures by Laski, Hobhouse, Tawney, and Malinowski (who made a lasting impression on him), confirmed him in the change of studies. A year later in Heidelberg he wrote a thesis about *The Concept of Capitalism in Werner Sombart and Max Weber*.

He came to Harvard in 1927, and left as Emeritus in 1973. From economics he soon shifted to sociology, but due to a long and bitter conflict with Sorokin, who headed the Department, was not promoted to a full Professor until 1944. After that he quickly became the dominant figure in Sociology, first at Harvard, then in America, and soon world-wide.

---

<sup>2</sup> Original page number in: ANNETTA PEDRETTI (ED.). (1984). *Problems of Actors and Actions*. London UK and Zürich CH: Princelet Editions, Vol. 1, pp. 207-222.

His rise to prominence is in itself interesting, and would lend itself to a case study of academic success. He was an excellent teacher. Among his 80 doctoral students and others who studied under him are the leaders of current sociology in the world. He was a teacher in the classical, perhaps feudal tradition, professing his beliefs and referring every issue to his own frame of reference. He regarded his discourse with his students as perhaps the prime source of his intellectual development.

A second source of inspiration, and a base of influence, was his untiring activity as an academic administrator and committeeman. He founded the interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations at Harvard, and for many years was its  209 chairman. He was active in numerous sociological and academic committees, and held the positions of the chairman of the American Sociological Society and, as the only social scientist so far, of the chairman of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He participated in the Pugwash Conferences, and for years was an active participant in the Chicago Conference on Systems Theory, organized by Roy Grinker. He undertook training in psychoanalysis, under a special arrangement with the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute. From all these and other sources came requests for his analysis of current social issues, to which he invariably responded with essays, some of which, e.g., "Age and sex in the social structure,"<sup>3</sup> became classics of sociological literature.

But his main source of success was his persistent, at times monomaniac, pursuit of some central themes in social theory.

Focal among these was the problem of **rationality**, as first formulated in classical economic theory, and later generalized by Pareto to all social theory, as well as the complementary problem of non-rational factors in human action, at first as formulated by Max Weber, and later as defined by Freud.

The second was the problem of **social order**. Parsons rejected both the totalitarian conception of Hobbs and the liberal of Rousseau, but leaned heavily on Durkheim.

The third problem was the problem of the  210 **unity of the life sciences**. Parsons was committed to the ontological position of a structural unity of nature, and attempted to incorporate ever-larger portions of biosocial reality into one overriding scheme. In his early major work, *The Structure of Social Action*, he believed to have proved the existence of a common conceptual framework in the theories of Marshall, Marx, Pareto, Weber and Durkheim, thus laying the foundation of the theoretical unification of the social sciences. In his contribution (with Shils) to *Toward a General Theory of Action*, and his own *The Social System*, he attempted to include psychology as well. His later works all include attempts to enlarge the domain by including political science and biology. He also tried to move from static and synchronic to dynamic and diachronic analysis: in the psychosocial sub-domain by his analyses of

---

<sup>3</sup> (1942) and (1943).

socialization and social control, and in the social domain by his work on social evolution and the post-industrial and (as he called it) the post-democratic society to come.

The controversy about the nature and scientific status of Parsons' work continues. Some of it is due to Parsons' disregard of traditional approaches and boundaries, and to his sometime pontifical style of expression. Much of it derives from the simple fact that many of Parsons' most vocal critics have not read his work, or have failed to understand its content and the problems that Parsons addresses. But some of it rests on seeming paradoxes in Parson's position, to  211 the appearance of which Parsons himself has contributed by the intertwining of his personality traits (e.g., his reluctance to criticize others based on tolerance and respect) that gave the impression of an unwillingness to debate, his academic politics that led to a generation long dominance of sociology by him and his students, and his personal disdain of ideology that gave rise to the false labeling of conservatism.

He was a problem even to his would-be followers. Acknowledged as the leading sociologist of his time, he regarded himself as a life scientist, and although largely rejected by contemporary economists, biologists, and psychologists, had an unshakable confidence in his own competence in these fields.

Within sociology, he was regarded as the chief proponent of **grand theory**. Yet he acknowledged that his was not a theory in the hypothetico-deductive sense, but rather a system of principles and adjudications, which he attempted to justify epistemologically by drawing an analogy to the Anglo-Saxon method of 'common law' jurisprudence. (His contribution is in the codification of concepts and the synthesis of disparate frames of reference, 'validated' by application to various aspects of social reality. In the European tradition, his method is closest to hermeneutics or perhaps to Ricoeur's structural hermeneutics.)

Sociologists universally regard him as the leader of the 'structural-functional' school, yet he disclaimed the school,  212 asserting that **not structure and function, but process and system** are the primary concerns of his analysis. While expending pages upon pages of his writing on classifications and sub-classifications, he recognized systems theory and cybernetics as the correct formalism for the realization of his theoretical ambitions.

All the criticism and misunderstanding notwithstanding, even today Parsons' influence in the social sciences is worldwide and probably lasting. The concepts he defined and the problems he formulated are the foundation of the theoretical work of even his current critics. Although he was unable to formulate a truly cybernetic biosocial theory, he was correct in his judgment that his conceptual framework is suited to a systems-theoretic and cybernetic formalization. It constitutes a grand conceptual synthesis of the biosocial domain from the hermeneutic (or *Verstehen*) perspective of the social sciences. This synthesis regards the

concept of **action** as the key to the development of a coherent theory of biological and social systems.

 213

## PARSONS' CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL ACTION

Parsons' progressive development of his conception of social action mirrors his central theoretical concerns with the **rational and non-rational factors** explaining human activity, with the prerequisites of **social order**, and with a general formulation of the **dynamics and regulatory processes in bio-social systems**. Over time, he arrived at three conceptions of action, each particularly appropriate to the larger theoretical concerns mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

In the first conception, action occurs when  
*actor seeks goals in situations.*

The second defines action as  
*the relation of an actor and a situation.*

And the third conceives of action as  
*the distribution of energy in time and space, subject to definite constraints.*

## ACTOR SEEKS GOALS IN SITUATIONS

The teleological conception of action is as old as philosophy. The attempts to formalize this conception have so far failed, either formally or empirically. They do not do justice to the psychological and social phenomena as they appear in the humanistic, the hermeneutic, or the *Verstehen* traditions of the social sciences, within which Parsons' work and aims are to be understood. The 'teleological calculus' of the Brno school (particularly of Engliš), Polish 'praxeology' (Kotarbiński), 'deontic logic' (Mally and von Wright), as well as various other recent ingenious attempts have failed to develop a coherent logical  214 formalism for action conceived as goal seeking. Decision theory, whatever its logical adequacy may be, requires assumptions that violate a number of fundamental psychosocial observations, and thus its use as the key formalism of a psychosocial theory is limited.

Parsons' first conception of action was developed within this framework. As a motto to his first major work,<sup>5</sup> he quotes Max Weber:

*Jede denkende Besinnung auf die letzten Elemente sinnvollen menschlichen Handelns ist zunächst gebunden an die Kategorien 'Zweck' und 'Mittel'.*

---

<sup>4</sup> (1951b), esp. p. 53-68.

<sup>5</sup> (1937).

But the problem with the categories 'means' and 'ends' is, that even phenomenologically they appear adequate only for the analysis of **instrumental** action, and thus, following Weber's lead, Parsons soon<sup>6</sup> develops the concept of **expressive** action. His later formulation<sup>7</sup> of the 'instrumental and expressive economies of action' is a major achievement.

The second major problem is that in the teleological formulation it is difficult, for Parsons as previously for Weber, to **distinguish between action in general and specifically 'social' action**, which distinction, after all, is the major aim of their efforts.

The above difficulties were, in my opinion, not sufficient to motivate Parsons in his persistent efforts to escape from the trap of the teleological conception of action. It must have been rather the discomfort of realizing, that this conception, especially [§ 215](#) in its rationalistic instrumental-utilitarian version, leads precisely to those solutions of the problem of social order that he rejected. The totalitarian-cynical solution on one hand leads from Hobbs' war of all against all and Leviathan, through the Prisoner's Dilemma and similar vicissitudes of game theory, to Kenneth Arrow's impossibility and imposition theorems for the social ordering of individual preferences. The liberal-romantic solution on the other hand leads from Rousseau's Social Contract to the current fiction of the *Rechtsstaat*, in which the web of human affiliations is misinterpreted as consisting of constitutional and contractual legal-rational arrangements. Parsons, committed as he was to Durkheim's ideas of collective representations and the non-contractual element in every contract, could not rest satisfied with a conception of action that went contrary to his views on rationality, biological and psychological dynamics, and social order.

#### RELATION OF AN ACTOR AND A SITUATION

Leaning on a sociological classic<sup>8</sup> in which the idea of an actor's **definition of the situation** was first used as a major analytic tool, Parsons developed a new conception of action, which entails the previous formulation as a special instance, but is largely free of teleology. This conception, perhaps not deliberately, is also squarely in the phenomenological tradition. It further [§ 216](#) permits a precise definition of **social** action.

**Situation** is defined as those aspects of the environment that are **meaningful** to the actor, because of his interests.<sup>9</sup> Parsons generalizes the idea to an actor's orientation (motivational and cognitive) to a situation, and develops his famous scheme of five *pattern variables*.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> (1951a).

<sup>8</sup> (1918-1920).

<sup>9</sup> In Thomas & Znaniecki wishes, in Freud libidinal investments, in Parsons motivations.

These purport to classify all the motivational, cognitive and evaluative **strategic choices** an actor must make (habitually or consciously) when relating to his environment. Thus the combined choices generate types of all possible definitions of a situation. The choices are formulated as alternatives between

- 1) *affective* involvement or *neutrality*,
- 2) *specific* or *diffuse* interest,
- 3) preoccupation with inherent (or ascribed) *qualities* of objects or with their *performance*,
- 4) evaluation of objects according to *particularistic* or *universalistic* criteria, and
- 5) an actor's commitment to *self-interest* or to the interest of a *collectivity* of which he is a member.

It becomes however soon apparent to him that **actor** and **situation** used in this technical sense are mutually defining terms, and that their Weberian *Sinnzusammenhang*, the nexus of meaning between them, is provided precisely by their **relation**, *i.e.*, **action** in this new technical sense. Thus an actor's **intention**, previously understood teleologically, becomes increa-  217 singly his **intentionality** in the phenomenological sense: a relation between a subject (as the noetic pole) and an object (as the noematic pole) of a meaningfully oriented (and experienced) action.

This formulation fits naturally into the hermeneutic conception of the methodology of the social sciences, which Max Weber advanced as his position in the *Methodenstreit* that raged in Europe at the turn of the century. According to Weber, social sciences belonged with the humanities. Instead of seeking a causal nexus between events, they were to inquire after the nexus of meaning among various elements of human activity. Instead of constructing hypothetico-deductive formalisms to connect events, various elements of human activity were to be organized into **ideal types** and configurations of action.<sup>10</sup> The technique of validation was to be not experiment, but *deutendes Verstehen*, perhaps best translated as **understanding arrived at by assigning meaning to events**. Briefly: phenomenology instead of experiment, semantics instead of mathematics, and hermeneutics instead of measurement. It is only within this tradition that Parsons' work makes sense.

This new conception of action also leads to a simple and satisfactory definition of **social** action. **An action is social, when the situation of an actor is another actor.**  218 A situation is social, when another

---

<sup>10</sup> Famous among Weber's own ideal-typical constructs are: prophecy, Protestant ethic, the spirit of capitalism, and bureaucracy.

actor is the key to the understanding of an actor's orientation to the situation.<sup>11</sup>

#### DISTRIBUTION OF ENERGY ... SUBJECT TO DEFINITE CONSTRAINTS

The previous definitions of action provide the conceptual foundation for a new general definition of action, in which Parsons consciously imitates the physical conception of action, attempts to abandon teleology in favor of a mechanistic conception of constraints, and takes the decisive step toward embedding the concept of action in the contexts of social interaction and psychological and social structures, thus making it possible to develop a formal dynamic and cybernetic theory of bio-social systems.

In defining action as *the distribution of energy through time and space*, Parsons at first operates with rather nebulous primitive concepts of physical, psychological, and mental (*à la* Freud) energy. However, the question that really interests him is: What is the **nature of the constraints** on the distribution of energy? For action in general, the answer is at the first sight simple: The  219 constraints are in general the relevant (if not all known) laws of nature. On the side of the actor they are his physical, biological, and psychological limitations, and his intentions (motivations, interests). The situational constraints are the conditions and structures in the environment relevant to the actor's interests.

But what are the particular **constraints on social action**? In the social situation, these are the **expectations** of another actor or other actors. Now Parsons formulates his famous feedback-like doctrine of **double contingency**:

*An actor's orientation to a social situation is contingent on both his expectations of another actor, and his perception of the other actor's expectations of himself.*

What is to save this formulation from infinite regress of the Sherlock Holmes — Moriarty type? This insight: **attempts at social interaction become abortive, unless they occur in the context of a pre-existing psychological and social order, and unless further psychological and social order quickly emerges from the incipient interaction.**

How does this order emerge? In that certain **expectations** of all the actors involved **become** regarded as both **binding** and **legitimate**, *i.e.*, as **norms**. But norms are stable only in configurations held together by a nexus of meaning, the Weberian *Sinnzusammenhang*.

Where are these semantically bound complexes of norms to be found? In Weber's  220 ideal types, and in Durkheim's social facts.

---

<sup>11</sup> Following this format, and the idea of self-reference, I define an action as psychological, when the situation of an actor is himself as an actor. A situation is then psychological, when the key factor in the understanding of an actor's orientation to the situation is his orientation to himself as an actor.

The common concept, going back to early Roman law, is **institutions**. Social order emerges and incipient interactions become stabilized when they are **complementary** and when the interaction endures long enough so that the expectations of the participating actors become regarded as legitimate and mutually binding. The expectations are said to have become **institutionalized**.

But how do the intentions of the individual actors, which are after all crucial determinants of their expectations, become stabilized? How does psychological order emerge, beyond genetic determination? By a process symmetrical to that of institutionalization. Drawing on Freud's ideas about introjection and identification of an actor with important figures in his early life, and on George Herbert Mead's ideas about the development of the Self through the incorporation of Significant Others, Parsons formulated a general psychological process of **internalization of expectations as norms**. This psychological process is the source of a psychological order, or **personality**.

However, personality must also be seen as the interface of an individual biological order (co-determined through 'socialization' as the societal vehicle of internalization) and the social order. Is not then a social order to be found in individuals as well? Parsons' answer is positive. There is a social order in the individual, the resultant of socialization. This order is called,  221 by Parsons, the **role**. The role is the minimal (organized) unit of the social system.

Thus Parsons develops from the consideration of the concept of action his solution of the problem of order, not only in social, but also in general in living systems. The order is the resultant of feedbacks between four dynamic systems of constraints: the genetically determined organism, the personality, the role, and the institution. In Strawson's terminology,<sup>12</sup> there are not only biological and psychological, but also social individuals. As in Strawson, the mappings among them are not necessarily one-one: an organism can have multiple personalities, the same personality can be enacted by different organisms (sometime symbiotically), and beyond the simplest of social organisms, an organism or personality has necessarily multiple (often conflicting) roles, while the same role can, fortunately, be played in various institutions.

This conception of the individual as the unit of the social system has led to a criticism that can only be based on an inability to deal with the complexity of Parsons' formulation (as indeed many of the other criticisms leveled against Parsons): that it is a one-sided, over-socialized conception of the individual. On the contrary, Parsons is the first theorist of biosocial systems who fully expressed the dynamics of interaction between the various levels and sub-systems, deeply appreciated the fragility and evanescence of the vari-  222 ous orders, was constantly preoccupied with the possibility and sources of individual and social

---

<sup>12</sup> (1959).

change, and devoted a life-time of intellectual activity to the problem: how **is something as improbable as a biosocial order at all possible?**

## THE LEGACY OF TALCOTT PARSONS

Talcott Parsons built the first truly interdisciplinary but unified conceptual framework for the analysis of living systems. In my opinion, he was unable to complete the final dual step: to formalize his conceptions in a cybernetic as well as a phenomenological theory of living systems, thereby to mend the hiatus between the naturalistic and the humanistic approaches to the study of life. But the edifice he has left is indispensable to those who wish to complete the well-defined task.

It was amusing to hear Parsons (who was of small physical stature) repeatedly quote the expression about *a pygmy standing on the shoulders of giants*. He was of course referring to himself in relation to his intellectual idols, particularly Kant and Whitehead, Freud and Durkheim. In my memory, however, and I believe in the memory of many others, Parsons remains not only a fascinating, kind, and lovable man, but also an intellectual giant.

## REFERENCES

- PARSONS, T. (1937).  
*The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of European Writers.*  
New York NY: McGraw-Hill.  
Reprinted by Glencoe IL: The Free Press, 1949.
- PARSONS, T. (1942).  
Age and sex in the social structure.  
*American Sociological Review*, **7**, 5 (October).  
Reprinted as Ch. X, p. 218-232 in: T. Parsons. (1949). *Essays in Sociological Theory Pure and Applied.* Glencoe IL: The Free Press.
- PARSONS, T. (1943).  
The kinship system of the contemporary United States.  
*American Anthropologist*, **45**, 1 (January - March).  
Reprinted as Ch. XI, p. 233-250 in: T. Parsons. (1949). *Essays in Sociological Theory Pure and Applied.* Glencoe IL: The Free Press.
- PARSONS, T. (1951a).  
*The Social System.*  
Glencoe IL: The Free Press.
- PARSONS, T. AND SHILS, E. A. WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF JAMES OLDS.  
(1951b).  
Values, motives, and systems of Action.  
Ch. 2, p. 45-275 in: T. Parsons and E. A. Shils, (Eds.). *Toward a General Theory of Action.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- STRAWSON, P. F. (1959).  
*Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics.*  
London UK: Methuen.
- THOMAS, WM. I. AND ZNANIECKI, F. (1918-1920).  
*The Polish Peasant in Europe and America.*  
Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press. 5 volumes.