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Reviews

Jiří Šubrt (editor): Talcott Parsons and his Contribution to Contemporary Sociological Theory

Charles University in Prague. Karolinum Press 2006, 245 pp.

At the end of 2006, Prague publishing house Karolinum Press published a book that had until then been lacking in our sociological production. By bringing out this book, Czech sociological elite began to pay off a bill opened back in the 1960s by the first analytically-informative books on Parsons and his concepts by J. Klofáč, V. Tlustý, Z. Strmiska, P. Machonin and others. Surprisingly enough, it was these publications that carried a joyful spirit of having discovered something new and remarkable and could share this delight with a broad group of readers. Undoubtedly the most grateful of the readers were sociology students who had a far better understanding of Parsons' terminology than their contemporary colleagues, having studied these texts.

During the 1970s and 1980s there were more attempts to interpret Parsons' structural functionalism in Czech sociological books and journals; however these lacked the magic attraction of new discovery and in addition had to adapt to the ideological restrictions of that time. Most of them were part of wider overviews of Western sociology and could not deal with Parsons' concept as a whole, thus they only touched upon those parts of his theory that were already part of general sociological knowledge preferring a not always accessible interpretation of Parsons' concept to an analysis of scientific problems that this concept introduced. Another shortcoming of publications from this period was the fact that they emerged while Parsons' works were still incomplete and expanding as well as undergoing substantial conceptual transformations. Authors were not always able to react to changing attitudes toward Parsons that could be seen in Western commentaries. However, these limitations of Czech parsonsology have been overcome and lately we can enjoy competent and knowledgeable analytical overviews of world sociology with Parsons' concept occupying a worthy place within. (Šubrt 2001) Still, until now there has been obvious absence of monographs that would provide a fully comprehensive, indeed panoramic look at the life and works of this unique character of world sociolo-

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gy of 20th century who it appears made the greatest contribution to sociological theory as we know it now. A publication of this kind would not only emphasise his theoretical and methodological merits, but also force us to think of the burning questions of our world today, which Parsons was able to discover and name in spite of his seemingly sublime theoretical position.

For all these reasons it is vital to warmly welcome the initiative by Doc. PhDr. Jiří Šubrt, CSc, who not only managed to organise a theoretical conference dedicated to assessing theoretical contribution of Talcott Parsons but also to follow this event through to an editorial finale. The final result of this collective ambition takes the form of an anthology that perhaps does not possess the quality of the desired monograph, but its complexity (an complicity to some extent) are close to perfect. Such output was predestined due to the fact that authors belong to several generations and thus within the group we see witnesses of the original „bringing in“ of Parsons onto the Czechoslovak sociological scene, representatives of the middle generation as well as young parsonologists. In this respect, author was able to not only rely on manifold analytical capacity of his background; as a sociological historian he could also use the valuable potential of personal recollections and experiences of individual contributors. He used this more or less for certain compositional split: he divided the contributions into those biographically oriented - these he placed to the „first“ part of the anthology right after his own  290 introductory study; and those articles that represent impersonal analytical overviews of Parsons' concept and its individual elements that appear in the „second“ part of the anthology.

If we compare these two parts, we must say that their informative value and content balance are identical. However, I will not try to conceal the fact that I personally was more interested in studies with a personal touch to them as they enable to re-live a period in history that has been lost forever. And, as a sociological historian I could not help but be pleased to see that Czech colleagues finally planted a seed of biographical sociological historiography whose birth I was able to witness in Russia under the important Russian sociologist G. S. Batygin and which is currently visibly lacking in Slovakia. Studies by Miloslav Petrušek, Pavel Machonin and especially Richard Jung are very attractive for readers and have convinced me that this trend in creating national sociological history has a future.

These contributions have a nostalgic effect, particularly article by Miloslav Petrusek where he concentrates on the fate of Talcott Parsons' works in Czech environment. In my opinion this concerns basically the reception of Parsons in the whole Czechoslovakia during the „fateful” 1960s and 1970s. Petrusek not only contemplates the causes of a belated reception of Parsons' theory by Czechoslovak sociology, he also points out a certain stiffness of the Czech sociologists even during the 1960s. He explains this with the existence of a strong anthropological stream in the Marxist philosophy and sociology of that time (Kosík, Michňak, Nový), that was working against the moderate supporters of Parsons who were attempting to utilise the theories and methodology of his structural functionalism.

In this sense exemplary were the experiences of a team led by Pavel Machonin who was preparing to publish the renowned Czechoslovak society (1969). One of its members was Miloslav Petrusek. It is interesting to see how Petrusek and Machonin retrospectively assess real contribution of Parsons' concept to the creation of first stratification model within sociology of Socialist countries.

Petrusek made a personal contribution to Czech translations of Parsons' studies on stratification which are in use now and claims that „the whole concept of stratification research was built on different premises, albeit clearly knowledgeable of Parsons' works”. (41) Petrusek considers the influence of sociologists such as Lenski, Barber (who was a parsonist by the way), Aron and others to be more significant. To a certain extent refusing to acknowledge the structural-functionalist view, Petrusek emphasises that it was „one of many possible” but not dominant. His reserved or even critical attitude to structural functionalism in that time is also confirmed by Machonin in his contribution which is otherwise dedicated to the influence of T. Parsons on Czech sociology. Nevertheless, this did not mean an absolute refusal of his „theoretical and methodological merits” (47); notion of social stratification and the criterion of functionality were appreciated. Machonin stresses his importance in highlighting the notion of social structure which was defined in his book *Social Structure of Socialist Society* (1967). He also

points out the study on concepts of social structure from an expert on Parsons Zdeněk Strmiska published in the same anthology. Within the framework of this study, a broad analysis of Parsons' structural functionalism appears. Although it comes two years after the extremely popular *Contemporary Sociology* (1965) by J. Klofáč and V. Tlustý where a large part (125 pages) was taken up by a detailed analysis of Parsons' concept (written solely by V. Tlustý as we are now told by Petrušek) which has an analytical value on its own. This value, Petrušek says, acquired an even better quality when compared to a text by Tlustý in another study by Strmiska - *Social reality as a system and structure* (1967). Strmiska, who has been described as a „genius non-writer“ obviously preferred long and remarkably vivid public lectures on  291 structural functionalism at the end of which the audience felt familiar with the topic. I say this based on personal experience as I attended one of Strmiska's lectures on structural functionalism that took place in Bratislava at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in 1965, i.e. before *Contemporary Sociology* had been published. I had just defended my dissertation on Parsons and thus was familiar with Strmiska's topic, but those present at the lecture could not help but be fascinated by his knowledge.

Apart from Strmiska, Petrušek also gives credit to the authors of *Contemporary Sociology* by remembering their earlier publication *Contemporary Empirical Sociology* from 1959, the book that had started everything and where J. Klofáč and V. Tlustý mention Parsons twice for the first time. It was not much for a start, but still authors published their extensive analytical evaluation of structural functionalism before *Contemporary Sociology* was published, sometime in the late 1950s in the Soviet journal *Voprosy filosofii* within their contribution on contemporary empirical sociology. I point this out not in order to finally solve the traditional puzzle „Who was first?“ but rather to be able to create a link to the idea of an apparent fight between first Czech parsonsologists that is being suggested but not openly spoken about by authors of both studies. When answering such questions, biographical method proves very useful as it significantly extends the possibilities of sociological historians in that it provides knowledge stemming from the very process of the life of science. This is not only an analysis of texts of

those we research - this is information acquired from their speeches, from their participation at congresses and events, from personal encounters and so on. We might from time to time hear strange stories like the one that the introduction to Parsons' Societies (1971) had been written in a „pub" (42), but such peculiarities are indispensable in science.

After all, if it was not for the biographical approach we would not have the very valuable testimony of Machonin of his personal encounters with Parsons which after all those years help us get to know his opinions on the reform of „state-socialist society", or his proposal to introduce the value of social equality into value sets of other than American social systems (49) that is his individual contribution to the convergence theory.

We also get to know personal characteristics of Parsons as an inconspicuous, respectful, modest, friendly character, „without a trace of superiority and behaving like an academic gentleman of the English rather than American kind". (48)

The image of Parsons as „extremely kind and responsible man with great respect to the differences of others" (89) also appears in the contribution by Richard Jung. However, the noble picture of an „academic gentleman" clashes with the impression of „shopkeeper cutting and selling cheese" (57) which was how Jung perceived Parsons the first time they had met.

It is those unwanted „benefits" of the biographical approach that Jung deliberately uses in his long study on Parsons where he successfully mixes memories of the person with reflections on his work. Jung believes that „some biographical information about Parsons and remembering the world in which he lived and worked will help to interpret his work". (53) Professor Jung has lots to look back on: he had known Parsons since 1951 and spent years in his immediate vicinity as assistant at the Department of Social Relationships of Harvard University. Jung not only had the opportunity to listen to Parsons who „as soon as he sat down at the table in the classroom and started to speak, there was no doubt that this is a thinker of higher class" (57), thus somehow correcting the initial impression of a „shopkeeper". Jung could debate with Parsons, argue with him, attend student parties and

above all assist Parsons in his scientific work „with the creation of his political ideas and the conceptualisation of power and later influence". (58) These qualifications naturally put the author at great advantage  292 and his contribution acquires an exclusive position compared to others in the anthology. What is more important, however, is the fact that this initial exclusivity is reaffirmed after reading Jung's contribution. His article offers the possibility to experience Parsons as a private person and at the same time courageously fights all the „idols" surrounding Parsons' concept. Considering the fact that he himself belonged for years to the academic elites of top American universities, professor Jung is remarkably non-conforming and critical. He does not present Parsons as fetish whose limelight he could relish; in fact he evaluates his concept in a matter-of-fact and objective way and tests its potential merit. Individual parts of the concept appear in Jung's article in a seemingly chaotic but otherwise logical order. They are led by the logic of associations, when the author considers not only issues Parsons dealt with but also those he did not want to deal with but which Jung thought he should have dealt with. So it happens that apart from paragraphs corresponding to Parsons' own concept elements such as psychoanalysis, system theory, equilibrium, homeostasis, cybernetics, evolution of society etc. there are other seemingly „alien elements" such as phenomenology, Roman law, linguistics, informatics and communication theory, hermeneutics, physics, Heidegger and similar. By introducing these issues author points out those areas of modern science that were somewhat ignored by Parsons. This is why some of the subchapters ends with author's resignation when he tried to rouse Parsons' interest for a topic but „it seemed he did not hear me". (70) This was the case of phenomenology, hermeneutics, Roman law etc. I think that the reason behind this reluctance of Parsons to react to new impulses is a certain inertia that is typical for systematic thinkers, or to some extent the primacy of „old settlers" who were first to conquer an area and are not willing to conform to new inhabitants. After all, this can be observed in the areas of science that Parsons adopted - for example in system theory. As an expert in the field of system theory Jung can competently assess real Parsons' contribution to this area and, and this is something of a

disappointment, he does not think highly of him. According to Jung, Parsons was not interested in the general theory of systems by L. Bertalanffy, did not react to system concepts of W. Buckley and R. Rosen, and was not influenced by I. Prigogine. To conclude this overview, author merely bitterly states that „the notion that Parsons was concerned with the study of systems seems to be acknowledged only by sociologists these days. „System literature" neither discusses nor quotes him." (75)

The same can be said about Parsons' relationship to new trends in cybernetics, linguistics, theory of equilibrium, evolution theory and so on. After all, readers could easily get the impression that Parsons' concept is scientifically inappropriate and outdated which is something that should worry the author. On one hand, he speaks from the position of a former young assistant that had spent years under the influence of Parsons' charisma; on the other hand he is himself a mature expert that cannot help but see some imperfections of his teacher's concept. This is in fact atypical situation in an academic's life and it must be said that professor Jung copes in a very dignified way. In the end he concludes that in spite of the fact that Parsons misused many scientific terms and most of his reflections seem neither logical, nor systematic, nor convincing, he still managed to „in some inherent way to come to conclusions that he held on to undeterred". Some of these conclusions, says Jung, „ continue to be not only revolutionary but represent a lasting contribution". (87) He recognises his genius of interpretation and the originality of some of his thoughts. (84)

The study of Professor Jung undoubtedly belongs to the most remarkable and valuable pieces not only within the anthology, but in general among the existing memoir literature about Parsons. We can compare Jung's article to writings by G. C. Homans, R. K. Merton and so on.

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We should thank J. Subrt for including Professor Jung among the authors as his presence helps to de-mythologise or „unspell" Parsons.

Hoping to be „re-fascinated" by Parsons, we are forced to turn to contributions providing an analytical overview which aim to reproduce his con-

cept according to common standards of interpretation; this in turn requires authors to maintain a certain degree of respect and tolerance in relation to the subject of interpretation - along the lines „first interpret the given theory right and only then you can criticise it". All contributions that we have put to the „second" part of reviewed anthology fulfill this precondition. This particularly applies to studies concerned with Parsons' general theory as they almost resemble textbook texts.

The introductory study by Jiri Subrt, where he monitors the evolution of Parsons' concept „from structure of action to the theory of system", as well as the contribution by Jan Urban provocatively named Was Parsons' sociology American?, could be put into this category. These studies are remarkably complementary in that they pursue the same goal but do not copy one another. It is not known whether this was an editorial intention or pure chance, but we certainly can speak of a peculiar division of labour between the two authors. Where one of them finishes, the other one picks up. Subrt presents a classical encyclopaedical study on Parsons, including a biographical introduction and a summary bibliography in the end. He offers a brief but nevertheless very precise interpretation of the theory of action as well as Parsons' system approach, which in Subrt's work overlaps with the structural-functional analysis. He observes the conceptual changes that took place during the evolution of Parsons' concept and in this respect notices the expansion of application of AGIL scheme even on the level of „Human condition paradigm", published in last of Parsons' works Action theory and the human condition (1978). Incidentally, this expansion is being ridiculed by Professor Jung. I have on several occasions attempted to explain it to my students, but the topic is difficult to understand. Now there is hope that they will be able to learn about it from this study.

In a way I feel sorry that this fast-paced text stops after arriving at the issue of social change by Parsons, quoting his main neo-evolutionist book Societies. It was probably intended by author due to lack of space and in the hope that one of the co-authors would touch upon this topic. This happened only partly in contribution by Machonin who belatedly notices Parsons' con-

tribution in this area; some of this topic we find in Jung's article. The anthology is missing a more detailed and broader analysis of these issues.

One must admire author's ability to squeeze his very rich interpretation into the space of 24 pages. Led by a lecturer's discipline he avoids useless meditation and does not quote much. This allows him to transpose the contents of Parsons' Social system to a very dense form that makes it very difficult to search for original text sources. Subrt does not make unnecessary excursions, does not dive deep into details and thus lets J. Urban to finish some topics in his contribution that deals with a wider socio-historical context of Parsons' works. In this connection, J. Urban reminds us of the beginnings of American sociology, including its links with social reform movement and Social Gospel, private financial resources and so on. This part of his article strongly reminded me of my own lectures on early American sociology, probably because we had both been using the same sources. His interpretation is strongly inspired by verified overviews of American sociological history by Martindale and Coser, but he also confronts them with other sources and overall provides an all-embracing and sound notion of this period. In this regard, his text along with Subrt's study can be easily used to teach history of sociology as its writing is easy to understand.

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Urban does not address Parsons' complete works like Subrt, but rather focuses his attention on his first monograph Structure of Social Action and the circumstances connected to the reception of the book among American sociologists. This enables him to some extent to provide a hesitant answer to the question asked in the title, searching for the "Americanness" of Parsons' sociology. In light of Prof. Jung's claim that „Parsons was as American as they get" the question may seem superfluous. Explaining the nature of apparently strong links of Parsons with European sociology and weak connection with the American sociology, author practically re-enters the jungle generations of parsonsologists world-wide had to jostle through at some point. Urban is not afraid to do so, on the contrary, his orientation within

this topic and useful literature is very good. His focus is not so much on the substance of the question asked as it has become vague after all those years of Parsons' „Americanisation"; Urban attempts a problem-solving approach to his concept that has been sorely missing.

In the context of these refreshed arguments concerning Parsons' affiliation I allow myself some remarks. In my personal opinion, Parsons was neither a typical European thinker, nor typically American; he was an original. He was a systematic thinker with a tendency towards presumptions who could not be distracted by occasional empirical cases or ideas of others, as confirmed by the experience of Prof. Jung. At the time of his intellectual formation Parsons was influenced by Kant (however he only admitted to this late in life), later it was Whitehead and still later he became largely immune to such strong intellectual influences. Above all Kant's influence found a reflection in Parsons' own aprioristic three-level scheme of world order that results in the theory of action. This is what is important, not sociology. Sociology for Parsons appears as a by-product of theory of action. The action concepts of the four selected European philosophers whom he brings together in *Structures of Social Action* are perceived by Parsons as material confirming the accuracy of his own scheme. He probably favoured these four because they were all already dead and could no longer argue with him, unlike still-alive Europeans such as Sorokin or Schutz, who could have opposed him and deviated from his scheme. They could even had made his life difficult through accusing him of plagiarism like Sorokin, something we could read about in his book *Requirements and Shortcomings of Contemporary Sociology and Related Sciences* (1956). Maybe this is the reason why Parsons' sociology was not American enough; it took its main ideas from P. Sorokin whose *System of Sociology*, published in Russian and Russia in 1920 (not in English and not in 1919, as author claims on p. 97) in many ways anticipated the same way of evolution of 20th century American sociology that was later taken by Parsons himself. In a sense, this was not a case of plagiarism, but rather a rare convergence of two scientists who identically foresaw the evolutionary perspective of contemporary sociology.

Finally, I do not consider Parsons that non-American at all; he did after all adopt some of the premises of early American sociology regarding the principles of group life. Thus he cannot deny his actors an American way of thinking; they are just as dependent on appreciation and respect of their immediate surroundings as individuals in concepts of Cooley and Mead are on the ideas and attitudes of their companions. In conclusion, we can say that Parsons quietly builds on the legacy of early American sociology, although he does not openly acknowledge this.

The contribution of Jan Balon concerned with Parsons' idea of general theory of actions could too be compared with the first two studies, although its scope is substantially narrower. Instead, his reflection goes much deeper. Similarly to Urban he concentrates on analysing Parsons' Structures of Social Action which unavoidably leads to some repetitions. He bears in mind his objective which is not to look for confirmation which sociology, European or American, had greater influence on Parsons; it is his goal to identify two main traditions of sociological thought in general - the 📖 295

Positivist and Idealist traditions. Parsons attempted to make use of both by integrating them into voluntaristic concept of action. Author attentively monitors his attempts down to the level of „action units“, and the individual elements prove that both traditions had been integrated.

In doing this, Balon emphasises the categories of „objective“ and „norm“ as representatives of terminology of two traditions and at the same time two types of rationality according to Weber. The category of „situation“ remains in the background, although Parsons insists on its parity with „norm“. After all, this is terminological residue of the behaviouristic model that Parsons had to integrate in his synthesis. We see these behaviouristic remains in the action model found in the book *Toward a General Theory of Action* from 1951. It is a pity that author has set his theoretically demanding and interesting contribution only within the framework of Parsons' first book and only partly looks at the version that was presented in *Social System* from 1951.

The study by Helena Kubátová overcomes this insufficiency and completes Parsons' original scheme of action by adding motivation that she even splits up into three layers. She does the same with value orientation; however it is a shame she does not name the sources for her knowledge - for instance the above mentioned Toward etc.

Unlike other authors Kubátová highlights Parsons' turn to behaviourism and interactionism (152) and in light of this she points out not only Toward a General Theory of Action but also Social System.

Her article reflects on a partial problem of Parsons' concept which is the value cultural model, taking into account the problem of linking person and society. At the same time her contribution is generous enough to allow for a broader background for comparison. It puts Parsons' concept of culture in a perspective along extended concepts of cultural anthropology and psychology and Kubátová finally comes to the conclusion that his understanding is much more dynamic than that used by cultural anthropology with its „cultural determinism" (R. Benedict). Another evidence of Parsons' dynamics is the psycho-analytical background of his concept that the author confronts with the Gestalt psychology used by Benedict. Finally, she comes to a not very transparent conclusion that Parsons' understanding of the relationship between individuals and society is typically more dynamic.

This interpretation is set into the sociological space and confronted with Thomas' concept of situation definition as well as Giddens' theory of structuration, both of which are presented through a rather lengthy and at times bold interpretation.

Kubátová ends her study with a rather trivial observation that Parsons' solution to the problematic link between individuals and society is the moral order. The author might have proven her knowledge, but due to some stylistic or compositional clumsiness she is unable to make her conceptual conclusion clearer to the readers. They are left wondering whether the article was meant to praise Parsons or rather Giddens. In any case, author should take a more critical stand towards Parsons' „value imperialism", possibly as-

sisted by Giddens whose concept would then need to be used as weapon of attack and not merely indifferent background.

It is this disagreement with the simplified idea that „society is held together only by shared values" that Marek Německý uses to begin his article (although he normally focuses on Parsons' notion of societal community). He goes on to say: „Parsons knows that the integration of modern society is a much more complex and complicated process." (176) Key role in this process is played by societal community and generalised media such as money, influence, power and value commitment which enable exchange processes. Author in a way refers to one part of J. Subrt's article where he touched upon these terms. Německý bases his argument on the notion of societal community as found in Parsons' book *Societies* (1971); however, he wrongly claims the book had been published in 1966 - year of publication of the American original. He underlines two dimensions that create societal community: normative order on one hand and collectively organised population on the other hand. In doing so, he manages to extricate himself from the „culturalist"  296 interpretation; along normative order he also sees the other dimension - status, rights and obligations that have more in common with real processes such as division of labour. After all, division of labour becomes the basis for social integration.

The anthology also includes an article by Kateřina Ivanova, Sylvia Bartlová and Martin Horváth, who provide an expert and sound presentation of Parsons' legacy for medicine and nursing. Although this topic is frequently addressed within the sociological discourse, it is important that not only sociologists of medicine pay attention to this contribution in terms of its structure, contents and conceptualisation.

In its own way pioneering is the contribution by František Znebežánek, who decided to look at the issue of social conflict in Parsons' theory despite the fact that Parsons had never really looked at neither the term nor the problem. However, author is able to point to the potentially conflicting area of relationships between ego and social and cultural system which is the source of social tension responsible for various cases of deviant behaviour.

Parsons basically not only presents the problem of role conflicts; he also anticipates and suggests solutions for this tension which are really in no way different to those proposed by the theory of conflict.

To all curious readers I recommend the article by Tomáš Dvořák with the title Parsons' unwanted offspring. Author plays with Parsons' translation of Weber's metaphor of an iron cage that is firmly embedded in sociology. In reality, this is an iron shield, and this changes to a great extent the interpretation of modernisation process as ordinary people become its captives. Author points out the reasons for this not particularly fitting translation and finds them in the fact that Parsons adopted this term from the Protestant bible of the 17th century.

Last article in the anthology is a contribution by Oleg Suša, who is trying to answer the question whether Parsons was a system instrumentalist or a communitarian. He deals with less well known aspects of Parsons' work, connected with some burning issues such as the relationship between the society and the environment or the issue of civil religion as a way of morally restoring the society. In the first case, Parsons proves to be an instrumentalist who sees nature as an industrial object. In the second situation, however, he becomes a critic of instrumentalism. What is valuable about this study is the fact that these issues are not forced on Parsons by the author; they are found in his thinking and used to comment on the burning issues of ecological and moral crisis, that are typical manifestations of late modern societies.

It is in a way characteristic that finally at the end of reviewed anthology we find a reflection of the problems encountered by post-modern society, closely linked to recent modern past - Parsons' concept after all is usually considered a classical interpretation of it. Certainly, with some courage it would be possible to question even this axiom and we could search for some elements that announce the onset of the post-modern era. This could be perhaps a task for a further collective book similar to that we have just reviewed and that we strongly recommend to Slovak readership.

In conclusion, we would like to express our sincere pleasure that after all those years, there finally is a sound theoretic publication on T. Parsons -

one which will be very useful in our scientific and teaching activities; but also to commend Czech sociology for having such a large number of knowledgeable experts on Parsons even among young sociologists. That is a guarantee that theoretical sociology in Czech Republic will continue to be a success.

We can only hope that something similar to this anthology will soon be published in Slovakia, too.

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