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**Talcott Parsons**  
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**'Talcott Parsons: in his times and ours'**  
 John Holmwood

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) is probably the most important and influential US sociologist of the twentieth century. He was brought up in the provincial mid-Western state of Ohio, where his father, a minister in the Congregational Church and an advocate of social reform, was President of a small college. Talcott Parsons was an undergraduate student of biology and philosophy at Amherst College in Massachusetts where he had the initial intention of pursuing a career in medicine. While at Amherst, he became interested in economics. In particular, he was drawn to the more sociologically (and social reform) oriented 'institutional economics' that was then challenging economic orthodoxy. After Amherst, Parsons spent a year at the London School of Economics where he attended the lectures of the functionalist anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski. He was then offered a fellowship at the University of Heidelberg, where Max Weber's influence remained powerful and palpable. Parsons (1928/1929) took his doctorate on 'The concept of capitalism in recent German literature', before returning to Amherst to a teaching position in economics. In 1927 he went to Harvard University as an instructor in economics before becoming instructor in sociology in 1931, at about the same time as a new Department of Sociology was created with Pitirim Sorokin as its Chair. Parsons remained at Harvard for the rest of his career.<sup>1</sup>

Parsons was a prolific author of books and articles and, in his own words, an 'incurable theorist'.<sup>2</sup> From the outset of his academic career he was concerned with the professional standing of sociology and its place within the 'system' of social science disciplines, in particular economics and psychology. To this end, in his first major book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) he outlined a general analytical framework of categories – *the action frame of reference* – that was intended both to provide a framework for social research and to define the field of sociology and its relation to other fields.

His career spanned the early formation of sociology as an academic discipline and he was active during a key period of its institutionalisation in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s, serving as President of the American Sociological Society (subsequently to become the American Sociological Association) in 1949. His theory was, perhaps, most influential during this period. Indeed, in his Presidential Address he was able to conflate the development of his own position with the prospects for sociological theory in general (Parsons 1954[1950]). However, his scheme was not without its critics, especially from those who felt that the 'structural-functional' development of his theoretical framework in *The Social System* (1951) overemphasised the system at the expense of actors, or that his scheme was at odds with more orthodox conceptions of social scientific methodology.

In the 1970s, in a political climate more attuned to issues of conflict and change, these criticisms gained momentum and his work fell from favour, with few sociologists of subsequent generations self-consciously identifying themselves with it. Nonetheless, it remained the critical foil against which those who sought a reorientation of sociology would define their own position. Indeed, as Jürgen Habermas put it, "any theoretical work in sociology today that failed to take account of Talcott Parsons could not be taken seriously" (1981, and below: 174).

<sup>1</sup> Parsons' relations with Sorokin were rather cold and distant and it was some considerable time before he was appointed to an assistant professorship in sociology. However, he succeeded Sorokin to the Chair of the Department in 1946, when it was reconfigured as a Department of Social Relations (comprising social anthropology, social psychology, clinical psychology and sociology; a separate department of sociology re-emerged in 1970). For further discussion, see T. Parsons (1970, and below) and Hamilton (1983).

<sup>2</sup> The description occurs in the dedication of *The Social System* to his wife, Helen Parsons, whose 'healthy and practical empiricism' were 'an indispensable balance-wheel to an incurable theorist'.

Subsequently, it has been suggested that the major criticisms of Parsons have often been superficial. For example, for Bryan Turner, the seemingly radical critiques of Parsons put forward in the 1960s and 70s did not give rise to much that was substantially new and they represented, “shifts in theoretical dialect rather than fundamental changes in discourse” (1986: 200). For him, “Parsonsian sociology is the dominant *episteme* ... and the promise of a new domain of concepts has yet to be realised” (1986: 200). In a similar vein, Jeffery Alexander (1988, and below) and Richard Munch (1987, and below) have argued for a convergence among erstwhile critics on a neo-functionalist paradigm.

It is probably true to say that the ambition to produce general theory (whether structural functionalist, neo-functionalist, communicative action, or structuration theory) is now somewhat diminished, with, in the words of Alan Wolfe, ‘strong theory’ now replaced by ‘strong theorists’ (Wolfe 1992), and with many recent strong theorists espousing a ‘postmodern’ hostility to the ‘grand narratives’ of strong theory. Parsons is firmly in the canon of strong theorists, although his ambition had been to establish the foundations of sociology as a collective and professional undertaking.<sup>3</sup> The essays collected in this volume cover the range of criticisms directed at Parsons’ work. They have been selected not just to identify central themes in his work, but also to identify the way in which the major proponents of significant alternative approaches – for example, Alfred Schutz, George Homans, Ralf Dahrendorf, David Lockwood, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Giddens - found it necessary to engage with him in the definition of their own positions. Perhaps the greatest tribute that has been paid to Parsons as a theorist is the stature of those who have taken issue with him. The present volume, then, is about the thought of Talcott Parsons, but it also captures debates across a range of sociological positions and contributions by some of the most important sociologists of the period.

This introduction is designed to provide the context for reading the contributions that follow. In the first section, I shall set out the background of Parsons’ early work, including a discussion of some of the issues of interpretation that are raised. In the next section, I shall provide an overview of the main features of his theory of social action and social systems, before addressing the main criticisms to which it gave rise and which are represented in the essays re-printed in this volume.

### *Parsons and his theoretical context*

Most sociologists are conscious of Parsons’ first book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) – hereafter, *TSofSA* - as a modern classic of the discipline. In it Parsons identifies the elements of a general frame of reference that he suggests can unify hitherto conflicting tendencies of sociological analysis, deriving from positivist and idealist traditions of social thought. Parsons argues that there are convergent tendencies toward this common framework from within each tradition and he illustrates this convergence in a detailed analysis of the work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto and the economist Alfred Marshall. For him, this group – the 1890-1920 generation – represented a turning point in the development of social thought, when sociology could be freed from the ideological controversies about the future of capitalism with which it had previously been bound up (essentially, what Parsons came to call the ‘individualism-socialism’ dilemma. See, Parsons and Smelser 1956). For this reason, Parsons did not devote much space to a discussion of Marx; he ‘belonged’ to the nineteenth century and his valid insights had already been absorbed by Weber (see, Parsons 1967).

The neglect of Marx, alongside the claimed convergence of Durkheim and Weber, two sociologists frequently seen as offering radically distinct approaches, was something that came to the fore in the 1960s when critics sought alternative readings of the ‘classics’ that would open up the dimensions of conflict and change apparently neglected by Parsons (see, Pope, Cohen and Hazelrigg, 1975 and below, Warner 1978 and below). However, *The*

<sup>3</sup> As Wearne puts it, “Parsons’ contribution involves his attempt to ensure that ‘theory’ is possessed by a corporate and professional body, rather than by individuals competing in the academic market place” (1989: 67). One of Parsons’ severest critics in the 1960s, Dennis Wrong, has recently been moved to comment upon postmodern developments in sociological theory, “was it for *this* that we killed Parsons?” (1993: 188).

*Structure of Social Action* had little immediate impact, except 'locally' on an impressive group of graduate students at Harvard (their number included Robert Merton, Wilbert Moore and Bernard Barber). If anything, his contemporaries (including Sorokin) were annoyed at his apparent slighting of American social science in his concentration upon European luminaries. The early reviews indicated some unease with the direction that Parsons' argument was leading (or, more precisely, the difficulty of identifying a clear thesis out of the density of its prose), the 'strangeness' of the form of argument as neither fish nor fowl (neither, straightforwardly history of sociology nor exposition of systematic theory) and with his interpretations of his group of writers (see, for example, House 1939; Kirkpatrick 1938; Wirth 1939). However, there was agreement that it was a *tour de force* and that it was the best critical discussion of each writer then available.

The book was republished in 1949, with a paperback edition in 1968 coinciding with heightened critical engagement with his work. The critical reception accorded *The Social System* gave rise to a reappraisal of the earlier volume. Ironically, this engagement with Parsons' convergence thesis served to establish the very mode of sociological argument that earlier critics had found puzzling, where foundations for sociology are sought in a critical exegesis of selected sociological classics. Thus, major critics of Parsons in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Giddens, Habermas and Lockwood (see, selections below) all went on to produce their own interpretation of the classics and, through that, to propose their own re-ordering of the sociological field. *TSoSA* became an exemplar even where its specific content was contested.

Despite arguments that Parsons' critical commentaries were frequently one-sided or overly constrained to fit his convergence thesis (Pope et al 1975, and below), there was also something one-sided about the criticisms. Very rarely was issue taken with his treatment of Pareto and Marshall. Indeed, the fact that Marshall was an economist and that Pareto operated between economics and sociology was barely noticed, or, if noticed, passed over.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Parsons' early interest in the relation between economics and sociology has been neglected until very recently, even by someone like Jeffery Alexander who has been most concerned to rehabilitate the formal analysis provided in *TSoSA*. Yet, as Charles Camic (1987, and below) has argued, most of Parsons' published work prior to *TSoSA* dealt with topics in economics and his initial training was in 'institutional economics'. As Camic argues, one of the key issues in understanding Parsons' theoretical development is his resolution of the relation between sociology and economics and his apparent repudiation of his early sympathies with institutional economics and move toward a greater appreciation of orthodox economics that became evident in *TofSA*.

For Camic, part of the explanation of why Parsons turned away from institutional economics is to do with his appointment at Harvard and the lower status accorded to sociology when compared with economics.<sup>5</sup> This had both a particular expression, in the dominance of orthodox economics within Harvard itself (compared with Parsons' *alma mater* Amherst, where he had imbibed institutional economics), but also a general expression. Institutional economics was on the wane and sociology itself was experiencing greater problems of public acceptance than economics (evidenced by much later incorporation into University teaching and research arrangements). To some degree, being seen to be closer to the accepted form of science was to have greater status and the emulation of economics was a potential route to the successful institutionalisation of sociology, as well as serving Parsons in terms of his personal career; for Camic, this explains Parsons' ambition to develop analytical theory of a kind similar to that found in neo-classical economics.

There is no reason to believe that Parsons' reasons were simply self-serving. As we shall see, as befits someone who was concerned with the integration of self-interest and altruism (and their explanation in terms of 'social structure'), rather than their expression as opposites,

<sup>4</sup> For exceptions, see Sahay (1972), Camic (1987, and below) Wearne (1989), Holton and Turner (1986),

<sup>5</sup> See also Wearne 1989; Granovetter 1990; Velthuis 1999; Brick 2005). According to Alexander and Sciortino (1996), this is an unsatisfactory reductionist approach. However, if we accept that there is nothing intrinsically problematic about identifying the social factors associated with critical episodes in the development of Parsons' project, the way is also open also to consider them in the light of Parsons' own implicit sociology of science (in particular, concerning the relation between science and ideology).

Parsons also had clearly articulated reasons for this shift. If Parsons subsequently turned away from institutional economics in particular, and economics in general, at least in his own mind, it was because he had transcended the limits of orthodox economics in his general frame of reference, the further elaboration of which was the primary focus of his attention after the writing of *TSofSA*. Moreover, he regarded its sociological aspect not to be in direct opposition to institutional economics, but to be its more adequate successor (in the sense of providing a better theoretical account of the very processes of the institutionalisation of activities, including those deemed to be 'economic').

These arguments were also developed in articles on the professions which were written between *TSofSA* and *The Social System*.<sup>6</sup> Parsons (1954 [1939]) argued that professional disinterestedness stands in contrast to the self-interested motives attributed to the operation of the modern economic system. According to Parsons, the professions distinguish themselves from mere occupations by virtue of the fact that their knowledge is based upon general university learning, associated with technical competence, but also with universalistic values. Despite a profession's monopoly of expertise, Parsons held that the corporate form of professional organisation provided an ethical self-regulation of relations with clients such that any apparent monopoly operated in the general, public interest, rather than in the private interest of professionals themselves.

In this way, he argued, the professions introduce an element of 'disinterestedness' into the organisation of social activities, in contrast to what was attributed to a commercial ethos of self-interest. Nonetheless, the general dominance attributed to pecuniary motives within the modern capitalist economy creates a tension where any social structures organised in terms of professional disinterestedness are either thought to be *really* determined by the operation of self-interest (and their ethical self-understanding is simply an ideology), or their distinctive structures are held to be becoming increasingly commercialised so that they are likely to disappear. In contrast, Parsons writes that, "the fact that the professions have reached a uniquely high level of development in *the same society* which is also characterized by a business economy suggests that the contrast which has been mainly stated in terms of the problem of self-interest, is not the whole story" (1954 [1939]).

Although Parsons' argument can be seen to be directed at one strand in the institutionalist critique of capitalism, which emphasised the dominance of pecuniary motives over other motives, including those of the professions (see, for example, Veblen 1904), he is not doing so from a utilitarian perspective. Moreover, his purpose is to uphold another institutionalist point. This is that the seemingly radical difference (when considered empirically) between business motives and professional motives is to do with different social structures; that is, it is 'situational' rather than 'motivational'. Parsons writes that, "the difference is not so great as our predominantly economic and utilitarian orientation of thought would lead us to believe. Perhaps even it is not mainly a difference of typical motive at all, but one of different situations in which much the same commonly human motives operate. Perhaps the acquisitiveness of modern business is institutional rather than motivational" (1954 [1939]: 36). In this way, Parsons is just as concerned to criticise any simple association of the professions with 'altruistic' motives. The *individual* doctor may be no less self-interested than someone engaged in business. The point is one about the *social structural* governance of activities. In addition, it is about how the 'universalism' predominant in professional activities comes to extend to other spheres: "the role of universalism is by no means confined to the professions. It is equally important to the patterns governing contractual relationships, for instance in the standards of common honesty, and to administrative office" (1954 [1939]: 42).

This point is reinforced by the recognition that the sharp 'empirical' differentiation between business motives and professional motives recedes with the increasing complexity of the modern economic system. The 'firm' no longer corresponds to that analysed by Marx, for example, or by other classical political economists (and by extension, neo-classical economists as well, though there are suggestions in Marshall that go beyond the standard approach). It is increasingly complex and, while that complexity might seem to indicate a

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<sup>6</sup> He had planned a monograph on the medical profession, but had been unable to complete it, although his thinking about it informs his writing and it forms a case study for one chapter of *The Social System*.

greater concentration of economic power, it is, for Parsons, predicated upon a differentiation of functions of ownership and managerial control, where managers could increasingly take on a professional ethos and direct companies toward longer term and more socially diffuse goals (Parsons and Smelser 1956).

It seems clear, then, that Parsons was looking toward a unified and structural theory of motivation – a general theory of the structure of social action, no less - that was distinct from the utilitarian account, and that he understood the dominance of the latter in sociological terms; that is, in terms of the evolution of the institutional structures of capitalism. According to Parsons, the increasing complexity of these institutions cannot be understood in terms of a utilitarian theory of motive. At the same time, however, the dominance of the utilitarian approach within intellectual thought and public policy is to be understood in terms of the development of those same institutions. Disciplines such as economics and psychology (including biological theories of behaviour) had come to maturity during the period of early and developing capitalism; as Parsons put it, "while the economic era of ideology was related to the *fact* of industrialization, the psychological era has been related to industrialization's *consequences*" (1959: 553). However, with the transition to mature capitalism, Parsons argued, problems of 'scarcity' recede to be replaced by the problems of 'affluence'.

In this way, Parsons' early work rests on a version of the 'end of ideology' thesis. The institutional developments associated with the rise of professions are central to the resolution of an 'individualism-socialism' dilemma that had characterised an earlier phase of capitalist development. For Parsons, this brought into being the era of sociology which, while it overlaps with the 'psychological' and 'economic' era, involves the recognition that the complexities of large-scale society require an analysis that goes beyond individual behaviour and, therefore, beyond the individualistic assumptions of economics and psychology. Parsons' claims represent a powerful mix. Sociology, itself, had come of age into a new professional role. The 'end of ideology' presaged the 'age of sociology' (Parsons 1959).

Parsons was aware of problems within the discipline as it confronted this new challenge of public relevance. The 'European' tradition in sociology had retained strong links with humanist social philosophy. However, this also meant that, implicitly, it was tied to a different, and less relevant, set of ideological issues than those that were emerging with a mature, modern society. His analysis of North American sociology was mirrored by his critique of institutional economics. The 'American' tradition of sociology was tied to a pragmatic orientation to social problems, hostile to 'over-intellectualised' theory. The 'technical' sophistication of the discipline that had grown around this orientation, together with the hostility to theory, meant that it had distanced itself from any new public role leaving that role to 'maverick' individuals and campaigning journalism. It was in this 'gap' between the 'European' and 'American' traditions that Parsons sought to define his own role, unifying them within the categories of a general theory which would provide a secure basis for the discipline in its coming of age. A clear understanding of the role of a theoretical framework as the foundation of scientific work was necessary, Parsons believed, to counter the cognitive claims of ideologies.<sup>7</sup>

Parsons' account of the '1890-1920 generation' as a transitional generation presaging a synthesis which would be the basis of future collective endeavours, then, was underpinned by a sociological analysis of the changing social context for sociology itself. It was a transitional generation in part because it was also located in a transition in the institutional development of capitalism; the particular authors were selected because they bore upon the relation between sociology and economics which was crucial to the emerging discipline and what Parsons saw as its necessary formation. However, in outlining the convergence of his group of authors on a common framework of categories, Parsons was far from arguing that their positions were the same, as is inferred by Pope et al. The common framework was Parsons' innovation and its necessity was deduced from parallel problems identified in each writer, despite their location in different traditions of social thought.

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<sup>7</sup> Although much has been made of the absence of pressing social issues like the economic depression of the 1920s and the emergence of fascism from the pages of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons was very concerned to address such issues and devoted a number of articles to such topics. In his own mind, the analysis provided in *TSoSA* helped to clear the ground for their proper address. For discussion, see Gerhardt (2002).

*Parsons and the development of his scheme*

Parsons begins *TSofSA* with a characterisation of systems of scientific (including social scientific) theory and their associated criteria of validity. Crucial to his analysis is the identification of indicators of the breakdown of a theoretical system. Parsons identifies two kinds of category relevant to the dynamic processes of theory development. These are the *positive* categories of a theoretical system and its *negative*, or, *residual*, categories, writing that, "a theoretical system must always involve the positive definition of certain empirically identifiable variables or other general categories" (1937: 17). By *positive* definition, he means that they have a consistent definition within a system. However, he believes that there will also emerge categories that are *negatively* defined, for example, "facts known to exist, which are even more or less adequately described, but are defined theoretically by their *failure* to fit into the positively defined categories of the system" (1937: 17). Such residual categories are of fundamental importance and their role, "may be deduced from the inherent necessity of a system to become logically closed", in so far as, "the obviously unattainable, but asymptotically approached goal of the development of scientific theory ... is the elimination of all residual categories from science in favour of positively defined empirically verifiable concepts" (1937: 19). According to Parsons, this process of 'elimination' is not a matter of simple addition: "theoretical systems change. There is not merely a quantitative accumulation of 'knowledge of fact', but a qualitative change in the structure of theoretical systems" (1937: 19). It is not simply the residual categories that are transformed by re-definition, but also the positively defined categories of previous statements as explanations are extended and new relationships postulated: "the process of the carving out of positive categories from residual categories is also a process by which the reconstruction of theoretical systems is accomplished as a result of which they may eventually be altered beyond all recognition" (1937: 19).

In brief, Parsons argues that the positivist and idealist traditions can be characterised in terms of their complex development of positive and residual categories. The expansion of the latter within each tradition points to the necessity of going beyond each tradition, but the fact that analogous problems occur within each suggests that their transcendence can also be a synthesis. It is a synthetic general theory that he proposes, at one and the same time, different from what is to be found in Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber, but drawn from them. The order of presentation is significant because it reveals both the greater influence of positivism over current theories of action (following from the earlier disciplinary development of economics and psychology) and the special status accorded by Parsons to Weber as having achieved a formal typology of action that recognised *both* the role of conditioning factors in the relation of means and ends *and* the role of subjective motivation and the values that inform the selection of ends. However, Parsons felt that Weber's approach took *analytically* distinguishable *elements* of all action and represented them as distinct and mutually inconsistent *types*.<sup>8</sup>

As a first step in his solution to this problem, Parsons identified what he calls the 'unit act' and its component elements. This 'unit act', however, should not be understood as referring to something which exists *concretely*. It does not have any immediate reference to the concrete individual acts of any specific person. Parsons' aim is to identify by a process of logical abstraction the most basic elements of a wider scheme. Any issue of the concrete manifestation of action can only be addressed once that wider scheme has been fully elaborated. The analytical categories of the scheme do not refer directly, but, ultimately, it will be used to generate mechanisms with direct empirical implications. Failure to recognise this, Parsons argues (following Whitehead), is to commit 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'.

According to Parsons, action is a process oriented to the realisation of an end. It occurs in conditional circumstances that must be calculated upon and utilised by actors in the pursuit of

<sup>8</sup> This reflected a criticism of Weber's 'type atomism' made in Parsons' doctoral thesis (Parsons 1928/29). The problem Parsons addresses is evident in the way in which Weber refers to all action empirically as involving *zweckrational* and *wertrational* aspects, but that in terms of their formal statements as types, each appears irrational from the point of view of the other: "Value-rational action may thus have various different relations to instrumentally rational action. From the latter point of view, however, value-rationality is always irrational" (1968: 26)

their ends. However, 'ends' and 'conditions' (including 'means') are analytically distinct categories. This claim is important because it means that action cannot be understood as an emanation of cultural values as is the case with some forms of idealism: action is not free from determination by circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, action involves 'effort' to conform with norms (which govern ends and the selection of their means of realisation) since it must transform circumstances and, therefore, accommodate and calculate upon conditions if it is to be successful. Given Warner's (1978, and below) critique of Parsons for his neglect of the 'cognitive element of action', however, it is worth emphasising at this point that Parsons is not assuming any particular content to norms, he is simply registering that, since acting involves intervention on the part of the actor, it must be 'motivated', whether that is by a desire to conform with norms, or to avoid sanctions that might otherwise be applied.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, since ends represent future anticipated states of affairs, there must necessarily be some cognitive construction of ends (in terms both of different possibilities and their conditions of realisation) as an aspect of motivated action.

As well as being normatively oriented (in Parsons' sense), action, to be rational, must be adequate in terms of the knowledge necessary to the realisation of ends. Thus, Parsons, refers to the 'intrinsic rationality of the means-end relation' in terms of the necessary role of 'valid knowledge as a guide to action' (1937: 600). However, the validity of that knowledge is relative to the ends being pursued and not simply according to an external standard, as occurs within positivism (with the consequence that much action is rendered irrational). Action, for Parsons, cannot be reduced to its conditions since an understanding of the agency of the actor and, consequently, of the subjective meaning of an action is necessary in any adequate account. With conditions and means classified as technical in substance and, as such, external to any given actor, the 'subjective', voluntary aspect of action is associated with the actor's capacity to form ends.

Parsons saw the problems of positivism as consisting in the problematic role of the category of 'ends' within the different variants of their scheme. He addressed his criticism to the utilitarian conception of action in neo-classical economics where ends are 'given', in the sense that how actors arrive at their preferences is not addressed, only the processes by which they are to be realised through rational choice. Parsons' view was that to take ends as 'given' is to assign them a necessary status within a scheme, but to fail adequately to account for them. The implication, Parsons suggested, is that ends vary, 'at random relative to the means-end relationship and its central component, the actor's knowledge of his situation' (1937: 63). Within 'positivism', an assumption of the 'randomness' of ends would also be regarded as unsatisfactory (because of its implicit indeterminacy), but the tendency is for theorists to move in the other direction to that suggested by Parsons. Thus, radical positivists – especially, in biological explanations of behaviour - attempt to deny the analytical independence' of 'ends', reducing ends to the 'situation' of action. They attempt to see action as entirely the product of determining stimuli located in the external environment. There is, then, what Parsons called, a 'utilitarian dilemma' within positivism where, "either the active agency of the actor in the choice of ends is an independent factor in action, and the end element must be random; or the objectionable implication of the randomness of ends is denied, but then their independence disappears and they are assimilated to the conditions of the situation, that is to elements analysable in terms of nonsubjective categories, principally heredity and environment, in the analytical sense of biological theory" (1937: 64).

The discussion of 'unit acts' provides only the basic *elements* of an action frame of reference and, according to Parsons, such a discussion "serves only to arrange the data in a certain order, not to subject them to the analysis necessary for their explanation" (1937: 48). Failure to recognise this is another instance of the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', where the unit act is regarded as having a concrete reference in terms of individual actions, rather than being conceived correctly as the means of identifying analytical elements and relations.<sup>11</sup> As

<sup>9</sup> Critics of Parsons that are sympathetic to the idealist tradition, such as Habermas (1981, and below) and Joas (1988, and below) view his representation of it as thin and one-dimensional.

<sup>10</sup> As Schutz observes, "to avoid any misunderstanding it must be kept in mind that Parsons defines the term 'normative' with the purpose of eliminating legal and ethical connotations" (1978[1940]: 14, and below).

<sup>11</sup> Thus, Parsons writes that, "the sense in which the unit act is here spoken of as an existent entity is not that of concrete spatiality or otherwise separate existence, but of *conceivability* as a unit *in terms of a frame of reference*"

such, the 'unit act' has a 'fictional' status because empirical reference is only properly achieved when analysis has gone beyond the 'unit act'. The problem of neo-classical economics is not the lack of 'realism' of its assumptions, then, as institutional economists had argued, but the lack of development of the scheme which its categories presuppose and in which they will find a proper statement.

'Explanation' – *analytical realism* rather than *empiricist realism* - requires a further step in the analysis, from 'unit acts' to their location within 'systems' of action. This step, Parsons argues, "consists in generalising the conceptual scheme so as to bring out the functional relations in the facts already descriptively arranged" (1937: 49) This further generalisation of the scheme will identify emergent properties of *systems* of action; that is, properties which appear in relation to any consideration of the co-ordination of actions and which are not reducible to analysis in terms of 'unit acts' alone. Thus, Parsons writes that, "action systems have properties that are emergent only on a certain level of complexity in the relations of unit acts to each other. These properties cannot be identified in any single unit act considered apart from its relation to others in the same system. *They cannot be derived by a process of direct generalisation of the properties of the unit act*" (1937: 739). The concept of emergent properties, then, serves to identify the, "elements of structure of a generalised system of action" (1937: 718) and these elements of *structure* are to be further analysed in terms of their *functional* relations; that is, in terms of the logical relations established within the theoretical system.

This is what underlies Parsons' use of an 'organic' analogy in *TSofSA*, where, "the very definition of an organic whole is one within which *the relations determine the properties of its parts*. The properties of the whole are not simply a resultant of the latter" (1937: 32). Thus, Parsons writes that, "analytical elements, once clearly defined, will be found to have certain uniform modes of relation to each other which hold independently of any one particular set of their values" (1937: 36). These 'uniform modes of relationship' have the status of 'analytical laws' where "an analytical law ... states a uniform mode of relationship between the values of two or more analytical elements" (1937: 622).<sup>12</sup> *Concrete* differences are to be accounted for by differences in the 'values' (in the technical meaning of the content and levels of variables) of the elements which have been identified analytically.<sup>13</sup>

It is precisely the understanding of uniform modes of relationship between elements, which the analytical theory of action provides, that enables the prediction of changes in the 'values' of the variables of empirical systems consequent upon changes in the 'value' of some other variable in the system. In contrast, the analytical categories of the scheme itself are not empirical. Parsons writes that, "the action frame of reference may be said to have ... 'phenomenological' status. It involves no concrete data that can be 'thought away', that are subject to change. It is not a phenomenon in the empirical sense. It is the indispensable logical framework in which we describe and think about the phenomenon of action" (1937: 733).

The idea of emergent properties of systems of social action is at the heart of how Parsons approached the 'problem of order'.<sup>14</sup> Action occurs in systems and these systems have an orderly character. There are two issues of 'order', or integration, identified by Parsons. These

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(1937: 43-4. My emphasis). The force of Parsons' point here is missed by Schutz, who treats 'unit acts' precisely as concrete, writing that one can break down wholes into parts which can exist independently of wholes, as, "if I break down, for instance, a grove into the trees which form it. This kind of analysis would correspond to Professor Parsons' unit analysis" (1978[1940]: 24).

<sup>12</sup> One issue of subsequent debate is the extent to which Parsons is a positivist in his approach to social inquiry (see Camic 1987). Certainly, his espousal of a general frame of reference as a precondition of social inquiry is at odds with what was then emerging as the more orthodox 'covering law' model. It is clear, however, that he has a 'naturalist' commitment to the discovery of analytical laws.

<sup>13</sup> Parsons writes in similar vein that, "a generalised social system is a conceptual scheme, not an empirical phenomenon. It is a logically integrated system of generalised concepts of empirical reference in terms of which an indefinite number of concretely differing empirical systems can be described and analysed" (1954[1940]: 71).

<sup>14</sup> The 'problem of order' is frequently called by Parsons the 'Hobbesian problem of order'. However, as Warner (1978, and below) points out, Parsons uses the term to refer to the 'analytical' problem of order, as in his positing of the 'utilitarian dilemma' (associated with the 'randomness of ends') which would not apply to Hobbes, as well as correctly identifying it as a substantive problem of the scarcity of the means available to meet the desired ends of individuals who are thereby placed in competition with each other.

are what we can term *personal order* and *interpersonal order*. *Personal order* involves the recognition that any given act is, for the actor, one among a plurality of other chosen and possible actions with a variety of different ends in view with different requirements for their realisation. *Interpersonal order* involves the recognition that actions occur in contexts which include, as Parsons put it, 'a plurality of actors' (1937: 51).

The emergent properties of personal order, according to Parsons, have received more attention in social theory (in particular, in economics) than those of interpersonal order. From the point of view of the analysis of the 'unit act', any relation of conditions (including means) to the realisation of a given end is a purely 'technical' issue of the competent realisation of the end in question. However, every action occurs in contexts produced by each individual's past actions which, in turn, affects the possibilities of their future action. Along with the requirement of a 'technical' efficacy of means, there is a requirement of consistency in the relation among purposes. Actions occur in what Parsons termed 'means-ends chains'. For any actor, there is a mutual dependency of acts as means and conditions of other acts. Where means are scarce relative to ends, actors will maximise outcomes by the most efficient selection of means and by placing their ends in a personal hierarchy of preferences. Actors' ends are determined by their preferences and values, but their 'cognitive' address to the means of the realisation of their ends is also governed by what Parsons termed a 'normative standard', the 'norm of efficiency'. As Parsons put it, 'economic rationality is thus an emergent property of action which can be observed only when a plurality of unit acts is treated together as constituting an integrated system' (1937: 40).

For Parsons, more fundamental issues of social theory arise when systems of social action involving a *plurality* of actors are the focus of attention. These are the issues of *interpersonal order*. He offered his analysis of emergent properties in terms of the increasing complexity of systems of action. Interpersonal systems are more complex than personal systems because, analytically, they presuppose the latter. Thus, what Parsons was concerned to identify were additional emergent properties of interpersonal order beyond those of personal order, but incorporating them. Such systems are *interpersonal systems of personal systems of action*.<sup>15</sup> Interpersonal order concerns the coordination of systems of action where these systems include the activities of a number of actors. According to this conception, the actions of any given actor form the conditions and means of other actors in the system. Just as there is a mutual dependence of acts within the means-end chains of an actor's system of personal order, so there is a mutual dependence of acts and means-end chains among the interactions of a plurality of actors.

It is these considerations which underlie the more directly 'sociological' aspects of the 'problem of order' which consists, as an analytical problem, in identifying the properties and processes of the system that maintain the commensurability of actions among the different actors in a system. Thus, Parsons argued there is a requirement of *consistency* in the coordination of an interpersonal system equivalent to that of any personal system. The implication is that just as there is an 'analytical law' of the 'maximisation' of rationality in personal systems, so there is an equivalent 'analytical law' of interpersonal systems; facilities are 'maximised' in integrated systems.

Parsons stressed the role of a common culture, both as the source of the standards governing interaction and internalised within personality as the basis of dispositions to act. However, he was far from arguing that the stability of systems of action depends only on the functioning of common value elements, as many of his critics suggest. Parsons' conception of normative order is more subtle than is usually allowed and he intended it to include a treatment of issues of power. Thus, in his hierarchical presentation of 'emergent properties', Parsons offered coercion as 'above' economic rationality, but below 'common values'. He wrote, "where others are concerned coercion is a potential means to the desired control, which is not included in the economic concept as such. It also has a similar double aspect - the exercise of coercive power as a means and its acquisition as an immediate end" (1937: 239-40). However, according to Parsons, 'coercive power' does not *define* the system, in the

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<sup>15</sup> It should be clear, then, that Parsons' account transforms the categories of neo-classical economic analysis – at least in principle – by virtue of their location within a 'holist' scheme.

sense that the system is founded upon it. Coercive power is a relation *within* the system. Thus, Parsons wrote, 'it cannot be a property of the *total* action system involving a plurality of individuals; it can only apply to some individuals or groups within a system *relative* to others. Coercion is an exercise of power over others" (1937: 740).

The final emergent property of the total action system is the requirement that, "in order that there may be a stable system of action involving a plurality of individuals there must be normative regulation of the power aspect of individuals within the system; in this sense, there must be a distributive order" (1937: 740). In other words, the distribution of resources, within the system and, therefore, the actions within which those resources are produced and reproduced, must be governed by some legitimating principles or norms.

As Parsons developed his theory – in *The Social System* and after - he offered a distinction between different *levels* of analysis, namely personality, social system and culture (adding a fourth level of 'organism', once the four-fold scheme of functional imperatives became fully elaborated). The levels correspond to the analytical distinctions made in the earlier statement of the action frame of reference. Thus, the level of personality corresponds to the individual actor viewed as a system. The level of culture refers to the symbols and meanings which are drawn upon by actors in the pursuit of their personal projects and their negotiation of social constraints and facilities. As Parsons said, the three key features of the cultural system are, "that culture is *transmitted*, it constitutes a heritage or a social tradition; secondly, that it is *learned*, it is not a manifestation, in particular content, of man's genetic constitution; and third, that it is *shared*. Culture, that is, is on the one hand the product of, on the other hand a determinant of, systems of human social interaction" (1951: 15). The 'social system' corresponds to that level of interaction among a 'plurality of actors' which was the primary focus of the analysis of the 'problem of order' in the earlier work. It is a structure of positions and roles organised by normed expectations and maintained by sanctions (including coercion).

Parsons proposed that each of the 'levels' forms a system in its own right, where the characteristics of a system are relations of logical coherence among its parts. At the same time, each system functions in relation to the other systems and interpenetrates with them. In other words, their interpenetration, or interdependence, also constitutes a 'system'. This is what Parsons had previously referred to as the 'total action system'. By the time of writing *The Social System*, Parsons (1954[1950a] 1964 [1952]) had also begun to see Freud as having an equivalent status to Durkheim or Pareto. His elaboration of the relation between the personality system, social system, and cultural system drew heavily on Freudian terminology. Thus, the institutionalised roles of the social system structure the 'reality situation' and (through the operation of cultural norms) the 'superego content' for individual actors. However, 'internalisation' involves not merely the 'superego' aspect where the 'norms of culture' are internalised, but also the 'ego' which, for Parsons, is, "a precipitate of the object-relations which the individual has experienced in the course of his life history" (1964[1958]: 80). Although the 'id' in Freud has reference to instinctual drives, Parsons believes that it, too, is structured in terms of internalized object-relations, namely those of the early life history of the individual. Through the interaction of id, ego and superego, the individual personality becomes organised in terms of needs and their gratification, which because dependent on others, also become sources of anxiety and guilt feelings.

The main focus of Parsons' attention remained that of the social system. His theoretical evolution was not complete and in work subsequent to *The Social System* he elaborated a further refinement of the scheme (Parsons and Smelser 1956, Parsons 1960), proposing four functional prerequisites, or imperatives, which are necessary to its constitution and operation. Two of the imperatives - pattern maintenance and integration - are concerned with normative issues and two - adaptation and goal attainment - are concerned with the non-normative. Similarly, two are concerned with the expression of culture - integration and goal attainment - and two with issues of integrity in potentially hostile lower-level environments - pattern-maintenance and adaptation.<sup>16</sup> Together they supply the axes of the two by two tables that

<sup>16</sup> Parsons was emphatic that environments must be conceived of in the plural, since his analysis did not conceive of environment as a simple physical geographical space, but as the 'enviroming' subsystems of organisms, personalities, and culture, which mediated the physical conditions in different ways (1977: 297, 1966: 10-16).

proliferate throughout Parsons' later writings. They are the co-ordinates of the account of 'social structures' and institutionalised action that he promised in his earlier work.

It is not necessary to follow Parsons through every further specification of his scheme, where everything is divided by four and four again. The social system, for example, is further divided into sub-systems defined by the priority accorded to one or other of the functional pre-requisites in its organisation (for example, the 'economy' sub-system defined by the 'adaptation' pre-requisite; the 'polity' sub-system defined by the 'goal attainment' prerequisite; the 'societal community' sub-system defined by the 'integration' pre-requisite; the 'socialisation' sub-system defined by the 'pattern-maintenance' pre-requisite), but where each is also specified in terms of the subordinate, but mutual operation of the other pre-requisites. The diagrams of exchanges between systems and among sub-systems within systems become increasingly complex, but their underlying logic remains the same.

Ironically, this development returned him to positions that he had initially seemed to criticise. Parsons began *TSofSA* with a repudiation of Spencer – 'who now reads Spencer?' (1937: 3) - yet, scarcely two decades later, he came to rely on a Spencerian concept of differentiation operating in conjunction with his own four-function scheme, to understand social change.<sup>17</sup> Parsons sets out a developmental account of the emergence of modern societies in terms of stages derived from the application of his functional requirements to historical societies (1966, 1971). Once again, Parsons' typologies are generated by the logic of his *a priori* categorical scheme. Concrete empirical societies are not themselves the basis for the identification of types and their underlying categories: they are either taken as confirming them, or they are ignored.

Although he believed he was continuing his early disagreement with evolutionists about what progress entailed, Parsons seems as convinced as any that social evolutionary theory is a "paradigm of a progressive, developmental social change" (1977: 297). He summarizes his evolutionary paradigm's guiding principle as being that, "in the complex of 'goal directed thrusts' in a system of action, there will on the one hand be some kind of balance between internal pressures towards innovative change and factors of situational and environmental opportunity for it. If the combined 'pressure' of these factors is sufficient they will bring about some kind of 'outlet' for the tendency to change. For this to happen new structures and processes may be necessary" (1977: 275). The criterion he considers to be the measuring stick of advance was "greater generalized adaptive capacity" (1977[1970]: 231, 1966: 26). Adaptation concerns, "the relations of a living system to its external environment" (1977[1975]: 111). Adaptive upgrading occurs by differentiation which brings about the improvement of a social system's capacity to adapt to its environments.<sup>18</sup> Differentiation occurs with the splitting of a generalized structural unit (meeting a number of functional requirements) into functionally specialized units. These specialized structures are able to attain their functional goals far more efficiently than their more general predecessors (1970: 51, 1977[1971]:282).

For Parsons, differentiation leads to the 'system problem' of integration and how solidarity is to be achieved. Since differentiation is concerned with the relationship of structures to external phenomena, then the concept of integration, conversely, is about the internal relationships of the system. Integration can, therefore, be considered to be adaptation in relation to internal environments. Foremost amongst integrative processes (from the point of view of development) is inclusion, which, according to Parsons, refers to the incorporation of newer, more functionally efficient structures within the normative framework of the societal community (1977[1971]: 293, 1971: 27).

Parsons (1964) made an explicit turn to biology as a source of analogy for the process of social development in terms of 'evolutionary universals'. Vision is an example of an

<sup>17</sup> See Holmwood and O'Malley (2003) for a discussion of the relation between Spencer and Parsons. The following paragraphs are drawn from that discussion.

<sup>18</sup> Parsons was emphatic that environments must be conceived of in the plural, since, following his analysis in *The Social System*, he did not conceive of the environment as a simple physical geographical space, but as the 'environing' subsystems of organisms, personalities, and culture, which all mediated physical conditions in different ways. (1966: 10-16).

evolutionary universal in the animal kingdom; the hand and brain are good examples of evolutionary universals for human biological evolution. All organisms, Parsons argues, had to develop vision *in order* to evolve to 'higher levels'. Hands and brains illustrate the increased adaptive capacity of a species, even though losses of lower level functions (locomotion, infantile independence) may have been incurred as a result (1964: 340). In societies, the most basic evolutionary universals are fourfold: religion (as the most basic form of culture), language (for communication), kinship (for organization), and technology. These complexes are definitional of human society in its most *primitive* form, and come as a set (1964: 341). This represents a restatement of Durkheim's idea of mechanical solidarity.

After these, in the next tier, come the evolutionary universals that shift society into the *intermediate* level: social stratification and cultural legitimation. They are accompanied by the emergence of written language. These processes can most generally be described as the differentiation of the cultural and social systems. Initially united, these systems have now become separated and can never be reunited. Stratification is the "hierarchical status differentiation that cuts across the overall seamless web of kinship" (1964: 346). It functions to permit dynamic leadership and more flexible use of resources. Cultural legitimation is closely connected to stratification, according to Parsons, and both together are prerequisites for social advance. Legitimation entails the "differentiation of cultural definitions" from "taken-for-granted fusion with the social structure" and the institutionalization of the legitimating function (1964: 346). Parsons was most concerned with the institutionalized identification of a society's members with that society. It is invariably political in its effects, he claims, although always based in religious sentiment. This identification functions to coordinate action collectively, once the traditional adherence to a non-differentiated kinship system has been supplanted (1964: 345). Written language is the critical breakthrough which assists this process by giving a society an objective record of its culture and norms, thereby further crystallizing the independence of the cultural system from the social system it circumscribes (1966: 26).

These 'universals' lay the ground for the next advance, from intermediate to *modern*. The prerequisites that stimulate such a shift are administrative bureaucracy, paired with money and markets, and universalized norms in partnership with democratic association. Bureaucracy is institutionalized power, backed up by the system-wide legitimation of that power. Like Weber, Parsons was convinced that bureaucracy was the most efficient form yet invented of administration, and the only form capable of organizing the specialized operations of a modern society (1964: 347-9). Power has to be concentrated for performance to improve and that is why bureaucracy is needed for social advance. It is connected to the capacity to utilize resources effectively and to meet general *collective* goals. Money and markets, which 'liberate' resources from ascriptive and particularistic bonds, allow these resources to be used flexibly in achieving social goals (1964: 349-50).

Neither of this pair of universals would be stable or effective enough without the next pair of evolutionary universals: generalized universalistic norms and democratic association. System-wide norms, especially those institutionalized in the legal system, define and regulate power structures and their administration. They also regulate market relations and the resources represented by money. So important are these universal norms that Parsons considers their "crystallization into a coherent system" to have been more important than the industrial revolution in bringing the modern world into being (1964: 351). Just as the development of written language had been the developmental impetus of the shift from primitive to intermediate, the institution of a formal universalized legal system had launched modernity from the intermediate stage (1966: 27). The fullest early exemplar of such a universalistic normative order is English common law, Parsons argues, and only once it had developed could the industrial revolution have materialized in England (1964: 353). Such a legal system then allowed the final evolutionary universal to emerge: a full-blown democracy of elected representation and universal adult suffrage. Since power depends on consensus, it had to be not only legitimated at the level of universal values, but also legitimated by 'structured participation' (1964: 356). Totalitarian organization would eventually prove unstable, Parsons predicts. Altogether, these 'organizational complexes' constitute the 'structural foundations of modern society'. They confer 'adaptive advantage(s)' on their vehicle societies over societies without such 'structural potential' (1964: 357).

With this model of social development, Parsons clearly felt he had overcome problems in his earlier work, such as *The Social System* (1951), which had emphasised static, structural categories over dynamic processes of social change. Parsons now classified societies according to the extent of institutional specialization around functions, such as the extent to which political institutions are separated from economic institutions, or economic institutions separated from the household, and how the household then becomes specialized around functions of socialization. His scheme of functional imperatives was, however, supposed to apply to all societies. Societies with lesser specialization, therefore, could be no less 'adequate' than those with greater degrees of specialization. There could, therefore, be no 'internal' requirement for greater structural differentiation *except by assuming an overarching system goal of more effective performance*.

At the same time, the idea of 'superiority' carries the implication of evolutionary change where better adapted forms are realized out of the deficiencies of 'lesser' forms. Furthermore, the way in which structural differentiation occurred around the four functions, each with its characteristic 'sub-system', suggested an 'end' to the process of development. This end would seem to coincide with the realization of the institutional structures of modern capitalism. Parsons did not self-consciously organize his functional analysis in terms of a direct affirmation of a 'final state', but it is implicit in the logic of structural differentiation.<sup>19</sup> Progress is guaranteed by the very way in which he theorizes social change.

In *TofSA* Parsons presented his action frame of reference as having a 'phenomenological' status with no concrete implications that could be 'thought away'. The subsequent presentation of the USA as the 'new lead society' (Parsons 1971) and, at the same time, the 'end state' of the development process, would seem to indicate a form of functionalist teleology that revealed an ideological bias in a scheme that Parsons had sought to present as neither partial nor ideological, but as 'an indispensable logical framework' which implied nothing concrete that could be 'thought away'.

#### *Between 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism'*

It is not surprising that an undertaking as ambitious as that of Parsons should give rise to fundamental criticisms. In general, the problems with Parsons' theoretical scheme seem to be two-fold. One is the underlying emphasis on the integration of the 'total action system'. Parsons maintained that this was an *analytical* assumption, rather than a concrete description. Nonetheless, the analytical theory is intended to refer to concrete circumstances and its reference is in terms of the mechanisms elaborated through the idea of functional imperatives. These are all about tendencies toward integration as a property of concrete systems of action, *in so far as they are systems*. The second issue is that of how the empirical reference of the scheme bears upon its adequacy. Any lack of integration in concrete systems of action is precisely that, *concrete*, lacking any theorisation *equivalent* to that of integration in terms of the scheme and its analytical categories.

As we have seen, Parsons had identified the elimination of residuals in the 'asymptotic' approach to 'closure' as one of the processes of theoretical development. The elimination of 'residuals', he suggested, would involve the reconstruction of categories, including those previously positively specified. His own response seems to emphasise the adequacy of his own positively defined categories despite the evident partiality of his scheme. The typical response by Parsons to his critics was simply to re-state his position and to identify them with the re-assertion of positions he believed he had already transcended. However, this response became less effective as the initial problems associated with his scheme remained through the different reformulations, in particular problems of empirical specification and the handling of social conflict and social change.

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<sup>19</sup> Curiously, Alexander (1984) wishes to claim that the teleological implications of the scheme can be avoided by arguing that de-differentiation is a possible future development of any concrete system, though he fails to specify how it can be represented as an 'adaptive upgrading'.

One longstanding criticism focused on his conception of scientific method. In his outline of analytical realism he implicitly challenged the dominant conception of scientific explanation, namely the 'hypothetic-deductive', or 'covering-law' model of explanation. George Homans (1964, and below), in particular, is scathing about this aspect of Parsons' approach. According to him, Parsons is not offering a *theory* – that is, something that can be empirically specified and tested - but a mere orienting framework. Although Parsons emphasises mechanisms – operating, as we have seen, through institutionalised systems of interaction – which depend upon individual action, he seems to eschew any explanation of *why* individuals act in the way that the theory sets out as necessary. The only way this can be done, Homans argues, is through the direct examination of social interaction in terms of real individuals – rather than roles of the social system – their dispositions, motives and calculations. These attributes can be derived from the studies of economists and psychologists and can be given a general axiomatic form to be applied to the field of sociology. In essence, then, Homans' critique *is* a powerful re-statement of the utilitarian and methodologically individualist position that Parsons was criticising. Where Parsons argues that, 'the very definition of an organic whole is one within which the *relations* determine the properties of its parts', for Homans the whole is no more than the aggregate of the properties of its parts and the parts are *the concrete actions of real individuals*.

Homans outlined an alternative approach, 'social behaviourism', which developed alongside Parsons' structural-functional approach as a potential alternative to it (see for example, Blau 1964, and Coleman 1991). However, although many sociologists did feel that there was a problem of action in Parsons' scheme, they were less convinced that Homans' positivistic approach was the answer. Indeed, while there was considerable unease with the direction that Parsons' theory had taken, especially in *The Social System* and after, there remained a strong view that his critique of the formal structure of utilitarian thought was both sound and necessary for the definition of sociology as a discipline distinct from economics and psychology (See, for example, Alexander 1984, Gould 1991, Scott 1995). Nonetheless, the force of Homans' own 'objectivist' critique of Parsons' – that, "as the theory of action was applied to society, it appeared to have no actors and mighty little action" (1964: 817) – contributed to the view that Parsons' theory was 'objectivist', at least as it was elaborated after *TSofSA*, even if Homans' critique had implied it was not objectivist enough.

Alfred Schutz had written his examination of the phenomenological grounding of Weber's categories of action, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (1932), shortly before emigrating to the United States. His subsequent writings became important in outlining a phenomenological critique of Parsons, one taken up by Garfinkel and the ethnomethodologists, for example, although he rarely criticised Parsons directly. The essay selected here, is a long review of *TSofSA*, something he discussed with Parsons by letter, but which remained unpublished until 1978 (Schutz had died in 1959). Nonetheless, the issues it raised became an important part of the debate over Parsons' scheme as others drew upon the implications of Schutz's other writings.

Where Homans emphasised the requirements of sociology as a science of observable behaviour, Schutz emphatically endorsed Parsons' concern with action as *necessarily a subjective phenomenon*, something that had meaning to actors and that must be addressed in those terms. However, in two respects, his criticism was similar. Like Homans, he had difficulty in recognising the distinction between unit act and system and that Parsons was not claiming a concrete status for the unit act. Correcting this 'error', however, Parsons (1978 [1941]: 64) missed the other more fundamental point. Schutz also observed that, despite Parsons' concern with a theory of action in its subjective aspects, "he deal[s] only superficially with the problem of motives in social action. Only in his introductory approach to the problem does he mention motives at all, stating that each actor in the social world, if asked to give the meaning of his act, would enumerate certain motives" (1978 [1940]).

According to Schutz, this is not a matter of providing the concrete substance of action, but of providing a proper philosophical – that is, phenomenological grounding – of the necessarily abstract and formal categories of action used in sociological explanations. Since Parsons does not provide this grounding, there is a risk that he has conflated distinctions that, were they to have proper explication, would make a difference to the formal analysis. In particular,

Schutz identifies a problem in the way in which Parsons sets out his unit act analysis in terms of distinctions between means and ends, in order to establish the role of rationality as an aspect of action. As we have seen, Parsons refers to the importance of 'valid knowledge', but he fails to examine what this means subjectively in the context of acting. His only point of reference is to the meaning of valid knowledge within the positivistic scheme, which is to say its meaning as scientifically validated knowledge. In contrast, Schutz argues that actors act according to common-sense, rather than scientific, standards of rationality.<sup>20</sup> It does not help Schutz in his attempt to persuade Parsons of this gap in his approach that he cites Parsons' characterisation of the positivist account of rational action as if it were his own (1978[1940] 20).<sup>21</sup> Parsons does argue that the meaning of valid knowledge is 'relative' to the ends actors are seeking to achieve, rather than in its own terms, but, as we shall see, this remains a weak area of his account.

Although action is, in Schutz's words, to be distinguished from mere behaviour by virtue of it being, "determined by a project which precedes it in time" (1978 [1940]: 33), it is also the case that the 'meaning' of this 'project' is not straightforward and varies with the moment at which reflection is occurring (for example, whether during or after its completion), or, given that reflection is not a continuous feature of acting, according to what has prompted it. Unlike the ethnomethodologists, Schutz does not believe that this calls into question formal sociological constructs using means-end categories, rather he believes that it can help to provide their proper grounding and an understanding of the kind of abstractions that they are. Once the process by which actors come to be self-conscious about their actions and the 'typifications' they use to characterise their own actions and those of others is understood, we can ground social scientific representations of action and, at the same time, understand 'objectivity' as a special kind of 'third party' understanding. Nor does Schutz's argument legislate in principle against the view that sociological explanations should be concerned with functional relations. However, his judgement is that Parsons' failure to carry through this kind of phenomenological analysis gives rise to a kind of residual 'objectivist' bias, despite his fundamental commitment to the action frame of reference as *subjective*.

### *Norms and action*

The issues that Schutz very presciently raised with regard to *TSofSA* are more pressing with regard to *The Social System*. As we have seen, the analysis of functional relations contained in *TSofSA* incorporates a conception both of the overall integration of the total action system as an analytical assumption, as well as a hierarchy of the mechanisms coordinating action under values. For many critics, this seemed to involve a very pronounced normative bias. Indeed, the formal analysis put forward in *The Social System* elaborates the idea of the total action system in terms of separate interdependent systems, the cultural system, social system and personality system, where a significant interconnection between the personality system and the social system is provided by the internalisation of dispositions to act.

Stephen Warner (1978, and below) makes only a brief reference to Schutz in his criticism of Parsons, taking his cue from ethnomethodological work that drew upon Schutz in practical examination of the operation of common-sense rationality. Nonetheless, his article suggests that Parsons had conflated the 'cognitive' and the 'normative', in part because of the weakness of his account of the 'scientific element' in action. Parsons was so anxious to avoid the reduction of voluntaristic action to a positivistic conception of valid knowledge, Warner suggests, that he tended to neglect the cognitive element altogether. This was all the more easy to do because of the way in which Parsons had initially used the term the 'normative orientation of action' to cover action in conformity with substantive norms as well as action oriented to others as a factor in the situation of action. Warner uses this analysis in criticism of attempts to 'de-Parsonise' the classics by Whitney Pope and his colleagues (1975, and below). For him, their critique lacked a clear theoretical focus. To be sure, the classics

<sup>20</sup> This is something taken up by ethnomethodologists in their 'practical' phenomenology of the negotiation of common-sense standards of rationality.

<sup>21</sup> Schutz's difficulty in interpretation consists in disentangling Parsons' statements about the conception of valid knowledge within the positivist theory of action from his statements about how the residue of that position is taken over and re-stated within the voluntaristic theory of action.

diverged in significant ways from the accounts given by Parsons, but it was necessary not merely to register those differences but also to identify the way in which they might be used toward a reconstruction of action theory. According to Warner, this could be done by recognising that social order was not so much a moral order as a cognitive achievement.

Warner is primarily concerned with the reconstruction of the voluntaristic theory of action in terms of the elements that Parsons derived from his analysis of unit acts, however, and he does not address how this would translate into the analysis of systems. While cognitive considerations may be paramount in how actors negotiate the social order, does this mean that it is not also a moral order, or that normative commitments play only a secondary role? Paradoxically, there are good reasons to suggest that cognitive elements do play a larger role in Parsons' later theory, when compared with *TSofSA*, as a consequence of the very complexity that Parsons attributes to the social system. For example, a social system entails a complex of social roles with different 'role expectations' and actors must understand these different expectations and their appropriate operation in terms of the multiple roles that they and other actors inhabit. Indeed, Parsons writes that, "the most elemental and fundamental 'orientational' category ... seems to be the 'cognitive' which in its most general sense must be treated as the 'definition' of the relevant aspects of the 'situation' in their relevance to the actor's 'interests'" (1951: 7).

Clearly one of the problems in interpreting what Parsons comes to mean by the 'normative orientation of action' is the great complexity of his elaborated scheme and of the relation between cultural system, social system and personality system.<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, he understood these as separate systems, in the sense that each has its own internal organisation, but they also interpenetrate and each is dependent on the other for aspects of its functioning. Drawing on Freud, the 'internalisation of norms', for Parsons, is part of the process by which the individual personality comes to be formed in terms of the interaction of id, ego and super-ego.

According to Dennis Wrong (1961, and below), the overemphasis on normative social order that others (including Warner, writing subsequently) identify, is mirrored by an overemphasis on socialisation processes determining the development of the individual personality. For Wrong, Parsons in his early work had already conceived of social norms being constitutive of human nature, rather than regulative, but this was further reinforced by his later emphasis on Freud's theory of the superego as the model of internalization. What is neglected, Wrong argues, is the very interaction between id, ego and super-ego and the conflict and tension integral to that interaction that was so important to Freud. In contrast, to the dominant sociological view, writes Wrong, "in psychoanalytic terms, to say that a norm has been internalized, or introjected to become part of the superego, is to say no more than that a person will suffer guilt-feelings if he fails to live up to it, not that he will in fact live up to it in his behaviour" (1964: 187).<sup>23</sup>

Wrong's critique was directed at those influenced by Parsons, as much as it was directed at Parsons, and it was not based upon a close and detailed reading of what the latter had written. In fact, Parsons had himself criticised others for confining their discussion of internalization mainly to the content of the superego. However, the fact that, in Parsons words, "the categories of the instinctual and learned components cut across the id, the ego and the superego" (1964[1958]: 110), does not really help with regard to Wrong's criticism, since it merely reinforces the tendency to see the operations of the id, ego and superego in potentially integrative terms. There can be little doubt that Parsons does seriously downplay the tensions between the three and between the complexity of a modern social system (or civilisation) and the needs of the personality to be found in Freud.

<sup>22</sup> We have already seen that Homans found it problematic that the primary sociological focus for Parsons was not *actors*, but *roles*. For Homans, this occurs precisely because of the analytical separation that Parsons makes between the personality system and the social system.

<sup>23</sup> Once again, it appears that Wrong elides Parsons' distinction between the *analytical* and the *concrete*. Parsons does not suggest that internalization operates directly to produce conformity, rather that actions in conformity with norms are *reinforced* by feelings of guilt, etc induced by resistance.

### *Conflict and power*

Wrong connects his critique of the 'oversocialised' concept of human personality to a related problem in Parsons, that of the 'over-integrated' view of society or social system. This was a criticism levelled by 'conflict theorists' (See, Dahrendorf 1958 and below, Lockwood 1956, Rex 1961). For them, the problem was straightforward. Parsons' theory was too one-sided. Its language of systems expressed interdependence and integration, rather than independence and contradiction. It also seemed to give greater emphasis to values and norms, than to power.

Conflict theorists drew inspiration from Marx and Weber and it seemed obvious that at least part of the problem was that Parsons had failed to give proper attention to their work in *TSofSA*. Conflict theorists did not really disagree with Parsons' judgement about Marx and the superiority of Weber, but they felt that Weber owed more to Marx than Parsons allowed and that his attempt to synthesise Durkheim and Weber had meant that the more conflict-oriented aspects of Weber's writings had been lost. It was Durkheim's approach, with his emphasis on order and social solidarity, which dominated Parsons' interpretation of the classics.

In his essay, 'Out of utopia' (1958, and below), Dahrendorf disagrees with other critics that the problem with Parsons' scheme was simply that it was too general and abstract. The problem for him was also that Parsons was insufficiently explicit about the values that informed his approach. For Dahrendorf, the 'consensus' model, with its emphasis on synchronic analysis, and on social processes tending toward integration was part of a longstanding conservative tradition in social theory going back to Plato. It was also utopian in the sense of modelling societies from which change is absent. Dahrendorf argues, "it may well be that society, in a philosophical sense, has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony, and consensus, and one of change, conflict and constraint. Strictly speaking, it does not matter whether we select for investigation problems that can be understood only in terms of the equilibrium model or problems for which the conflict model is required. There is no intrinsic criterion for preferring one to the other" (1958: 127).<sup>24</sup> Given this, Dahrendorf recommended that sociological attention should be re-directed toward the conflict model.

These criticisms struck a chord, but the alternative position was unstable for a number of reasons. Parsons had sought to account for *both* power *and* normative order in his model. It is difficult to argue that the two models could be kept entirely apart and used separately for different purposes. The issues of conflict and cooperation, and power and legitimation are intertwined. Conflict theorists were more successful in pointing out the *empirical* significance of conflict within systems than they were at finding a way of expressing this in the general language of analytical theory. Attempting the latter would place them back on the terrain of Parsons' own theory.

In his critique of Parsons' treatment of power, Giddens (1968, and below) takes issue with his association of power with the securing of 'collective' goals within the social system. As Giddens observes, "what Parsons is concerned to point out, then, is that the use of power frequently represents a facility for the achievement of objectives which *both* sides in a power relation desire" (1968: 263). However, he believes that Parsons overstates the case and fails to recognise that sometimes power serves sectional interests. There is certainly a difficulty of this kind - as we shall see below, it is addressed rather differently by Lockwood, Habermas and Gouldner (and, in truth, by Giddens in his later writings) - but in Giddens' treatment it is mixed up with some other issues.

For example, he also argues that, "what slips away from sight almost completely in the Parsonian analysis is the fact that power, even as Parsons defines it, is always exercised *over* someone" (1968: 264). However, the fact that Parsons recognises that concrete systems are less than fully integrated means that the sanctioning mechanisms that are identified in terms of the analytic theory of perfect integration are always about properties of the system

<sup>24</sup> A similar argument was put forward by Rex, who argued that 'perfect cooperation' and 'perfect conflict' are polar theoretical cases. "All actual cases," he argued, "lie somewhere along the continuum between perfect cooperation and perfect conflict" (1961: 54). Like Dahrendorf, Rex argued that, "Durkheim and Parsons, have unduly restricted the scope of sociology to the study of forms of perfect co-operation" (1961: 54).

that serve to secure compliance. In that sense, it is intrinsic to Parsons' scheme – and fully recognised by him - that power is a property of the system exercised *over* actors. The problem, as we shall see, is much more that Parsons has no explanation of the origins of oppositional interests, other than the contingencies of concrete systems and individual deviance

Although Giddens wishes to suggest that there can be a mutual recognition of power and normative order within a general theory, with no priority given to either, an example he gives in illustration tends to reinforce the Parsonsian analysis. Thus, he criticises Parsons for his emphasis on the role of trust in cooperative relationships, suggesting that, “if the use of power rests upon ‘trust’ or ‘confidence’ as Parsons emphasises, it also frequently rests upon deceit and hypocrisy ... any sociological theory which treats such phenomena as ‘incidental’, or as ‘secondary and derived’ and not as structurally incidental to power differentials, is blatantly inadequate” (1968: 264). However, trust is a resource of cooperative relations and so long as the activities that draw upon it are consistent with the conditions of trust, those resources will be reproduced and, with them, the possibilities for more extensive cooperation. It is certainly the case that the existence of trust offers the possibility of deceit, but actions which abuse trust must always run the risk of being found out. In the long run, deceit cannot be in a stable relationship to the reproduction of the resources that it requires; it is difficult to see that deceit could be *structurally* intrinsic to those resources. ‘Trust’ may be a poor analogy for the operation of power within complex systems of social action, but within the limits of the example, Parsons' analysis appears sound.<sup>25</sup>

#### *System and action*

Alongside criticisms of Parsons' approach in terms of specific aspects of his scheme – the relation between subjective and objective factors, the role of norms, and his treatment of power – there also emerged a series of criticisms directed at his scheme and its characterisation as an action frame of reference. Given that it involved a distinction between the *analytical* and the *concrete*, the problems of his scheme are easily associated with ‘gaps’ in his analytical specification in terms of the concrete particularity of social actions. In other words, the problems would necessarily appear as problems of *action* in his scheme. We have already seen how Homans identified this as an issue, that Parsons concentrated on roles, rather than concrete actors. Others, such as Martindale (1971), argued that there was a fundamental shift in Parsons' theoretical scheme between *TSofSA* and *The Social System* (see also, Scott 1963, Turner and Beeghley 1974, Menzies 1976). According to Martindale, Parsons first developed a subjective framework of action focused on concrete actors (confusingly, Martindale uses the term ‘social behaviourism’ used by Homans to denote his objectivist approach). In his later work, Parsons shifted to a macro-functionalist framework. Whereas, in the first phase, Parsons was a thoroughgoing nominalist, he subsequently adopted a ‘realist’ approach to social structure, Martindale proposes.

It is not too difficult to demonstrate that Martindale's argument is seriously flawed as an interpretation of *TSofSA* (see also, Adriaansens 1979, and below). Parsons was clear that unit act analysis was not ‘nominalist’. It did not provide what Martindale (and others, including Schutz) believed it to provide; that is, a statement of the smallest *concrete* unit of sociological analysis. Parsons was concerned with functional relations from the outset. However, if Martindale's analysis severely misrepresented Parsons, what it helped do was to establish a new orthodoxy in sociological interpretations of Parsons. Namely, that Parsons had abandoned his initial action frame of reference and, in consequence, the *TSofSA* and, in particular, its Weberian roots could be returned to without addressing their implication in the problems of his later scheme. Indeed, as Adriaansens (1979, and below) suggests, the idea of discontinuous phases in a writer's oeuvre is a staple of the interpretation of classical writers. It was an interpretive device that Parsons himself used, and so, it is perhaps not surprising that it should be used in interpretations of his own work.

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<sup>25</sup> See footnote 33 for a brief discussion of Giddens' subsequent convergence with aspects of Parsons' scheme.

A much more powerful and fundamental critique along these lines is set out by Burger (1977, and below). For him, the problem with Parsons' approach is precisely his ambition for a general framework of action. He reviews the standard criticisms of Parsons and suggests that each of them fails to get to the heart of the issue because each fails to address the core motivating assumption of his approach, namely that there can be a general solution to the problem of order, rather than a set of different concrete solutions. According to Burger, it is this that leads Parsons to identify sociology as primarily concerned with institutions (or, as Homans would have it, of roles), within an 'analytical factor' view of disciplinary differentiation where each discipline provides specialised theoretical elaboration in terms of the primary factor with which it is associated. Sociological criticisms, then, are like water off a duck's back to Parsons because they emphasise the variation associated with the operation of the different factors in all their concrete complexity, but fail to address the level of abstraction necessary to any social science when conceived analytically.

Where Parsons argues that the alternative to analytical realism is 'empiricism', Burger argues that he is himself drawn to a position where the statements of analytical theory are 'unfalsifiable'. As Burger puts it, "the only thing that could be tested is the synthetic explanation of concrete phenomena by the combined totality of all the specialised sciences. Yet how can these sciences be developed to begin with if they are not testable?" (1977: 328). Burger further suggests that concretely the problem of social order is about the relations between self-interest, domination and normative commitment, but that there can be no general solution. Paradoxically, according to Burger, the Parsonsian 'problem of order' as a substantive problem, has no solution within an analytic sociology of the Parsonsian type (and the implication is that it would have no solution within an alternative conflict model with the same pretension to generality).

Although Adriaansens (1979, and below) does not refer to Burger, his article is very much a defence of analytic sociology. In this context, where the latter's approach opens up the possibility of a return to Weberian ideal types as a way of addressing concrete issues of order in a way that makes them available to a comparative analysis, Adriaansens rehearses Parsons' critique of such ideal types: "a really general theory of action should be based on concepts which refer to abstract elements of action, not to configurations of such abstract elements called ideal types" (1979: 8). In other words, Weber uses general concepts – the pure types of action, for example – but limits their statement to what is sufficient for their utilisation within concrete types of, say bureaucracy, or patrimonialism, etc. These abstract elements of action can, however, be stated within a systematic, general theory. "Concepts and theory", Adriaansens argues, "select and abstract from reality" (1979: 9). The development of analytical theory, he argues, also enables Parsons to overcome the 'nominalism-social realism' (or individualist-holist) dualism that underlies Martindale's account of phases in Parsons' theoretical development. Given his ambition to overcome dualisms, how, then, are we to understand how it is possible to identify dualisms in Parsons' own work?

According to Adriaansens, it is to some extent inevitable in the way in which Parsons poses the problem for solution as the resolution of pre-existing dualisms in social thought. To a significant degree, his theory reflects the dualisms from which it starts, and his initial tendency is to provide a statement of the positive element of each tradition – for Adriaansens, associated with the situation of action on the one hand and the orientation of the actor on the other - and propose their synthesis. Given Parsons' own comment that any synthesis should also be a work of reconstruction that transforms pre-existing categories, it is a painful and difficult journey from the statement of the problem to its adequate solution. According to Adriaansens, it is some time before Parsons is able to shake the 'bi-polar' structure of his statement of the problem and achieve an adequate synthesis. It is this that enables critics to insert the lever of criticism and identify the inadequacy and instability of Parsons' attempts at solution along the way, but, ironically, what is revealed unintentionally is, at the very least, the cogency of Parsons' statement of the problem. However, Adriaansens believes that Parsons does achieve an adequate solution, but that it occurs after *The Social System*, and, therefore, is unnoticed by critics who have already turned their back on the scheme and the very idea that its problems could be solved. Alexander (1984) makes a similar argument.

It is not possible to deal in detail here with Adriaansen's claim that Parsons' achieves an adequate statement (see, Holmwood 1996). Basically, it turns on the process by which Parsons comes to transform the *five* pattern variables of the earlier statements into *four* functional imperatives (Parsons 1960). He does so by arguing that one pattern-variable, that of 'self-collectivity', has been misidentified. The collectivity is an element of the social system, when understood analytically, and not, therefore something that is variable; the four functional imperatives, otherwise, all turn around their derivation from an analytical statement of perfect integration which itself is the statement of the collectivity (with 'self' in its relation to the collectivity relegated by Parsons to *concrete* deviance in its relation to the analytical statement). For many critics, this would be an accentuation of the problems of Parsons' scheme not their resolution. Indeed, Burger, for one, had addressed this later position and also found it wanting.

### *System and function*

In common with other critics, Burger's main argument against the Parsonsian scheme is its lack of empirical specification. From a different theoretical perspective, this was also Homan's complaint. Despite the latter's pronounced 'behaviourist' tendency, he was explicit that he was not objecting to functional analysis, as such. The problem with Parsonian functionalism, he argued, is the lack of an empirical program; functionalism as *method* is different from functionalism as *theory* (Homans, 1961: 811). For many, Merton's (1968 [1949]) essay on 'manifest and latent functions' had implicitly made a similar criticism of Parsons' analytical functionalism. Merton, as already remarked, was a student of Parsons and so the critique was veiled. The essay did not mention Parsons by name and was directed at problems associated with anthropological functionalism. Merton's 1968 bibliographic postscript was also nuanced; in a general commendation of Parsons' *The Social System*, he referred to the need to distinguish the salient part from "its more provisional and at times debatable conceptual development" (1968: 137). However, if not an explicit critique of Parsons, its aim was certainly to redirect functional *analysis* away from functional *theory* toward empirical research.

In order to come up with a more satisfactory statement of functional analysis, Merton argues that it is necessary to make a distinction between *latent* and *manifest* functions. The latter refers to the conscious intentions of actors and the former to the objective consequences of their actions. According to Merton, most of the mistakes that can be identified with existing functionalism are the result of the conflation of these categories. For Merton, "the motive and the function vary independently and ... the failure to register this fact in an established terminology has contributed to the unwitting tendency among sociologists to confuse subjective categories of motivation with the objective categories of function" (1968: 115). With this distinction, he argues functionalism could be made more sensitive to variations in the operation of functions and differences in their consequences for individuals and groups. This is necessary if functionalism is to be a proper framework for empirical research. Otherwise the tendency is for functionalist arguments to supplant research rather than support it. He identifies three problematic postulates - the postulates of the *functional unity of society*, of *universal functionalism*, and of *indispensability* - believing each to be characteristic of anthropological functionalism, though many of his readers would also see them as a critique of Parsonsian functionalism, especially that of the postulate of the functional unity of society.

The first postulate, that of the functional unity of society, Merton associated primarily with Radcliffe-Brown. According to Merton, it may be that some non-literate societies show a high degree of integration, but it is illegitimate to assume this would pertain to all societies. Moreover, it is also possible that what is functional for society, considered as a whole, does not prove functional for individuals or for some groups within the society. Similarly, what is functional for an individual or group may not be functional for the wider society. This suggests that alongside the concept of function, it is necessary also to have a concept of *dysfunction*; that is, where the objective consequences of an item are negative for some individuals or groups. Inequality, for example, may have the function of motivating individuals to perform at their different job tasks, but high degrees of inequality may give rise to the alienation of some individuals and groups. Integration, Merton writes, should be treated as an empirical variable: "that all human societies must have *some* degree of integration is a matter of definition - and

begs the question. But not all societies have that *high* degree of integration in which *every* culturally standardized activity or belief is functional for the society as a whole and uniformly functional for the people living in it." (1968: 81).

The second postulate of universal functionalism referred to what was a rather old debate in anthropology concerning 'survivals'; that is, practices that have no present role, but are to be understood in terms of the past history of a group. This was used by some anthropologists to construct highly speculative evolutionary histories. However, Merton suggests that functionalists go too far if, in rejecting these dubious accounts, they propose that all practices serve a vital current function. He links his point here to his criticism of the first postulate. If we accept that there are degrees of integration, then practices can 'survive' if they are functional for *some* individuals or groups. This identifies power as a central issue. Merton writes, "far more useful as a directive for research would seem the provisional assumption that persisting cultural forms have a *net balance of functional consequences* either for society considered as a unit or for subgroups sufficiently to retain these forms intact, by means of direct coercion or indirect persuasion." (1968: 86).

The final postulate that Merton addresses is that of indispensability. Here Merton directs his criticism at Malinowski's view that every item fulfils a vital function and represents an indispensable part within a working whole. Merton comments that this is unclear whether it is the *function* that is indispensable or the *particular item* held to be fulfilling the function. Once this is clarified, it is evident that it is necessary to distinguish between functional *prerequisites* – preconditions functionally necessary for a society – and the cultural or social forms that fulfil those prerequisites. While the former are indispensable (bearing in mind Merton's qualifications concerning the postulate of unity), it is not indispensable that particular forms or items meet those functions. There are always alternative ways of meeting any particular function. Thus, Merton argues that, "just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items" (1968: 87-8).

Each of Merton's qualifications of anthropological functionalism is designed to transform the postulates into *variables* that can be the object of empirical research. Furthermore, by identifying the possibility of *dysfunction* and by suggesting that practices can have different consequences for individuals and groups, depending on how they are placed within a social structure, he explicitly makes power and conflict central issues for research within a functionalist paradigm. This is all in line with another of Merton's (1968 [1947]) ideas about how sociological theory should be built; theory and research should go together and topics should be carefully chosen as lying in the 'middle-range' between minor working hypotheses of everyday research and an all-inclusive unified theory. Although this argument, too, can be read as a criticism of Parsons' idea of analytical general theory, there is a crucial ambiguity in Merton's position. It is not simply that he suggests that middle-range theory may converge with an all-embracing scheme. The further elaboration of his critique of anthropological functionalism led him directly to the starting-point of Parsons' analytical functionalism, that of the relationship between the intentions of actors and the objective consequences of their actions as a general issue for sociological analysis.<sup>26</sup>

For the most part, feminist concerns entered the academy after Parsons' theory had been subjected to major critiques. In these circumstances, it was rather easy for his writings to be dismissed by feminists as already effectively criticised in terms that bore directly on their own concerns and, therefore, that they need not be engaged with in any detail. Functionalism, for example, was held to be conservative and rather poor at dealing with conflict or change. Miriam Johnson (1993, and below) concedes that, "Parsonian functionalism is not likely in itself to lead to radical thinking or emancipatory insights" (1993: 119). However, although his rather abstract concern with systems might obscure their gendered nature, the emphasis upon systems is positive, for her, "if one specifies, functional for whom or what?" (1993: 119).

Johnson's feminist appreciation of Parsons is stronger than this and she reminds us of an unintended consequence of his ambition for general theory. He was one of the few

<sup>26</sup> Merton's terminology of latent and manifest *function* was also unfortunate when his concern was to distinguish between *latent function* and *manifest motive*, since it encouraged critics in their view that sociological functionalism neglected agency, just when agency was being identified as a central concern of functionalist analysis.

sociologists of his time to have a systematic interest in gender, whether that be in terms of socialization processes, the structure and function of the household, or in the occupational sphere. Moreover, precisely because he was concerned with the 'total action system' and its 'interchanges', he had something to say about gendered relations and their interconnections across different spheres of activity. Finally, because his analysis of gender roles within the family household identified them as *ascribed*, while roles outside the family household were *achieved*, he was also conscious of the particular 'role strain' experienced by women.

However, feminists were to identify those 'dysfunctions' in a much more systematic and rigorous way and, much like conflict theorists, to identify functionalism as an obstacle to their proper understanding. For example, dependency within the family increasingly came to be seen as a reflection of power relationships and, far from being a place that stabilised adult personalities (as Parsons had suggested) it was frequently a site of violence and abuse; women were tied to unsatisfactory relationships precisely because the gender segregation of employment and lower pay for women meant that they were economically dependent. There is no doubt that Parsons lacked a feminist sensibility and the weight of his analysis was to emphasise the positive functions for society of the nuclear family, rather than its dysfunctions for women. If functionalism could be functional for feminist analysis, as Johnson suggests, it is in its Mertonian, rather than its Parsonsian version, despite the fact that Parsons was much more interested in gender as a sociological topic than was Merton. Parsons' drive for generality brought gender to the fore, but the form of that generality would seem to obscure its specific features.

#### *System and contradiction*

We have seen that criticisms of Parsons tend to focus around issues of conflict and social change. At the same time, the distinction between the social system conceived *analytically* in terms of its integration and *concrete* systems which are less than fully integrated was also seen implicitly to be a distinction between action in conformity with the system and action as *deviance*. In so far as Parsons is able to deal with conflict, it seems to be only by regarding it as a form of deviance. At the same time, systematic processes are associated with mechanisms for securing the reproduction of systems against potential deviance. What is missing is an identification of systematic mechanisms producing deviance (or, more properly, since the very term 'deviance' implied its contingent, rather than systematic character, oppositional interests). The problem seems to point both to the lack of generality achieved by the Parsonsian scheme and a limitation in its conception of action.

For Gouldner (1959, and below), the explanation of change is necessarily an issue at the level of a *system*, considered as a system of interrelated parts, where the explanation of social change is an issue of the relation among the parts. He begins his analysis with a comparison of Parsons and Merton. Despite the latter's emphasis on the idea of dysfunction, which might appear to be the kind of category that would complement Parsons' own emphasis on equilibrium among the parts of a system, Gouldner declares that the concept of a system is missing in Merton. This is not just an accidental feature of his chosen vocabulary in which to conduct functional analysis, but, "is above all suggested by the architecture of his basic paradigm of functional analysis" (1959: 245). The unit of analysis for Merton, Gouldner argues, is some concrete item of human behaviour. For this reason, there is no sense that any unit identified as dysfunctional is, in its dysfunctionality, *systematically* related to what is functional (this would be necessary, for example, for the identification of any dysfunction as a contradiction). Merton does not consider social structures as a *system*. To do so, is precisely the merit of Parsons' analysis.

However, Parsons' scheme shows the opposite fault, where the relevant units are considered as parts of a *system*, but the units are constituted by an *a priori* theoretical scheme: "what seems to have been neglected is that the elements of social systems cannot be merely constituted *a priori*, but must also be inductively sought and empirically validated" (1959: 246). In trying to bring the two aspects together, Gouldner suggests that the meaning of parts may also be transformed by the substance of social change. Thus, the role of material factors is not constant across societies, such that it can be a constant element in its contribution to

explanations of particular societies; for example, material factors have a greater role in modern industrial societies (the interesting implication is that, if there are functional alternatives as Merton proposes, the alternatives may have different implications in terms of their functioning). This is something taken up by Lockwood (1964, and below).

For the most part, however, Gouldner's article is concerned to tackle the relations among the parts of a system in a more formal way. He suggests that the functional explanation of the persistence of a social pattern would require not merely the demonstration of the consequences of A for B, but also the reciprocal consequences of B for A. The greater the degree of reciprocal functionality the more stable the associated pattern. This, for Gouldner is the 'principle of functional reciprocity' and, in truth, it seems to be a formal statement of Merton's principle of the 'net balance of functional consequences'.<sup>27</sup>

For Gouldner, the problem that Parsons makes the interdependence of parts a 'given' of any system can be overcome if a system part is recognised to be both interdependent and potentially autonomous. These parts include both the elements of the social system, in Parsons' sense – for example, what Parsons later came to characterise as the different sub-systems – and between the system and individuals conceived as part of it, but potentially autonomous in their relations to it. According to Gouldner, then, the interdependence and independence of system parts is empirically variable, suggesting another dimension of variability in functional analysis to those proposed by Merton.

His argument is suggestive, but it is not apparent that it does go very much beyond Merton's own statement in substance. Moreover, the idea that the issue may be resolved as one of the potentially autonomy of the individual – the personality system – considered as a part of the total system also returns to an identification of the individual as a source of potential deviance, unlocated in the social system.

Like Gouldner, Lockwood (1964, and below) was sympathetic to Merton precisely because the latter's scheme was more conducive to the explanation of conflict and change than that of Parsons. He was also sympathetic to 'general functionalism' (which he associated with Merton) because it was interested in general processes of social systems, while he thought that conflict theorists, such as Dahrendorf, were too much concerned with overt conflict between actors. Drawing on Marx's analysis of capitalism, Lockwood suggested that what was missing, in functionalism and conflict theory alike, was a concept of *system contradiction*.<sup>28</sup> Simply put, Parsons had no place for the idea that the parts of a social system may contain tendencies toward malintegration. According to Lockwood, those tendencies may eventually come to the surface in the form of oppositional interests and conflicts among actors. These conflicts, then, may or may not be contained by the normative order. Thus, Lockwood proposes an independent role for the dimension of social integration in managing problems of system integration.

Rather than proposing two separate models as conflict theorists had done, Lockwood argued that it was necessary to consider the question of cooperation, conflict and social change in terms of two distinct, but inter-related, sets of processes. One concerned normative processes of *social integration*, the other concerned material processes of *system integration*. The problem with Parsons was that he conflated the two and emphasised the mutual operation of both sets of processes; the task for Lockwood was to be more aware of the possibility of contradictions within the system and how they were managed at the level of social integration.

Lockwood's article was highly influential, but it was not clear what kind of further analysis he thought should follow from it. He used Marx's account of the contradiction between forces and

<sup>27</sup> Later in the article, he elaborates an idea of structural de-differentiation as a possible response to 'disruptive influences' and posits that societies may exhibit different levels of integration of forms, which is, in effect, an elaboration of that part of Merton's analysis associated with the explanation of survivals.

<sup>28</sup> He also offered an illustration drawn from Weber of the contradiction of patrimonial bureaucracy in a near-subsistence economy. In this way, he seems to give substance to Gouldner's point that the parts of a system, although analytically identified in terms of the economic, or the political sub-systems, may be in tension deriving from their particular substance.

relations of production in capitalism as an example of a problem at the level of system integration, but he did not fully endorse the example as one that was correct in its own terms. Its purpose was to show a type of sociological argument that was outside the confines of Parsons' functionalism and, in this respect, its point was very effectively made. However, it is difficult to see that there could be a *general statement* of contradiction, rather than a series of substantive analyses of specific contradictions (see, Holmwood 1996).<sup>29</sup>

Others took up Lockwood's categories and sought to develop them as part of a systematic framework, in particular Habermas (1987) and Giddens (1984). Habermas is particularly interesting because of his own background in Marxism. This involved turning around the significance that Lockwood had drawn from Marx's analysis of the contradictions of capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, given the continuity of capitalism, it must appear that system contradictions have, indeed, been successfully managed at the level of social integration. If Lockwood perceived the problem in Parsons' work to be the absence of a concept of system contradiction, the problem in Marx's work would appear to be an inadequate account of mechanisms of social integration. At the same time that Habermas adopts the categories of system and social integration from Lockwood, then, he shifts the focus back toward mechanisms of social integration.

It is this that explains the specificity of Habermas' (1981, and below) critique of Parsons. Habermas associates the dimensions of system and social integration (or, as he terms them, *system* and *lifeworld*) with two distinct approaches to the coordination of action. Each is a paradigm of action, but, while the mechanisms of social integration are directly based on action orientations, the mechanisms of system integration operate through the consequences of action.<sup>30</sup> Thus, he writes that, "in the former case, action is integrated through conscious mutuality in the action orientations of the parties concerned. In the latter case, action is integrated through a functional coupling of the consequences of action to each other, consequences that may remain latent or beyond the conscious horizon of the action orientations of the actors involved" (1981: 175). According to Habermas, the task for social theory is how to synthesise the two approaches and how to prevent their 'bifurcation', something he believes occurs both in Marx and, more importantly for our purposes, in Parsons.

The critical literature on Parsons had accumulated since Lockwood had written, and Habermas accepts many of the interpretations that had become standard. In fact, Habermas provides an almost perfect illustration of Adriaansens' account of how the 'bi-polar structure' of Parsons' first statements of his theory serve to confound critics at the same time as providing them with their critical vocabulary. It is not simply, that Habermas' statement of the two paradigms of system and lifeworld is similar to Adriaansens' presentation of 'bi-polarity', but that he also identifies phases in the development of Parsons' theory that have him beginning from 'action' and tipping over into a 'systems' approach that displaces 'action'. Unlike, Lockwood, then, he criticises Parsons for an overemphasis on system integration at the cost of a properly worked out conception of social integration as its complement.

In setting out this account of Parsons' theoretical development, Habermas makes the familiar argument that in his early writing, "in the last analysis the single unit act of an isolated actor remains the critical building block" (1981: 179). For Habermas, this emphasis on the 'monadic actor' means that coordination mechanisms operating through the unintended consequences of action receive greater theoretical emphasis than those that derive from actions oriented to mutual understanding and, therefore, "with the concept of values as an already intersubjectively shared culture" (1981: 180). As Habermas puts it, "if one first treats action-oriented decisions as *an emergent of the private arbitrariness of isolated actors*, as Parsons did then one deprives oneself of a mechanism that could explain the emergence of a system

<sup>29</sup> In fact, in Lockwood's own later work he seems to come implicitly to this conclusion. Much like Burger, he suggests that the problem of order – of the relation among normative and non-normative influences on behaviour – is better addressed in a series of substantive studies than it has been in terms of general theory. He writes, "this is another reason for thinking that the search for grand theory, whether by way of synthesis or contestation, may be misdirected" (1992: 395)

<sup>30</sup> This corresponds with Lockwood's statement that the distinction between 'system integration' and 'social integration' is a "wholly artificial one" (1964: 245).

of action out of unit acts" (1981: 180). These are significant misrepresentations of Parsons' work.

Significantly, Habermas believes that Parsons comes closer to an adequate approach in his later work when he elaborates his conception of different systems, namely personality system, social system and culture system. However, the linking of these three systems is inadequate, he believes, precisely because Parsons lacks an appropriate development of the subjective aspect of action, as is found in phenomenological or hermeneutic schools of thought. In this way, Habermas develops the line of criticism initiated by Schutz.

It is certainly the case that this aspect of Parsons' approach is relatively less well-grounded than that associated with action situations. However, the basic architecture of the theoretical framework appears to be very similar to the one advocated by Habermas. In part, this is because Habermas fails to comprehend that the different phases in the development of the theory are driven by the attempt to overcome the dualism of two paradigms within a single frame of reference. Indeed, Habermas comes to criticise Parsons for failing to recognise the intermediation of culture, society and personality, writing that, "Parsons abandoned trying to explain in action-theoretical terms the notion that cultural values enter society and personality via institutionalization and internalization, respectively. Instead a model of mutually interpenetrating but analytically separate systems gains a central position on his theoretical stage" (1981: 183).<sup>31</sup> His criticism is the opposite of that made by Lockwood and by other critics

Habermas' formal scheme of categories is convergent with that of Parsons, in the sense that he also comes to accept that the two paradigms of system and lifeworld each operate in terms of two functional imperatives (see, Habermas 1987). Indeed, when he addresses the issue that any scheme of functional imperatives tends to over-emphasise integration, he has recourse to the idea that functional imperatives can operate autonomously as well as interdependently.<sup>32</sup> This is similar to Gouldner's conception of reciprocity and autonomy among parts of a system.

At the same time, Habermas confirms Parsons' account of structural differentiation that is derived from the analysis functional imperatives, as a *description* of modern societies.<sup>33</sup> However, his own interpretation of the critical resources integral to the paradigm of the lifeworld suggests to him that this can also be represented as a form of alienation. Here Habermas draws on Marx, but once again, his critique is different from that of Lockwood. Where the latter had drawn on the idea of the contradiction between forces and relations of production within the processes of system integration, Habermas draws on Marx's idea of an alienated life-world, separated from economic and political sub-systems and subordinated to them and, thereby deformed. The problem, Habermas suggests, is that the steering mechanisms of system integration continue to require legitimation, but the lifeworld may lack

<sup>31</sup> It should be clear that Parsons does have a clear view of 'interpenetration' operating through processes of institutionalization and internalisation. Indeed, Lockwood's criticism of him was precisely that these were the primary processes within his account. Habermas' criticism is more effective against Parsons' German student Niklas Luhmann's idea of autopoietic social systems (Luhmann 1995[1984]).

<sup>32</sup> Habermas' developed critique of Parsons tends to be that the latter refers to 'integration' in general terms and fails to distinguish sufficiently the qualitatively different nature of the processes associated with system and lifeworld respectively, writing that "Parsons makes the important – but nowhere explicitly acknowledged – decision to drop the concept of social integration established via values and norms and to speak from now on only of 'integration' in general" (1987: 241). However, any issue of 'integration in general' as the focus of Parsons' concerns must derive from what is shared with Habermas, namely that the separate processes of system and social integration are interdependent because one set is defined in terms of the 'orientations' of actors and the other set through the 'consequences' of action. Against this mutuality or interdependence of the two sets of functional principles, Habermas asserts the formal possibility of their independent operation, writing that, "Parsons has no theoretical tools with which to explain the resistance that cultural patterns with their own independent logics offer to functional imperatives" (1987: 231).

<sup>33</sup> Giddens, too, comes to propose general 'structural features' of all social systems, which are remarkably similar to those of Parsons. Thus, he, too, identifies *four* structural principles with similar points of reference - signification, legitimation, authorisation and allocation. He argues further that two aspects of how they are articulated can be identified, "one is how far a society contains distinct spheres of 'specialism' in respect of institutional orders: differentiated forms of symbolic order (religion, science, etc); a differentiated 'polity', 'economy' and 'legal/repressive apparatus'. The second is how modes of institutional articulation are organised in terms of overall properties of societal reproduction: that is to say 'structural principles'" (1981: 47-8).

the capacity to do so because of its deformation. Given that Habermas fails to identify any substantive problems of system integration, the problem of social integration that he identifies is essentially that of *anomie*, rather than alienation. What drops away is the specific idea of system contradiction as discussed by Lockwood.

*Neo-functionalism: Parsons re-visited and revisioned*

Many of the criticisms directed at Parsons' scheme sought a re-ordering of sociological theory, with the ambition of establishing a new paradigmatic consensus or 'successor science'. According to Alexander (1988, and below), these alternative paradigms were partial in their emphasis, for example, as in conflict theory or exchange theory. They produced valuable insights, but they have run their course and become 'enervated'. According to him, this is precisely because they were partial and polemical in character, overstating what could be achieved and running out of internal resources for further development. Alexander detects a shift in theoretical sensibility, "where even 10 years ago the air was filled with demands for radical and one-sided theoretical programs, in the contemporary period one can only hear urgent calls for theorizing of an entirely different sort. Throughout the centers of western sociology – in Britain and France, in Germany and the United States – synthetic rather than polemical theorizing now is the order of the day" (1988: 77).

Alexander is seeking to draw other theorists into his own 'neo-functionalist' paradigm, based upon his four-volume *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984). This involved a re-working of the ideas of Parsons' *TSofSA* and, like Adriaansens (and Münch 1987, and below), Alexander suggests that Parsons had developed the elements of a satisfactory 'multi-dimensional' scheme, but that, for much of its subsequent development, his solution remained caught up in his statement of the problem. In consequence, critics were right to identify weaknesses, but in taking the 'partiality' of their criticisms as establishing a new way forward, these have led to the fragmentation of sociological theory around a series of dualisms, namely those of 'structure' and 'agency', the 'macro' and the 'micro', instrumental and value-rational action, and so on. Paradoxically, even if Parsons had himself been seen as contributing to these dualisms (as a 'macro-structural' theorist) he had provided a frame of reference that, when properly understood, could synthesise the different one-dimensional perspectives.

Alexander, then, also presents a new version of Parsons' original convergence thesis, one that is now applied to his critics. Within each of the proposed successor paradigms, there is a convergence on synthetic theory. However, recognition of this requires an understanding of the role of meta-theory in the social sciences. Unlike the natural sciences, the social sciences are characterised by 'discourse' as well as 'explanation'. In consequence, the social sciences will not be unified by the rigorous application of method as the positivists had supposed, but by the *presuppositions* that govern discourse. As Alexander puts it, "generalized discourse is central and theory is inherently multivalent" (1988: 80). Although this makes controversy endemic in the social sciences, because every social scientific statement has to be justified by reference to general principles, this opens up a domain in which those general principles can be thematized. In effect, Alexander suggests that the different one-dimensional paradigms have each stretched beyond their self-conscious limitation to identify the role of factors additional to their own self-conscious justification – for example, agency within structuralist approaches and vice versa, value rational action within rational-actor approaches and so on. The 'new theoretical movement' is represented by attempts to achieve different kinds of syntheses beyond the separate paradigms. Post-Parsonsian theory is brought to centre-stage in this movement precisely because, according to Alexander, this is how Parsons had conceived of general theory.

Alexander draws a very sharp line between empirical research and meta-theory. Although Parsons did outline a 'phenomenological' status to the categories of the action frame of reference, he did so in order to establish an empirical reference. In contrast, Alexander seems to suggest that the vocabulary of functionalism can be used without a commitment to the 'reality' of any of its mechanisms. Functional imperatives may operate in mutually consistent or in antagonistic ways. In addition, it is not entirely clear if the positive categories of the one-

sided paradigms are to be transformed as a consequence of the proposed synthesis. Are the different dimensions specified in (multi-dimensional) synthetic, general theory a statement of all the factors that must be included for any concrete explanation to be considered adequate? Or is it an empirical matter which factors have causal significance in any particular case and the error is simply to generalise from particular cases what may be causally significant in other cases?

As Burger (1987) observed of Alexander's initial statement, the proposed scientific continuum from the domain of meta-theory to that of empirical application implies an interchange, but nowhere is this interchange specified and there is no recognition that fundamental theoretical categories might be subject to revision in this process. Indeed, Alexander refers to meta-theory as, "theorizing without reference to particular empirical problems or distinctive domains" (1988: 77).<sup>34</sup> Alexander draws upon postpositivist accounts of science, which he believes that Parsons had to some extent prefigured in his conception of the action frame of reference. However, postpositivist accounts of science are anti-foundational, in the sense that they conceive of scientific development in terms of competing (and at least partly incommensurable) paradigms which come to succeed each other. Alexander accepts that sociology is a 'multi-paradigm' science, but, in effect, he is arguing that there can be a higher level 'paradigm of paradigms' in which lower-level differences can be rendered commensurable. It is not clear how the differences that exist at the lower-level are resolved by moving to the higher level, except by accepting the indeterminacy of theory (which is somewhat different from arguing that theories are underdetermined by facts).

Like Alexander, Münch also identifies a renewal of the Parsonsian theoretical tradition following the wave of criticism directed at Parsons in the 1970s. This renewal involves a synthesis of some elements of the criticisms in a comprehensive paradigm for the analysis of modern society based upon Parsons' categories. The scheme of four functional imperatives, which all neo-Parsonsians from Adriaansens on accept as Parsons' most powerful and satisfactory mature statement, Münch argues, is the basis of this comprehensive paradigm. Like Alexander, he suggests that its more systematic statement can follow the strategy for theoretical specification set out in *TSofSA*, reuniting Parsons' mature theory with its early statement. This enables Münch to set out relations between general theory and empirical methods that are missing in Alexander.

In particular, Münch argues, what is needed is greater clarity about the distinction between the analytical and the concrete. Where analytical elements express *theoretical orderliness*, this must be distinguished from *empirical orderliness*. Empirically, there are varying degrees of order and disorder: "phenomena in reality, and hence also in action, can vary from total unpredictability (contingency) to total predictability (orderedness)" (1987: 119). These possibilities can be expressed in terms of a system of coordinates derived from Parsons' mature theory that provide a series of four-cell tables that categorise appropriate methods and explanations of the *meaningful* behaviour that is the object of social inquiry.

Münch elaborates the application of this four-fold scheme to methods and explanations, and to action and systems. The purpose is to identify different possible constellations of action systems and their sub-systems, together with the appropriate methods for the analysis of these different constellations. The point is to show that different methodological approaches have a restricted domain and, if taken separately, would seriously limit a comprehensive account of social systems (in some cases, failing even to recognise the appropriateness of the concept of system). He writes, "if we wish to avoid the distortions arising from these different methods, we need to choose a procedure which integrates them all within a more comprehensive frame of reference. We need to work constructivistically, ideal-typically, nomologically and idiographically at one and the same time" (1987: 181).

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<sup>34</sup> Parsons also conceives of the relation between 'theory' and research in terms of a hierarchy, a cybernetic hierarchy in which, ultimately, theory has the dominant role. At the bottom of the hierarchy is the "'fitting' of theory to operational procedures of research" (1954b: 351). Nonetheless, while this sets out the 'selective' role of theory, a conception of a continuum as a 'cybernetic hierarchy' does attempt to provide the space for the determination of theory by research, even if this was something that remained rather weakly applied.

In addition, Münch argues, his analysis allows the formulation of nomological hypotheses. The latter take the referents of each functional imperative as potentially variable in order to formulate hypotheses about continuity or change that can be predicted from the priority given to the control of action by 'exchange', 'authority', 'discourse' or 'communal association' in any relevant system (be it organic system, physico-chemical, telic or action system). However, given that the four imperatives are also identified by Parsons as mutually necessary, and can give rise to dominance over action systems only in circumstances of structural differentiation, the nomological hypotheses, applied to action systems, seem to be limited to the 'systems of modern societies'. Even here, they describe circumstances of uneven structural differentiation against a 'master account' of fully differentiated sub-systems although it is not clear what role the latter plays in the derivation of hypotheses about stability or change.

Münch's statement of the neo-Parsonian paradigm is both complex and detailed. However, it is less a synthesis of Parsons and his critics and more a restatement of Parsons' theory in the light of criticisms of its lack of empirical specification. As such, it is unlikely to satisfy critics. The different methodologies that might be applied to restricted domains are not, by that token, associated with research findings that could challenge the framework that provides their allocation to such domains. As with Alexander's treatment of alternative paradigms, the desirability of a multi-dimensional approach that synthesises them is assumed, rather than argued.<sup>35</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the neo-Parsonian paradigm has itself been subject to similar criticisms that were directed at the master statement. As Joas (1988, and below) points out, the 'troubled' pluralistic state of sociology is more of an issue for avowed Parsonsians and lacks a wider salience. For Joas, one of the differences between Parsons' statement of his project and that of his recent followers is that they close it off to, "the present-day possibilities and necessities of such a theory" (1988: 473) and, in consequence, risk losing their intended audience. As we have seen, Parsons addressed the relation between economics and sociology, the role of the professions in modern society and the role of sociology as a profession. The substantive concerns that drove Parsons' project forward are attenuated in the accounts of his followers and 'multi-dimensionality' becomes a formal requirement for social theory, without a more explicit examination of the different purposes that theoretical argument might serve. The synthesis of different positions will always involve some residue that is lost and what is missing in Alexander (and the argument would apply equally to Münch) is any systematic reflection on the significance of what is lost.

In important respects, Joas is asking for the same kind of philosophical examination of the construction of sociological theory that Schutz also requested. In its absence, Joas suggests, "if emphasis on the analytical character of a theory only serves to ward off criticisms of it, then there is a danger that a specific metatheory might simply make itself proof against criticism" (1988: 479). Joas suggests two ways in which analytical theory might be justified; one is pragmatically in terms of the utility of the abstraction, the other is in terms of anthropological assumptions about distinctive features of human action. Neo-Parsonians reject the former, but do not undertake the latter. This bears directly on the crucial ambivalence identified in Alexander's claims about multi-dimensionality identified above: "Alexander can, certainly, demonstrate from his standpoint that the ignoring of a particular dimension *can*, and in fact often does have harmful consequences for a social theory ... If he were to derive from his claim to have elaborated a multidimensional theory the positive assertion that all dimensions must be equally important empirically, this would be a false concretization of the analytical multidimensionality of his theory" (1988: 480).

Joas' point is not simply concerned with the rigidity of Alexander's statement of analytical theory and the hierarchy of theory and fact within his scientific continuum. Just as Schutz, criticised Parsons for his failure properly to examine 'knowledge' in everyday action, leading to an unconscious objectivist bias, so Joas extends that critique, writing that, "like Parsons before him, Alexander fails to grasp pragmatism's basic idea, that cognition is situated in

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<sup>35</sup> As is evident in the many prescriptive statements about the dualistic form of current theorising that assert that we 'should not' have to 'choose' between them, but we should find away of integrating them. What is missing is a recognition that sometimes we are faced with issues where we do need to choose and the mobilisation of theoretical argument and evidence is part of the process by which we do so.

problematic action situations" (1988: 481). For Parsons and for Alexander, the problems that drive knowledge are internal to a 'scientific' scheme and do not derive from the practical self-reflection of actors. Reference back to the 'classics' provides this connection with 'problematic action situations' – what might be termed 'problems of their day' – but in the formalisation of what might be identified as convergent in the way problems are approached by these theorists this connection with practical problems becomes lost and theory is justified by its own internal logic. It is unlikely, Joas suggests, that such a justification will win adherents from other sociologists and social theorists who are engaged with problems of our day.

### *Conclusion*

It was Parsons' view that sociology must be based upon a foundational scheme of general categories. This was something which he argued was a necessary feature of any successful science and what differentiated it from ideology. According to Alexander, such arguments are consistent with post-positivist developments in the philosophy of science and, therefore, his understanding requires no fundamental modification. Yet, post-positivist philosophy of science is implicitly critical of any proposal for a framework of general theory as a necessary precondition of social inquiry. Although Alexander wishes to see continuity between general theory in social inquiry and what he takes to be the theoretical assumptions that form 'paradigms' in science, that parallel cannot be sustained as we have seen. General theory is argued by Parsons and his followers to be *eternal* and *non-empirical*, and, as such, not subject to change in the practical processes of the development of social scientific understandings. These characteristics are the opposite of those attributed to 'paradigms' or 'research programmes', whose 'assumptions' are transformed in the development of science.

By implication, then, the professional task of sociology need not (indeed, could not) be defined by an agreement or consensus. What defines the natural sciences as progressive undertakings is not *mutual understandings*, but *mutual engagement* among scientists who differ and make their differences the substance of problems of understanding to be addressed in research - the search for evidence, the critical reflection upon categories and the re-organisation of data and problems. Of all the critical contributions gathered in this volume, then, those of Burger and Lockwood seem, finally, to be the most cogent.

Sociology may have the added complexity of taking place in a social world in which there are manifold ideological commitments. However, ideologies do not differ from science by their lack of cognitive claims. Parsons proposed general theory as a way of demarcating sociology from ideology yet, as the example of feminism shows, sociological argument can be formed by ideological commitments and make very significant contributions to knowledge. Moreover, as Joas suggests, sociology may well *require* an attachment to 'problems of the day' if it is to avoid professional sterility.

We can, perhaps, more readily accept (and, partially and temporarily, transcend) the entanglement of science and ideology in social inquiry when *research* rather than *theory* is the basis of professional identity. Although Parsons remains firmly associated with his self-proclaimed identity as an 'incurable theorist', we might perhaps look for the positive substance of his (or any other) contribution at a lower – and more fallible - level in specific sociological insights about the nature of social life. But, after this introduction to his scheme and its critics, it is Parsons, himself, who is left with the last word on the meaning of his life's work. His personal account of building social system theory – "a process of step-by-step development of theoretical thinking from the original problem-formulation base" (1970: 875) - is reprinted below as an afterword to the criticisms directed at it.

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