

Action, system and norm in the action frame of reference: Talcott Parsons and his critics ¹

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It is apparent that a new reappraisal of Talcott Parsons's work is currently under way. It may be asked, however, in what respects the current critiques differ from their predecessors? The themes appear to be the same: his neglect of power (Burger 1977), his over-emphasis on norms (Warner 1978), the break between the early voluntaristic theory of action and the later structural-functionalist theory of systems (Bershady 1973), and his misinterpretations of the sociological tradition (Pope 1973; Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope 1975; Pope, Cohen and Hazelrigg 1975; Camic 1979).

In this paper, I shall argue that these conventional criticisms of Parsons are misplaced and that Parsons and his critics share basic assumptions. My purpose is not to rescue Parsons from his critics, but rather to lay the basis of a more thoroughgoing criticism which might enable the resolution of some of the problems posed by his analysis. I shall not be able to deal with all of the many and varied criticisms of Parsons in this paper. Rather, I shall concentrate upon two areas where criticism has been most frequently focused: firstly, the relationship between Parsons's early formulation of the action frame of reference and a functionalist methodology, and secondly, the concept of the normative and its place in Parsons's theory.

Action and system

The idea of a break between Parsons's early voluntaristic theory of action and the later functionalist theory of system is strongly associated with the idea that there exists a *necessary* opposition between them. Dawe expresses this well in his conception of the 'two sociologies' (Dawe 1970). In his view these are two doctrines which represent alternative bases of sociological approach and they 'are grounded in diametrically opposed concerns with two central

problems, those of order and control... at every level they are in conflict' (p. 214). However, it soon appears that their separate status is compromised. Writers are placed in either camp not as a consequence of a commitment to one of the sociologies rather than the other, but by default of providing an integrated approach to sociological problems. The claim that the 'two sociologies' represent distinct paradigms is problematic in that neither of them seems to generate a coherent sociological practice. Rather, they confront each other as mirrors to respective deficiencies.

In this paper, I will not be able to take issue directly with the concept of the 'two sociologies'. Elsewhere, an alternative way of interpreting the 'two sociologies' has been argued, not as distinct paradigms, but as the form taken by the contradictory development of a *single* sociology, that of the action frame of reference (Holmwood and Stewart forthcoming). Whereas most of Parsons's critics associate the deficiencies of his work with his functionalist methodology, I shall argue that they are intrinsic to the action frame of reference and, indeed, that there can be no neat separation between these apparently different forms of approach. In order to demonstrate this it is necessary to examine in some detail *The Structure of Social Action* since many of the arguments for a break in Parsons's theory stem from a misunderstanding of that work.

Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action* (hereafter referred to as *TS of SA*) is organised in terms of an understanding of an hitherto basic cleavage in social thought. His 'two sociologies'—though there are a variety of positions within each category—are those of 'positivism' and 'idealism'. According to Parsons, they reflect the development of a one-sided account of 'conditional circumstances' on the one hand, and 'values', on the other. It is his view that an integrated account of conditions and values is necessary since neither of the 'two sociologies' taken alone proves adequate. Parsons argues that a voluntaristic theory of action will transcend the contradictions (explanatory deficiencies) internal to each position and integrate the different forms of approach.²

It should be stated at the outset that the voluntaristic theory of action is, despite the nomenclature, a theory of action in practical (i.e. conditional) circumstances. In later chapters of the book Parsons feels it no longer necessary to call his own scheme the 'voluntaristic theory of action' in order to distinguish it from other theories of action, but refers simply to the 'action frame of reference' and I shall adopt this practice. He begins his account with a statement of the elements of a 'unit act':

(1) It implies an agent, an 'actor'. (2) For purposes of definition the act must have an 'end', a future state of affairs toward which the process of action is oriented. (3) It must be initiated in a 'situation' of which the trends of development differ in one or more important respects from the state of affairs to which the action is oriented, the end. This situation is in turn analyzable into two elements: those over which the actor has no control ... and those over which he has such control. The former may be termed the 'conditions' of action, the latter the 'means'. Finally (4) there is inherent in the conception of this unit, in its analytical uses, a certain mode of relationship between these elements. That is, in the choice of alternative means to the end, insofar as the situation allows alternatives, there is a 'normative orientation' of action. (Parsons 1937: p. 44)

Parsons argues that action is to be understood as an end-oriented process. It occurs in conditional circumstances that must be calculated upon and utilised by actors in the pursuit of their specific ends. 'Ends' and 'conditions' (including 'means') are analytically distinct categories. This, according to Parsons, is significant for 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 (Parsons 1937: pp. 473-86). Consequently, action involves effort to conform with norms (which govern ends and the selection of the means of their realisation) since it must transform circumstances and therefore accommodate and calculate upon conditions if it is to be successful. Nor can action be reduced to its conditions since an understanding of the agency of the actor and, consequently, the subjective meaning of an action is necessary in any adequate explanation.

This account of the 'unit act' provides only the basic elements of an action frame of reference. According to Parsons, the utilisation of these elements in the analysis of concrete action is *descriptive* in form, and it 'serves only to arrange the data in a certain order, *not to subject them to the analysis necessary for their explanation*' (1937: p. 48, emphasis added).

For Parsons, such an explanation involves a 'functional' analysis. He writes, 'for the purposes of explanation a further step in abstraction is generally necessary. It consists in generalising the conceptual scheme so as to bring out the functional relations in the facts already descriptively arranged' (1937: p. 49). Furthermore, it is clear that this analysis of 'functional relations' is concerned with the emergent properties of systems of social action. 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: p. 739, emphasis original).

It is important to recognise that Parsons's theoretical strategy involves what he terms 'analytical realism'. Although the emergent properties of systems of social action are arrived at by a series of analytical abstractions Parsons argues that emergent properties are processes of concrete actions. He warns against the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (1937: pp. 27-41) and a consequent tendency toward a methodological individualism such as that of Weber (Parsons 1937: pp. 579-639) in which unit acts are held to be 'real' and structural categories mere 'fictions'. On the contrary, Parsons argues that *it is precisely the conceptual isolation of the unit act which is a process of abstraction* involving, 'the type of concept which is really and necessarily fictional, in the sense that Weber attributed to his ideal types' (1937: p. 739). Indeed, this is the core of Parsons's critique of Weber's methodological approach and its implicit 'type atomism' which is unable to constitute theoretically the relations among the elements that it isolates. It is worth contrasting the different statements of Weber and Parsons on the dangers of reification in sociological explanations in order to demonstrate that the difference in approach is fundamental. Weber writes that 'for sociological purposes there is no such thing as a collective personality which "acts"'. When reference is made in a sociological context to a state, a nation, a corporation ... or similar collectivities, *what is meant, on the contrary, is only a certain kind of development of actual or possible social actions of individual persons.*' (1968: p. 14, emphasis added).

Parsons also warns of the dangers of reification inherent in the concept of a collectivity. Although concepts referring to 'groups' are important in sociological analysis, for Parsons, 'there are no group properties that are not reducible to properties of *systems* of action and there is no analytical theory of groups which is not translatable into terms of the theory of action' (1937: p. 747, original emphasis). Parsons suggests that there are two distinct dangers of reification. The first, which is also identified by Weber, is that of the illegitimate postulation of a 'group mind'. The second, and this is directed against Weber, is to reduce concepts referring to collectivities to unit acts. Rather, collectivities should be understood in terms of

their component *systems* of social action. The theory of action to which Parsons refers has a functional analysis as a necessary part. A denial of such a necessary level of analysis involves the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.³

Finally, there is a third and related form of reification identified by Parsons, that of empiricism. Parsons argues that empirical entities ('facts') must be interpreted within a theoretical scheme; resort to untheorised empirical entities in the explanation of social processes indicates a deficiency within the theoretical scheme (Parsons 1937: pp. 6-16). This is the argument that underlies Parsons's analytical realism and his distinction between the analytic and the concrete. An analytical frame of reference is held to be necessary in order to theorise the relevant elements of concrete or empirical systems and the relations of dependence and interdependence amongst those elements. The concrete phenomena or data of an empirical system are describable as a specific combination of the particular content and levels (Parsons uses the technical term 'values') of these general elements. It is precisely the understanding, which analytic theory provides, of uniform modes of relationship between these elements which enables the prediction of changes in the 'values' of variables within empirical systems which are consequent upon changes in the 'value' of some other variable in the system. It follows, then, that, for Parsons, there are theoretical concepts which have no *direct* empirical reference, although they enable the prediction of processes of empirical systems. Parsons holds to a fundamental assumption of the logical or 'phenomenological' status of certain concepts and of the mode of relationship between them in so far as they represent the necessary form in which to think about the processes of societies. As Parsons puts it, analytic theory

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 phenomena of action. This is not true of the components of concrete action systems, or of the values of analytical elements, the specific content of ends and the like. They are of the empirical order of existence and are subject to analysis in terms of causality and concrete empirical process. (1937: p. 733)

Although the concepts of analytic theory are presented as having a phenomenological status they are *both* necessary and contingent. They are necessary in the sense that they are presupposed in empirical analysis yet do not have a direct empirical reference. They are contingent in that the predicted relations among the values of the

variables of concrete systems may not obtain. Parsons writes that

it must be remembered *that scientific achievement is a matter of the combination of systematic theoretical analysis with empirical observation*. When a theoretical system is only partially adequate to the known facts a more correct factual account may be achieved by admitting theoretical errors and inconsistencies. (1937: p. 97, original emphasis)

In such a case the analytic presuppositions are called into question; a breakdown of the theoretical system is indicated by the fact that empirical entities are introduced, but are not theorised. In this sense, the analytic theory no longer describes 'primitive' categories and a transformation of the theoretical system is necessary. This has the effect of re-establishing the phenomenological status of the analytical theory since the analytic categories have an ultimate or phenomenological status *at the point at which they have explanatory power*. The production within the theory of a contradiction between predicted outcomes and the 'facts' is merely one moment in the development of a more adequate theory. This is the basis of Parsons's critique of Weber, Durkheim, Pareto and Marshall and is integral to the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'.⁴

Before I go on to discuss some of the criticisms that have been directed at Parsons's scheme it is necessary to elaborate further his views concerning the emergent properties of systems of social action. In *TS of SA* there are two main points of reference. The first concerns the organisation in systems of the various unit acts of an individual. The second is the organisation in systems of the unit acts of a plurality of individuals. From the perspective of the individual, the emergent properties that Parsons identifies refer to (i) the necessity of selection amongst alternative means to given ends; and (ii) the selection amongst ends according to the organisation of wants into a hierarchy of preferences. Whereas Weber distinguishes two distinct forms of rational action, *zweckrational* and *wertrational*, Parsons argues that these are better understood as two different criteria of evaluation or selection which operate within a *single* rational form (1937: pp. 640-8). These criteria Parsons terms the 'norm of efficiency' and 'ultimate value standards' and his definition of action as 'effort to conform with norms' (1937: p. 76) incorporates both criteria. These criteria constrain action in the sense that there is a 'direction' to action which consists in the tendency toward the realisation of the rational 'norms'. As we shall see, this is an important point since these tendencies toward the rationalisation of action are aspects of the more

general processes of the integration of systems of social action; that is, the reproduction of the system has as its medium competent (rational) human action.⁵ This becomes clear when we consider Parsons's arguments concerning emergent properties which govern the organisation of the unit acts of a plurality of individuals.

We have already seen that Parsons makes a distinction between conditions (including means) and ends. When considered from the perspective of unit act analysis the distinction consists in the fact that objects in the situation of action are external factors from the point of view of the individual. This is the case both for 'ultimate conditions' and 'means' (which are distinguished in terms of whether or not they are subject to control or manipulation by the actor in the realisation of ends). However, when *systems* of social action are considered this distinction between conditions and ends is modified. While conditions from the point of view of the unit act are distinguished by their externality to the individual actor a certain class of these conditions is the actions of other individuals and, consequently, not external to action as such. As Parsons puts it,

what are to one actor non-normative means and conditions are explicable, in part, at least, only in terms of the normative elements of the action of others in the system. This problem of the relation between the analysis of the action of a particular concrete actor in a concrete, partly social environment, and that of a total action system including a plurality of actors will be of cardinal importance to the later discussion. (1937: p. 51, emphasis added)

According to Parsons, the nature of a total action system of a plurality of actors is such that actors must accommodate a 'material environment' and a 'social environment' that consists in the actions of others. However, these actions of others are not simply constraints for any given actor, but also facilities. In the language of 'inter-locking means-end chains', a 'means' for an actor at one point in the system is an 'end' for an actor differently located. Thus, for Parsons, there is a 'problem of order' which consists, as a theoretical problem, in discovering the properties or processes of the system which maintain the commensurability of actions within the total action system. Indeed, the integration of systems of social action—the 'problem of order'—*must* be a theoretical issue within any action frame of reference. This is simply demonstrated in terms of Parsons's theory. Action, understood in the categories of unit act analysis, is the accommodation of conditions and the mobilisation of given facilities to constitute the means in securing ends. The analysis of *total* action

systems, on the other hand, must be concerned with the processes of the production and reproduction of these facilities. On an action frame of reference the actions which mobilise facilities are, at the same time, the medium whereby facilities are reproduced. It follows (as the conception of inter-locking means-end chains indicates) that facilities are reproduced only when the actions within total action systems are commensurate, that is, integrated.

One aspect of Parsons's analysis of the integration of systems of social action is that of the crucial role of normative elements. He writes, 'a social order is always a factual order in so far as it is susceptible of scientific analysis, but ... it is one which cannot have stability without the effective functioning of certain normative elements' (1937: p. 92). The argument is an extension of the analytical independence of conditions and ends stated within unit act analysis. It can be seen that if any meaning is to be given to this analytical distinction when transposed to the level of systems it must consist in the analytical independence of normative elements and their effective functioning in the integration of systems. However, if a social order is, in an analytical sense, a normative order, it is not purely normative, but depends also upon the effective functioning of other elements in conjunction with normative ones. Here Parsons is often misunderstood. However, he writes that the issue of integration cannot be resolved by 'such an objectionable metaphysical prop as the doctrine of the natural identity of interests' (1937: p. 102). According to Parsons the analysis of the emergent properties which serve the integration of systems of social action involves the phenomenon of power. Parsons identifies two related issues in the analysis of power, (i) the reproduction of socially produced facilities (see especially 1937: pp. 228-41, 767-8); and (ii) the role of sanctions to maintain compliance within a normative order (see especially 1937: pp. 376-408, 767-8).

I shall return to a more detailed discussion of Parsons's conception of normative integration. It has been argued so far that in *TS of SA* Parsons is concerned to lay the basis of a functional analysis of the emergent properties of systems of social action. These properties Parsons refers to as 'the elements of structure of a generalised system of action' (1937: p. 718). However, and it is an argument of fundamental importance to his scheme, 'there is an element which does not fall within any of these three structural groups as such but serves rather to bind them together. It is that which has been encountered at various points and called "effort"' (Parsons 1937; p. 719). That is, the processes of the integration of total action systems

have as their medium a teleology of rational action.

It is apparent that on the basis of this presentation of Parsons's views that any argument for a 'break' which rests upon a contrast between an early concern with action and a later concern with the properties of systems involves a basic misunderstanding of the theoretical strategy outlined in *TS of SA*. Nevertheless, such conceptions of a break are common both amongst Parsons's critics and those who would defend him from his critics. In this paper I shall consider only a selection from among the many versions of the argument.

Martindale's argument alleging a fundamental discontinuity in Parsons's sociology (1971) has perhaps been the most influential. He argues that there is a bifurcation in sociology in terms of whether or not methodological individualism or methodological holism is adopted. According to Martindale, Parsons propounds methodological individualism in *TS of SA* whereas in subsequent writings methodological holism is proposed. However, as we have seen, *TS of SA* is not an argument for methodological individualism. Martindale misunderstands Parsons's conception of the unit act and its role in sociological analysis. As I have shown, Parsons does identify the elements of unit acts as basic, but he further argues that unit acts occur in systems which have properties which are not reducible in terms of unit acts. Although Martindale recognises that Parsons uses the concept of 'system' in *TS of SA* he argues that Parsons conceives of it as having only a 'fictitious' reality. He writes that

the conclusions in Parsons' *Structure of Social Action* are most noteworthy for their thoroughgoing nominalism. ... The only indication of a potential break from this nominalistic orientation is the suggestion that systems of social action may have 'emergent' properties not analyseable into unit acts. (1971: p. 169).

What Martindale takes as a mere indication of a break is fundamental to *TS of SA*.⁶

A similar interpretation to that of Martindale is offered by Bershadsky (1973). Although he argues that Parsons's 'two sociologies' do not reflect a fundamental epistemological break since both are cast in an '*a priori*' mode of theorising' (1973: pp. 22-4) and are concerned with the same epistemological problem (that of relativism), they do represent, for Bershadsky, two substantively distinct approaches to the problem. In fact, whilst he argues that Parsons's turn to functionalism is not arbitrary since it allows him to address the characteristics of 'systems', Bershadsky does not provide any account of the relation

between this 'later' concern with systems and the statement of the action frame of reference as a theory of unit acts and neglects Parsons's analysis of the non-reducible properties of systems of social action.⁷

This limitation has a certain salience independently of the question of the status of Bershady's interpretation of Parsons. Although he is sympathetic to Parsons's project, Bershady comes ultimately to reject what he sees as Parsons's later functionalist approach. He suggests as an alternative model for the sociological explanation of action, that of the 'practical syllogism' provided by Anscombe (1957) and von Wright (1971). He gives the following example:

(1) Mr. X, who has just entered the railway station, intends to board a train which is due to leave in four minutes. (2) He considers that the distance between himself and the train is such that he must run if he is to catch the train on time. (3) Mr. X thus sets himself to running (1973: p. 158).

For Bershady, the distinctive feature of this explanation is that the relationship between the premises and the conclusion is not logical in form, but practical, and depends upon a teleological conception of action. Further, according to Bershady, this form of explanation legitimately employs concepts of a narrow scope rather than the general categories advocated by Parsons (1973: pp. 159-60). However, the practical syllogism outlined by Bershady is a simple version of unit act analysis. It does not utilise any concepts which are not also present in Parsons's statement of a unit act. A teleological conception of action is entailed in Parsons's argument of the analytical distinction between conditions and ends and is the significance of his emphasis on 'effort'. Furthermore Bershady's suggestion that the practical syllogism represents an adequate and inclusive form of sociological analysis neglects entirely Parsons's criticism of the explanatory deficiencies of an analysis restricted to the properties of unit acts. Put bluntly, Bershady's model employs concepts of a narrow scope, rather than more general categories, simply by avoiding all the interesting sociological issues concerning the structure of social actions and the processes of the production and reproduction of social facilities. He commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

Before concluding this section of the paper, I want to consider a debate where the conventional interpretations of Parsons appear to be challenged. This is the exchange between Scott, and Turner and Beeghley (Scott 1963, 1974; Turner and Beeghley 1974) where the latter authors seek to challenge the 'current folklore' surrounding

Parsons's writings which they believe finds its most complete codification in Scott's article on the changing foundation of Parsons's action frame of reference. For the present purposes, I am rather more interested in the implications of Turner and Beeghley's rebuttal of Scott's article than in Scott's own argument, but for clarity it is necessary to summarise the latter's argument as well as some of its difficulties.

Scott's article has been influential since not only does he argue that there is an epistemological break in Parsons's theory, but that it consist in a shift from a non-positivist (non-behaviourist) conception of action to a positivist (behaviourist) conception of action. In this sense he proposes a strong version of the 'two sociologies' thesis (he is himself committed to a behaviourist approach). For Scott, Parsons's various arguments in *TS of SA* for the necessity of conceiving of action in a means-end scheme, the analytical independence of normative elements, the operation of a mechanism of selection on the part of actors, and the emphasis upon agency—'non-natural effort and will at least partly free from natural constraints' (Scott 1963: p. 722)—are all indicative of a non-behaviourist conception of action. However, the evidence that such a conception of action is transformed in Parsons's later writings is scant even as Scott sets it out. He recognises that 'the action scheme of 1951 still uses a means-end framework' (Scott 1963: p. 725) which was basic to the early approach. He suggests that in place of the independent selective factor Parsons now refers to normative regulation and that there is a different nuance to the emphasis upon effort and energy. However, he concedes ambiguity in that they can be given naturalist or non-naturalist definition (Scott 1963: pp. 724-5). Furthermore, Scott also suggests that in more recent work Parsons appears to move back to the earlier position (1963: p. 733).

The 'evidence' that the transformation takes place finally seems to boil down to the simple fact that Parsons collaborated with Tolman (Parsons, Shils *et al.* 1951) who was an explicit behaviourist and that Tolman's definition of 'purposive behaviour' is antithetical to the definition of action proposed in *TS of SA*. According to Scott, Parsons must (should) have realised this and, therefore, he implicitly accepted the behaviourist position (Scott 1963: p. 728). On its own the argument does not stand up since it could just as easily be argued that it is Tolman who changes his position. Unfortunately, Scott does not reproduce Tolman's definition of purposive behaviour nor provide one of his own more than the observation that, perforce, it is not the same as that set out in *TS of SA*.¹

Why Scott perceives a changing foundation of Parsons's scheme, however, can be readily understood. He associates *TS of SA* with the idealist tradition of social thought. This tradition he characterises by its neglect of the practical (conditional) circumstances of action. Since he believes that only a positivist and behaviourist approach can produce an adequate account of action in practical circumstances he necessarily treats Parsons's critique of positivism in *TS of SA* as indicative of idealism. The fact that Parsons also gives an extended account of conditional factors is neglected and when Scott confronts such an account in *The Social System* (which Scott believes approximates an adequate account) he interprets it as a transformation of Parsons's basic scheme rather than as an extension of the scheme set out in *TS of SA*.

As I have already noted, Turner and Beeghley seek to challenge Scott's interpretation. Their argument is that Parsons's 'later' functionalism is based upon a conception of unit acts similar to that set out in *TS of SA*. However, they do not recognise that the analysis of unit acts in *TS of SA* is itself located within a functionalist analysis. Although they argue that there is no epistemological break in Parsons's work they suggest a substantive break in terms which are very much a part of the folklore. They write,

in accordance with his commitment to building systems of concepts, *Parsons appears to have become concerned with how unit acts are connected to each other and how this connectedness can be conceptually represented*. Indeed, near the end of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons recognises that 'any atomistic system that only deals with properties identifiable in the unit act ... will of necessity fail to treat these latter elements adequately and be indeterminate as applied to complex systems.' (1937 pp. 748-9). *However, only the barest hints of what are to come are evident in the closing pages.* (Turner and Beeghley 1974: p. 49, emphasis added)⁹

This is not a nit-picking point. In the first place, failure to recognise it is itself a contribution to the folklore surrounding Parsons's work. In the second place, it seriously weakens their argument against Scott. They argue that there is a single conception of a unit act which is basic to Parsons's early and later writings, but they allow that it is only after *TS of SA* that Parsons develops a functional analysis of systems of social action. As a consequence they imply that this analysis is 'added on' without altering the concepts of action. It is difficult then to understand the necessity (what conceptual problems are overcome in its development) of the functional analysis. Of course, if they did

admit that development of a functional analysis does transform the concepts of action then their criticism of Scott would be undermined. In fact, Parsons goes to some lengths in *TS of SA* to demonstrate how existing theories of action are transformed by the location of their categories in a more developed action frame of reference; that is how a functional analysis enables an adequate statement of the categories of action and their interrelationships. Scott's error consists in a misunderstanding of *TS of SA*, but it is compounded by a similar misunderstanding on the part of those sympathetic to Parsons, for they are unable to capture the force of Parsons's theoretical undertaking.¹⁰

The normative orientation of action and the normative integration of systems

Scott's criticism of Parsons for the neglect of conditional factors is one that is frequently made by other critics. However, while Scott argues that it is a feature of Parsons's early writing and that the later writing shows a more adequate approach (see Scott 1971: pp. 7-10), other critics see the shift in emphasis from an early recognition of the importance of conditional factors to a neglect of them in later works (see, for example, Lockwood 1956, Dahrendorf 1968, Rex 1968). With this difference of opinion in mind we can see that Turner and Beeghley's presentation of Scott's argument as the most complete codification of the folk-lore surrounding Parsons's work is potentially misleading. What the different sorts of criticisms show is that the relationship between normative and conditional elements in Parsons's theory poses problems for his critics in all phases of his work. The discussion of the normative elements of his theory must be pursued in terms of the relationship between unit act and systems of social action. In this section of the paper I want to show this continuity of issues and how the failure to understand the theoretical system set out in *TS of SA* leads to misunderstanding of Parsons's conception of the normative. In the process I shall argue that there are indeed problems with Parsons's approach, but they are not those of conventional criticism. Unlike Scott I do not see the later writing as more or less adequate modifications of a deficient early position. I agree with other critics that the later writings are deficient, but unlike them I see the deficiencies as contained in developments which merely accentuate problems which were basic to the early position. As a means of presenting this argument I shall concentrate on Warner's recent criticism of Parsons and his attempted redefinition of action theory

(1978). His argument is of particular importance in that he wishes to locate the problems of Parsons's approach within his action frame of reference.

Warner argues that the deficiencies of Parsons's approach derive from an over-emphasis on norms and a neglect of other factors. For him this involves a particular failure to recognise the importance of the cognitive element. He writes that Parsons 'systematically derogates a cognitive element in action, with the corollary that an action orientation comes to be by definition a matter of normative orientation' (1978: p. 1318). He cites Parsons's definition of action as 'effort to conform with norms' (Parsons, 1937: p. 76) as further evidence of this derogation of the cognitive element arguing that, as a consequence, he does not allow for the 'cognitive construction of ends' (1978: p. 1344). This interpretation of Parsons is common, but, as I shall show, it involves a misunderstanding of Parsons's theory.

In *TS of SA* Parsons offers the following definition of the normative:

the term normative will be used as applicable to an aspect, part or element of a system of action if, and only in so far as, it may be held to manifest or otherwise involve a sentiment attributable to one or more actors that something is an end in itself, regardless of its status as a means to any other end. (1937: p. 75)

Warner emphasises the last part of the definition (1978: p. 1321) and interprets it in terms of Weber's concept of *wert-rational* action (as action which 'always involves commands or "demands" which, in the actor's opinion, are binding on him. It is only in cases where human action is motivated by the fulfilment of such unconditional demands that it will be called value rational' (Weber 1968: p. 25). On this interpretation Parsons seems to commit a one-sided bias and a neglect of conditional factors as a consequence of taking Weber's definition of *one* form of action as the definition of action as such. However, Parsons is not seeking to give a definition of a *form* of action, but rather to give a definition of the normative as an 'aspect part or element of a system of action'. His argument that the normative refers to a 'sentiment attributable to one or more actors that something is an end in itself' involves an *abstraction* from the relationship amongst ends (and means), either of a single actor or of a plurality of actors. He does not consider this abstraction to represent a *form* or type of action. Thus, Parsons follows his definition of the normative with a statement of three types of relationship among ends; that is, with the different ways in which an end may be considered in 'its status as a

means to any other end.' These are '(1) for the members of a collectivity (2) for some portion of the members of a collectivity (3) the collectivity as a unit' (1937: p. 75). Parsons's concern with the processes of the integration of systems of social action would not be intelligible if his definition of the normative referred to Weber's 'unconditional demands'.

What, then, is the theoretical importance of this analytical definition of the normative? It will be recalled that Parsons argues in *TS of SA* that an adequate understanding of action is achieved when the significance of *agency* is fully recognised. That is, action must be understood as an end-oriented process where 'trends of development' in the situation of action 'differ in one or more important respects from that state of affairs to which the action is oriented, the end'. Action must involve *effort* since it *transforms* circumstances in the situation of action. Further, if action involves *effort* then there must be some *commitment* on the part of the actor to engage in action, some sense of the 'desirability' of the course of action to be undertaken. It is precisely this generalised attribute of 'desirability'—that action is motivated—which Parsons means to convey by his analytical definition of the normative. He writes that

the logical starting point for analysis of the role of normative elements in human action is the fact of experience that men not only respond to stimuli but in some sense try to conform their action to patterns which are, by the actor and other members of the collectivity, deemed desirable. (1937: p. 76)

At this stage in the analysis Parsons is not concerned to differentiate between different motives for acting and the relationships among them (though as we shall see this is a feature of his functional analysis of meaning and motive). His references to 'desirability' do not prejudice the issue of whether this consists in the direct relation of the action to a value held by the actor, or in the desire to avoid any sanctions which may operate in relation to the projected action.¹¹

As I shall show, there is a problem in Parsons's analysis but first I shall consider Warner's criticism. As I have argued, he claims that Parsons systematically derogates the 'cognitive element in action' and that he does not allow for a conception of the 'cognitive construction of ends'. However, Parsons offers the unambiguous definition of an end as 'a concrete anticipated future state of affairs' (1937: p. 49). It is difficult to see how this could be construed other than as involving the 'cognitive constructions of ends'. Warner further argues that Parsons views compliance as occurring only as a consequence of the actor

having a positive moral commitment to the course of action. In contrast, Warner argues, it is necessary to understand that actors may have a 'cognitive orientation toward norms' (1978: p. 1342); that is, that a normative claim may be met by an actor not as a consequence of moral commitment, but in the desire to avoid sanctions that might otherwise be invoked. He believes that 'the basic problematic of the voluntaristic theory of action ... stresses motivation to accept social control by normative considerations and neglects a potentially independent, empirically consequential, role for cognitive factors' (1978: p 1333).

In fact, Warner fails to address the basic assumptions of Parsons's theory. Much of the argument hinges on Parsons's meaning of normative orientation. Clearly, Warner interprets it as involving 'positive moral commitment'. However, as I have shown, Parsons refers normative orientation to a state of affairs (an end) deemed 'desirable' by the actor, *whether* because of the 'moral attractiveness' of the course of action *or* because of the desire to avoid sanctions. Indeed, he devotes considerable attention to the possibility of the 'cognitive' orientation to concrete norms, most particularly in his discussion of Durkheim's theory of social control (1937: pp. 376-408), but also in his discussion of Weber's typology of the modes of orientation of action (1937: pp. 649-58). He is quite explicit as to his conclusions writing that, it is necessary to distinguish between

the fact of orientation to a legitimate order and the motives for acting in relation to it. The two elements of interest and legitimacy are interwoven in a complex way. The fact that an order is legitimate in the eyes of a large proportion of the community makes it *ipso facto* an element of the *interessenslage* of any one individual, whether he himself holds it to be legitimate or not.

Supposing he does not, his action, to be rational, must be none the less oriented to this order. (Parsons 1937: p. 652)

Nor is this simply a feature of the early writings, since in later writings he elaborates a complex argument concerning the mechanisms of sanctions and their operation in a normative order (cf. Parsons 1967, Holmwood and Stewart forthcoming). Indeed it is difficult to see that Parsons could at one and the same time propose a theory of sanctions and neglect the fact that *empirically* conformity may consist merely in the desire to avoid sanctions!

Warner's problem of interpretation arises because he does not make clear the distinction between the 'normative' component of action and the concrete 'norms' of systems of social action. Within the unit act the

normative component is the attachment of the individual to the end—the future anticipated state of affairs which the individual aims to bring about as a consequence of the effort expended. Parsons is attempting a theory of action in practical circumstances and his statement of normative orientation is consistent with this aim. He emphasises that in the formulation of ends actors must calculate upon the conditions and facilities of their realisation. The 'norm of efficiency' is a criterion operating within the cognitive appraisal of the conditions (including sanctions embodied in the system of social action) and facilities of their realisation. However, although he recognises the importance of the cognitive element Parsons does not seek to set up an opposition between the *cognitive* and the *normative* (as two *forms* or types of action); that is, an opposition between the commitment of the actor and the practical circumstances of action.

Parsons also discusses norms in terms of the integration of systems of social action. Since all action is end-oriented stable systems of social action must involve the integration of ends. The concrete norms of systems of social action reflect the primary form of this integration (that a majority or significant minority of the members of a community are attached to the norm) but they also form an aspect of a secondary form of integration which occurs in behaviour to avoid sanctions. Parsons gives the following account of a concrete norm: 'a norm is a total description of the concrete course of action thus regarded as desirable, combined with an injunction to make certain future actions conform to this course' (1937: p. 75). The normative component of the unit act of a potential deviant is not the 'concrete norm' of the system to which his behaviour complies. His end, however, is not intelligible without knowledge of his understanding of the operation of sanctions and the desire to avoid them.

It is here that the deficiencies of Parsons's scheme are revealed. The theoretical integration of unit act analysis and that of systems of social action is not achieved and Parsons commits 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Positive moral commitments and cognitive orientation to norms as the possible source of sanctions are not at the same analytical level. According to Parsons, the system and its facilities for action are reproduced when ends are integrated. Positive moral commitment involves a correspondence between the normative component of action and the concrete norms of the system. Sanctions, as a secondary mode of enforcement of compliance, serve to maintain the integration of ends in circumstances where the normative component of action is not that of the concrete norms of the system. However, the motives of potential deviance which occasion the need

to mobilise sanctions (or the threat) are not located within the operation of the system. They are introduced by what obtains *empirically*, that a complete consensus does not exist, they are not theoretically located. It can be seen why Warner's criticism lacks force. He argues that Parsons fails to recognise the *empirical* significance of cognitive orientations to norms. Yet it is precisely their *empirical* significance that Parsons does recognise. The problem is that he is unable to provide an adequate *theoretical* account.

The consequence of this failure is the undermining of analytical realism as the methodology of Parsons's theoretical undertaking. His theoretical constructs are made to appear as *ideal typical* abstractions from a more complex set of empirical circumstances. Furthermore, the nature of the breakdown produces the appearance of a one-sided bias in a single ideal typical construct equivalent to Weber's category of *wertational* action which is made the central theoretical focus. Thus, by virtue of his failure to locate motives for potential deviance, Parsons must come to give positive moral commitment as the central meaning of the normative orientation of action. Indeed, in *The Social System* he admits both this *and* the ideal typical status of his theoretical constructs despite the criticism of ideal types advanced in *TS of SA*. He writes that

There is a range of possible modes of orientation in the motivational sense to a value-standard. Perhaps the most important distinction is between the attitude of expediency at one pole ... and at the other pole the 'introjection' or internalization of the standard. ... *The latter is to be treated as the basic type of integration of motivation with a normative pattern structure of values.* (1951: p. 37, emphasis added)

The conventional criticisms of Parsons point to real problems of his approach. However the process whereby these problems are produced are misidentified and are not viewed as a contradiction within the approach. Rather, they are presented as the consequence of a neglect of factors which are self-evident to the critics, but somehow overlooked by Parsons. On the criticism of Parsons outlined in this paper, however, it can be seen that there is a basic contradiction in his theory. This is not simply that of the failure to realise an initial theoretical intent, but that there is an internal contradiction within the constructs *even when presented as ideal types*. As an ideal type the basic type of the introjection of the value standard is a form of motivation which is the reproduction of the concrete norms of a system. However, this statement of the system lacks a practical content. The

other type, 'expediency', enables a statement of the practical content of a system (its mechanisms of sanction), but only by taking the reproduction of the concrete norms of the system as given—that is, external to the theoretical construct. This disjunction is basic to Parsons's conception of 'perfect integration' and its distinction from actual states of concrete action systems which figures so large in Parsons's later writings.¹² Parsons justifies the concept of 'perfect integration' as the analysis of the means by which *given* system disturbances are reconciled, but only at the cost of the methodological principles established in *TS of SA*. At the same time, as I have shown, this problem is intrinsic to the categories set out in *TS of SA*; that is, it is intrinsic to the action frame of reference.¹³

As I have shown in his discussion of Parsons's theory Warner fails to make clear the distinction between concrete norms as components of systems of social action and the normative component of the unit act. Nevertheless, the development of his own position contains these as implicit assumptions and, consequently, produces the same problems as Parsons's approach. He begins, like Parsons, with a statement of a unit act which, according to Warner, has the following elements:

an actor (who expends effort); the end (which is constituted in part by his normative orientation, in part by his cognitive orientation, and in part by exogenous elements); and a situation combined of (a) conditions, those aspects of the situation over which the actor experiences no sense of control (including, in some cases, norms), and (b) means, those aspects of the situation subject to the actor's manipulation;—all of this occurring within the framework of normative and cognitive structuring, which in varying ways partly determines the ends of action, sets constraints on the means of action, and structures a picture of the situation of action. (1978: pp. 1341-2)

The definition is rather confusing in places, partly because it elides Parsons's distinction between unit act analysis and analysis of a total action system. In the first place, it is not clear what Warner means by 'exogenous elements' in relation to the category of end. If by end is meant 'the future anticipated state of affairs' to be brought about by the agency (effort) of the actor then 'exogenous elements' *can* be given distinct meanings, but not such as to constitute a distinct category. One meaning is that of consequences brought about in the course of acting which were not anticipated. In this case it is difficult to attribute them to the category 'end' since they are not subjectively formulated, while if they are brought into the actor's knowledge then

they cannot be distinguished as a separate category from that of cognitive orientation. In this last instance they are brought into knowledge as conditions or means, that is, as aspects of the situation of action. They may be understood as 'exogenous' in the sense that they are features of the situation of action relevant to the realisation of a particular end in view, but not subject to control by the actor. However, now the difficulty is to see them as other than conditions.

Warner also argues that norms may be understood as conditional factors. Here he suggests a distinction within the category of conditions which Parsons analyses in terms of a shift between levels of analysis, from unit act analysis to that of systems of social action; that is, that some 'factors' may be external to any given actor, yet not external to action as such. Like Parsons, Warner suggests that this is so to the extent that any given actor must accommodate the ends (and the sanctions they imply) of other individuals. However, Warner does not pursue the implications of this distinction. He argues that what follows is an empirical point, writing that his revision of action theory

includes norms and normative orientation, but decouples them so that 'norms' are defined as behavioural prescriptions that are endowed by the social environment with an 'oughtness' and are enforceable by informal and formal sanctions, but where the extent to which that oughtness is experienced and affirmed by the actor is an empirical issue not to be decided *a priori*. (1978: p. 1341)

However, as we have seen in the case of Parsons, important theoretical issues *are* involved. For example, Warner's argument that norms may be oriented to as conditions, rather than affirmed, by actors *presupposes the prior existence of a normative order*. However, he does not discuss the circumstances in which a normative order can be reproduced and 'endowed' by the social environment with an 'oughtness'. Further, he refers to sanctions, yet he does not discuss their relationship to a normative order. What, for example, is the nature of sanctions and in what do they reside? The problem with Warner's argument is that as a statement of categories to be used in the description of social processes it adds none that are not already proposed by Parsons, yet does not attempt the systematic analysis of these categories which is the significance of Parsons's own theoretical undertaking.

Warner claims to have effected a synthesis of theories of action which 'incorporates all of the elements that Parsons's framework and his exegeses of Durkheim and Weber took to be operative' (1978: p. 1342), with the advantage of 'not prejudging empirical reality or the

theorists who have addressed that reality, for the r.t.a. explicitly rejects the notion that action can only be effort to conform to norms' (1978: p. 1342). However, his own analysis in no way transcends the contradiction internal to Parsons's approach, but is within that contradiction. Parsons's theory is, as I have shown, deficient as a theory of action in practical circumstances, but Warner, who concentrates on Parsons's alleged one-sided emphasis on the 'normative', does so by drawing upon a Weberian conception of different *forms* of action and thus reifies the separation between conditions and values which, in the initial statement of his position, Parsons considered to be problematic.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have argued that Parsons's critics have misunderstood his theory and the implications of its breakdown for sociology. They have tended to associate the deficiencies of the approach with an alleged shift from an action perspective to a functionalist perspective and the common response has been to assert the necessity of action assumptions (Scott is atypical in that he reverses the argument though it retains this form). However, I have argued that functionalism is an integral part of Parsons's action frame of reference from its earliest statement in *TS of SA*. Furthermore, Parsons's arguments in *TS of SA* which seek to show the deficiencies of existing approaches have to be taken seriously. They are the basis of Parsons's commitment to his action frame of reference as a necessary development.¹⁴ I have shown that many of Parsons's critics propose an 'alternative' to his approach just such undeveloped forms of action theory which are easily seen to be limited in terms of the arguments set out in *TS of SA*.¹⁵ Were they to develop their theories then they would confront the same problems as Parsons.

The criticisms of Parsons discussed in this paper lead to a sociological impasse. It is important to recognise, however, that *the form taken by this impasse serves to make the conventional criticisms of Parsons appear plausible*; that is, the breakdown of Parsons's theoretical system (and, indeed, of action theory in general) does take the form of unintegrated theoretical principles. In this sense, then, there are 'two sociologies', *but they are not distinct approaches*. The attempt to represent them as separate paradigms is an abstraction or reification. They are the form taken by the breakdown of a single theoretical system and, consequently, neither can be the basis of an adequate sociological approach. This theoretical system is that of the

action frame of reference. The deficiencies of Parsons's theoretical scheme are the characteristic deficiencies of the action frame of reference in sociology.¹⁶ As Parsons himself writes, 'the best place to go to find the starting point of the breakdown of a system, is to the work of the ablest proponents of the system itself' (1937: p. 18).

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Notes

1 This paper was written during collaborative work with Sandy Stewart on problems in contemporary sociological theory. It has benefited from his criticisms and I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness. I would also like to thank David Lockwood, David McCrone, Michael Mann, John Orr and Gianfranco Poggi for their helpful comments.

2 The adequacy of Parsons's interpretation of these other positions is not an issue in this paper. In any case, I do not believe that the deficiencies in interpretation recently argued by critics (Pope 1973, Cohen *et al.* 1975, Pope *et al.* 1975, Camic 1979) are such to undermine the insights that Parson's analysis affords. Indeed, much depends upon a direct comparison of Parson's theory and that of the writers he discusses in order to demonstrate that Parson is guilty of over-emphasis upon some aspect and neglect of some other aspect of a writer's argument. In the first place, their interpretation of Parson's theory is often suspect. In the second place, they disregard Parson's qualification that his interpretation is structured by his own theoretical concerns. Parson writes that his scheme

does not contain only elements common to all the previous traditions. Though every one of its major groups of elements had some place in at least one of the other traditions as something more than part of a residual category, this is not true of the system as a whole. . . . The completed structure is at some vital point incompatible with each of these older systems. (1937: p. 720)

In any case, it would still be the case that the burden of how the errors or omissions in Parson's interpretations can be overcome to provide a new and more adequate sociological approach rests upon these critics. This they have not attempted. Nor have they responded to Parson's charge that these other traditions involve significant theoretical contradictions.

3 Cf. Parson's comment that

it has been stated repeatedly that precisely in so far as the whole is organic its parts or units are not real entities, but abstractions. Hence their use requires a particularly high degree of caution to avoid the kind of reification which creeps in when these units are treated as constant real parts through complicated processes of change. The

result is to reduce the organic wholes to a 'mosaic' of unit parts. (1937: pp. 747-8)

- 4 It should be noted that Parsons's argument does reveal a crucial ambiguity. Immediately following the statement just cited he writes, 'But factual correctness is not the sole aim of science; it must be combined with thoroughgoing theoretical *understanding* of the facts known and correctly stated' (1937: p. 97, original emphasis). The particular reference to 'facts known' suggests that they may be 'known' independently of theories in a manner *other* than as the *particular* deficiencies of *particular* theories; that is, it suggests an independence of 'facts' and 'theory' which is against the thrust of his analytical realism. This prefigures the breakdown of his own theoretical system in that faced with the deficiencies of his scheme Parsons does come to reify analytical theory. This can be seen in his later argument that a theory of stability is prior to a theory of change (Parsons 1951). Such a distinction is a pragmatic one deriving from 'the present state of theory', *but* in recognition of the theory's specific deficiencies. However, rather than extend the theory to overcome these deficiencies Parsons argues that the theoretical framework may be maintained as an adequate statement of stable social processes. This goes against the argument given in *TS of SA* and indicates reification of the categories of the frame of reference. In another paper (Holmwood and Stewart, forthcoming), we have argued that the issues of stability and change cannot be so separated and, consequently, that Parsons's theory is deficient even as a theory of social stability. Indeed, Parsons's strategy betrays the analytical realism set out in *TS of SA* since, now, the model of social processes must take on some of the characteristics of an ideal type and be represented as a 'fiction', one-sided in relation to the 'facts' of any given situation.
- 5 Cf. Parsons's argument that,

in any concrete system of action a process of change so far as it is at all explicable in terms of those elements of action formulated in terms of the intrinsic means-end relationship can proceed only in the direction of approach towards the realisation of the rational norms conceived as binding on the actors in the system. That is, more briefly, such a process of action can only proceed in the direction of increase in the value of the property rationality. (1937: p. 751)

- 6 Martindale compares Parsons with Weber and writes that

Parsons's conclusions are in all essentials identical with Weber's. These are (1) the act is the smallest unit of sociological analysis; (2) actions appear in systems—hence system is the second structural concept; (3) systems may produce emergent properties which are not completely analyseable into the individual acts; (4) systems of social action may, for convenience be treated as structures, aggregates of persons; however (5) structures have only a fictitious reality; in principle every structure is analyseable into unit acts, though this is slow and inefficient. (1971: pp. 168-9)

The confusions in Martindale's argument (in particular, between propositions 3 and 5) are apparent.

- 7 In fact, the situation is the opposite to that set out by Bershady. Parsons's theory has continuity in terms of its basic categories and problems, but Parsons's response to these problems involves the attempt to justify the categories despite their deficiencies. This leads him to modify his methodological arguments in breach of the analytical realism of *TS of SA* and the epistemological project is, therefore, discontinuous. See Note 4 above. The point is further discussed in the next section of the paper.
- 8 In fact, Skjervheim has argued that Tolman's reformulation of behaviourism in terms of the concept of 'purposive behaviour' incorporates the very subjective categories ostensibly denied by naturalism (1974: pp. 286-300).
- 9 They add that 'by 1949 Parsons began to emphasise that the concepts deriving the unit act need to recognise "the complications introduced by the interaction of a plurality of actors"' (Turner and Beeghley 1978: p. 49). As I have argued, this emphasis is basic to *TS of SA*. It can be noted here that van Zyl Slabbert in an article on Parsons entitled 'Functional methodology in the theory of action' (1976) makes the same argument; the theory of action in *TS of SA* is held to be one of unit act analysis and it is later modified to take into account 'the complications introduced by the interactions of a plurality of actors'. The source of each argument is Parsons's essay on the 'The present position and prospects of a systematic theory in sociology' (1949 p. 229). However, Parsons does not represent *TS of SA* as failing to consider such 'complications', but rather as summarising his earlier argument.
- 10 Arguments similar to those dealt with in this section of the paper are also produced by the 'theory of discourses'; for example, as in Savage's *The Theories of Talcott Parsons* (1981). His discussion of *TS of SA* draws heavily upon Bershady and Scott. He treats Parsons's epistemological arguments as a distinct discourse and, like Bershady, he sees no discontinuity in Parsons's arguments. As in Bershady, the discussion of the role of the concept of 'system' in Parsons's early work is confined to an epistemological discussion of what Parsons means by a system of theory. Savage does not discuss Parsons's detailed arguments concerning unit acts and their location within systems of social action. Like Scott, he characterises *TS of SA* as a 'sophisticated yet arbitrary idealism' (1981: p. 96) arguing that Parsons conceives action as 'a relation between two spheres, the normative and the conditional, or more generally... the ideational and the natural' (1981: p. 96). In fact, as I go on to argue in the next section of the paper, the 'normative' and 'conditional' cannot be distinguished in this way since they are differently specified in their relation to unit acts and systems of social action (see also p. 315 above). In these respects, Savage's views are precisely those of conventional criticism. I deal in detail with the interpretive problems intrinsic to the 'theory of discourses' in a review article, 'Talcott Parsons and the development of his system' (forthcoming).
- 11 The fact that Parsons seeks to give an analytical definition of the normative which is closely connected with the idea of agency helps to explain the otherwise rather strange term, the 'norm of efficiency'. This refers to the intrinsic rationality of action and is considered to be normative by Parsons as a consequence of the fact that its realisation is

contingent (that is, it is possible for an actor to err). The confusion that is generated by the failure to recognise Parsons's particular definition of the normative is well seen in Parsons's reply (1975) to Cohen *et al.*'s attempt to de-Parsonise Weber (1975). Here he shows his bewilderment at their claim that there is no normative component in Weber's concept of *zweckrationalität*. On Parsons's definitions there is a normative component. On definitions of the normative which derive directly from Weber's *wertrationalität* there is not. The confusion arises in the failure of Parsons's critics to understand his definition of the normative and how it is used in the attempt to dissolve Weber's distinction between *zweckrationalität* and *wertrationalität*.

- 12 In *The Social System* Parsons writes of the separation of 'structure' and 'process' which is necessitated by the 'present state of theory',

we simply are not in a position to 'catch' the uniformities of dynamic process in the social system except here and there. But in order to give those we can catch a setting and so be in the most advantageous position to extend our dynamic knowledge we must have a 'picture' of the system within which they fit. The system of structural categories is the conceptual scheme which gives this setting for dynamic analysis. As dynamic knowledge is extended the independent explanatory significance of structural categories evaporates (1951: p. 21).

The point is that they did not 'evaporate' and all Parsons's efforts went into maintaining them.

- 13 Indeed, the failure to integrate the account of conditions and values is present within *TS of SA*. It underlies the separation of culture as atemporal objective meaning complex from meaning in the process of interaction and it intrudes into the statement of the unit act. As I have argued, Parsons understands 'ends' as formulated in practical circumstances which are the specific conditions and facilities of action. However, he also argues that the various ends of an individual are subject to hierarchical order governed by an ultimate value. This can only be so in terms of an abstraction from the practical circumstances of each specific action. 'Ultimate value standards' are given a different analytical status to that of conditions. The contradiction is masked by the division within the category of conditions by which means they are *either* assimilated to the order of ultimate value standards (as the products of action) *or* given as uniform or indifferent in their relation to action (as ultimate conditions).
- 14 Basically, Parsons's argument is that any theory of action which uses means-end categories must confront the issue of how the facilities which are mobilised to constitute the means in the pursuit of ends are produced and reproduced within systems of social action. His own action frame of reference seeks to answer this question and, in that sense, is indeed a *necessary* development within a theory of action.
- 15 Scott might appear to be the exception in that he proposes a 'behaviourist' approach. However, according to Parsons's analysis, a behaviourist theory is a demonstrably deficient and unstable theory of action. This analysis receives support from Skjervheim (see Note 8 above).
- 16 For a more extensive discussion of this see Holmwood and Stewart forthcoming.

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