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Talcott Parsons and the Development of His System

Talcott Parsons and the Conceptual Dilemma by Hans P. M. Adriaansens; The Sociology of Talcott Parsons by François Bourricaud; The Theories of Talcott Parsons: The Social Relations of Action by Stephen P. Savage

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John Holmwood

Talcott Parsons and the development of his system

I

The most significant feature of recent writings on Talcott Parsons is the degree of sympathy for his theoretical undertaking that they reveal. Two of the books under consideration here clearly illustrate this. Adriaansens's *Talcott Parsons and the Conceptual Dilemma* is an account of different phases of Parsons's theoretical development. According to Adriaansens, the nature of these phases and the relationship between them has been misunderstood and, as a consequence, Parsons's theory has been misrepresented. He argues that the conventional criticisms of Parsons apply to a position that was subsequently modified and its problems overcome.

Adriaansens' book is for those with specialized interests in Parsonsian sociology. Bourricaud's *The Sociology of Talcott Parsons* is at a different level and is intended for a wider audience. It is primarily an exegesis, also organized in terms of phases of Parsons's theoretical development, but dealing with issues of central concern such as power, social change, and the concept of industrial society. It is certainly a valuable addition to the secondary literature and readers will find in it a useful account of Parsons's sociology which clarifies and illuminates arguments which are often opaque in the original. The selection of topics is, perhaps, more limited than is found elsewhere, but its treatment of particular topics is detailed and accessible. In short, it is one of the best of the available secondary accounts. However, it lacks the critical 'edge' which Adriaansens brings to bear upon Parsons's sociology. Indeed, the tone of the book is rather like that of Parsons's own commentaries on his work.

Both Adriaansens and Bourricaud attest to the power and relevance of Parsons's theoretical enterprise. The other book dealt with in this review is Savage's *The Theories of Talcott Parsons* and it seems to belong to a different more hostile response. He claims that Parsons's theories are contradictory and fundamentally incoherent. However, along with Adriaansens and Bourricaud, he believes the conventional

criticisms of Parsons to be misplaced and that Parsons's approach has an exemplary rigour (especially when compared to the approaches of his critics). In fact, approximately one third of Savage's book is devoted to discussions of Parsons's critics. Each of the books, then, raises the question of the relation between Parsons and his critics and suggests new interpretations of his approach and its relevance to modern sociology.

II

Savage is a proponent of the 'theory of discourse' and begins with an account of different approaches to criticism and interpretation. According to him, theoretical systems are 'discourses'; that is, there exists a plurality of perspectives with different objects. The task of interpretation is that of discovering the distinctive categories and problems of a specific theoretical system of discourse. He distinguishes between *internal* and *external* modes of critique. The latter are vitiated by a common flaw; the criticisms they produce are the incommensurate perspective of another discourse and involve merely, '*the counter-position of one discourse to another, the infinite opposition of discourses which are non-equivalent*'.¹ In contrast, Savage holds that an adequate, 'internal', mode of critique requires that 'the problem of reading and of critique be restricted to [the] strictly *internal* level, that no reference be made to the determination of discourse or the determination of a critique of discourse by a realm which is external to it'.²

According to Savage, the general characteristic of extra-discursive critiques is that they deal with theoretical *processes*. He writes that their 'one general feature . . . is the conflation of two orders; the logical nature of the discourse in question on the one hand, and the process of production of that discourse on the other'.³ Central to his approach, then, is the conception of theoretical systems in *abstraction from theoretical processes*.⁴ Savage argues that the logical (that is, 'internal') analysis of theoretical categories can proceed independently of the analysis of the production of those categories. He believes that such 'abstracted' discourses can be coherently analysed, but, as I shall show, his own account is far from coherent.

Three 'extra-discursive' modes of critique are distinguished by Savage: the 'sociology of sociology', 'epistemological guarantee', and the 'realist mode'. The criticisms of two of them are common enough. Against the 'sociology of sociology' he argues that it involves an infinite regress. 'Epistemological guarantee' involves the evaluation of discourse in terms of general epistemological criteria and the basic point here is that this depends upon a concept

of 'knowledge-in-general' while what exists are *specific* knowledges. This last argument is also found in other criticisms of positivism which have denied prescriptive methodologies of science.⁵ However, the fact that there is no 'knowledge-in-general' does not mean that different theoretical schemes have to be understood as discrete and unmediated. Nor does it mean that there are no epistemological issues in the evaluation of theories.

The third 'extra-discursive' mode of critique, that of the 'realist' mode, Savage associates with conflict theory. According to Savage, this involves the evaluation of discourse by reference to its correspondence or non-correspondence with the 'real' world. This 'real' world is, in fact, the product of a different discourse and all that the critique involves is the identification of what is absent from one discourse in terms of the perspective of another. Ultimately, all this can hope to achieve is 'more or less rigorous forms of a *grid-reading*, the simple counter-position of *one discourse to another* and the tabulation of relevant presences and absences between them'.⁶ This view of a 'grid-reading' is also applied to Parsons's approach in *The Structure of Social Action*, in particular the convergence thesis. Such 'grid-readings' are both arbitrary and dogmatic – 'there is, of course, no limit to what has not been said'⁷ and, 'there are as many critiques as there are grids to constitute them'.⁸

A first indication of the confusions in Savage's approach can be seen in his treatment of Lockwood. The latter is held to exemplify the problems of a 'grid-reading' and is charged with criticising Parsons in relation to objects *absent* from his discourse – social change, conflict, and deviance.⁹ Elsewhere in his book Savage argues that Parsons does indeed deal with conflict and social change and, further, that these are 'systematically induced, inherent in the relations between the systems themselves'.¹⁰ Apparently, they are *present* rather than *absent* and Lockwood's criticism is merely misinformed. However, a few pages later Savage refers to the 'major theoretical role structural-functionalism takes vis-à-vis a theory of change. It relates above all to an analysis of the *impact* of forces of change rather than to the sources of change themselves'.¹¹ Now change and conflict are no longer seen to be 'systematically induced'. Moreover, this is precisely Lockwood's argument as to the limitations of structural-functional theory and it cannot be maintained that to raise the issue of the sources of change is arbitrary in relation to a theory which takes them as 'given' in order to analyse their impact.

The problems in Savage's argument are directly related to his rigid distinction between what is internal and what is external, between the logical analysis of discourse and the production of discourse. Theoretical problems are such precisely because they are internal to a theoretical system (that is, they are generated by

it), but lack consistent or adequate specification in terms of its categories. They *appear* as external. Savage characterizes Parsons's convergence thesis as a 'grid-reading' yet the problems with which Parsons deals are far from being arbitrary; as we shall see below, they are *specific* and *located* in the theories which he subjects to criticism and transformation (as, indeed, is the case with Lockwood's criticisms of Parsons). In fact, it is Savage's argument which is arbitrary in its sterile separation of criticism and the practice of sociology. He admits that, 'there would appear to be no reason why some form of theorisation of the process of production of concepts cannot be established'¹² yet, in the *absence* of such a 'theorisation' he claims that 'in so far as such a referent is combined with an attempt to direct a theoretical *critique* of discourse (concerning its validity, coherence, or whatever) then a number of problems will of necessity emerge'.¹³ The problems appear severe – 'the discourse itself is left, as it were, untouched, and *its* concepts left essentially uncriticised'¹⁴ – but, as the discussion of Lockwood shows, they do not seem to follow.

Further problems are discovered in Savage's discussion of forms of internal critique which he wishes to distinguish from his own. These critiques involve the identification of 'presuppositions' and analysis of discourse proceeds in terms of the extent to which the presuppositions are adequately realised in the discourse in question. Such critiques are concerned to establish the 'unity' of a discourse understood as an 'expressive totality'.¹⁵ Savage comments that these 'often systematically attempt to avoid the dogmatism of the external types of critique' and 'it is thus not surprising that it is under this general category that one should find the most rigorous and extensive criticisms of Parsons'.¹⁶ However, on Savage's arguments it is difficult, in fact, to distinguish such internal critiques from the external critiques which he argues can, in principle, constitute no criticism. This is seen when he discusses the problems of these internal critiques: *either*, presuppositions are conceived as outside rational determination, that is, they are 'given' in a 'doctrine' and the consequence is relativism (i.e. the problem attributed to the 'sociology of sociology');¹⁷ *or*, the realisation of discourse is viewed as governed by the consciousness of the author as Subject (again, as in the 'sociology of sociology');¹⁸ *or*, the presuppositions are those of epistemological protocols (on Savage's arguments, the problem of 'epistemological guarantee').¹⁹

According to Savage, these internal critiques have a generic problem – discourse is conceived as coherent and continuous. He comments that, 'the immediate tendency of such readings is generally to assume (not surprisingly) no significant metamorphoses in the development of Parsons's work'.²⁰ However, if contradiction or theoretical incoherence is admitted, according to Savage there

could be no coherent account of the operation of the different presuppositions that it must reflect. He writes, 'on the one hand, given the notion of the effectivity of presuppositions in discourse (whether doctrinal, methodological or epistemological) it is impossible to theorize incoherency or contradiction in any consistent fashion; on the other hand, once the existence of more than one presupposition is claimed, then mechanisms distinct from them must be invoked to account for their differential determination'.²¹ Savage argues that it is necessary to deal with theoretical metamorphosis. Discourse must be understood as involving distinct phases with discontinuous categories and objects.

Savage's attempt to account for different phases of discourse contains precisely the failure attributed to the other internal critiques. *Either*, these phases must be treated as discrete and the problem is how to distinguish between *different discourses* and *different phases* of a discourse; that is, there is no coherent argument as to why the phases are judged to be *within* a discourse (reference to the author as Subject is, of course, precluded!). *Or*, there are categories which are continuous as well as categories which are discontinuous. Now the problem is that categories appear as 'presuppositions', but there are others (discontinuous ones) with different effects which cannot be located in terms of the continuous categories. The distinctiveness of the phases is asserted and it is claimed that they cannot be reduced to a common set of problems despite the generality of certain of their concepts. As with other forms of internal critique an unlocated mechanism 'must be invoked to account for their differential determination'!

The argument for the *essential* continuity of Parsons's discourse is clearly stated. Savage writes, 'while it is certainly true to argue that the substance of the general theory of action has been subject to a number of major transformations, this does not preclude the isolation of *certain essential concepts which may be considered general throughout Parsons's elaborations*'.²² These concepts are those of a 'rationalist conception of action' and according to Savage they are fundamentally incoherent. This is the standard refrain of the theory of discourse²³ and I shall deal with it shortly. What can be noted about Savage's argument, however, is that it is simply the mirror-image of the other internal critiques in that discourse is viewed as *essentially incoherent* rather than *essentially coherent*.

The problems that this produces are seen in Savage's attempts to distinguish the continuous and discontinuous components of the phases of Parsons's theoretical development. When he discusses the early formulation of the theory he argues for its distinctiveness vis-à-vis 'subjectivist' conceptions of action (whether phenomenological or Weberian), but he is not consistent in this argument. He also distinguishes it from Parsons's later 'systems' theory and argues

against any attempt to reduce the categories of the latter to those of the earlier formulation on the grounds that to do so would deny the specificity of the 'systems' concept and, thus, entail a phenomenology.²⁴ When he discusses the different conceptions of economic process contained in *The Structure of Social Action and Economy and Society*, he characterizes the structural-functional arguments of the latter as 'distinct from the mode in which "action theory" proper (i.e. Weber's sociology) has conceived this relation'.²⁵ He also argues that *The Structure of Social Action* 'remains, on the whole, little removed from Weber's formulation. There is, however, one major distinctive referent, albeit a rather formalist one: this concerns the epistemological concept of emergent properties'.²⁶

When these different arguments are disaggregated it can be seen that they involve nothing more than the standard accounts of Parsons's theory which Savage has claimed are deficient. The continuity of Parsons's theory is viewed in relation to a continuous and essential epistemological project, but there are within this project distinct phases utilizing different substantive concepts. For example, Savage writes that *The Structure of Social Action* 'fails to elaborate any concept of social system or a specific mode of organization of action elements. The nearest that Parsons gets at this stage is to provide the epistemological concept of "emergent properties", but these only designate *types* of action, "historical individuals" (e.g. economic rationality) and not organisations of action'.²⁷ Elsewhere, I have criticized such conceptions in some detail.²⁸ Here, it is sufficient to note the similarity of Savage's argument and that of Bershady or Martindale.²⁹ Implicit is the view that in the early formulation the 'break' with the 'sociology of action proper' has yet to be carried through in terms of substantive concepts.

When the arguments of Savage are related to others from within the perspective of the theory of discourse yet more problems are revealed. Elsewhere, its proponents argue that a rationalist conception of action is intrinsic to structural-functionalism *and* the 'sociology of action proper'.³⁰ Furthermore, it is claimed that there are epistemological assumptions common to each — those of 'rationalism'. If this is so, then the concept of emergent properties differentiates the approaches, but is unlocated. In so far as this problem is addressed it is by Hindess, but he differentiates the positions by reference to a 'doctrine' which governs discourse — 'humanism' or 'theoretical anti-humanism'.³¹ So much for the rigour of the theory of discourse and its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other modes of critique!

I now want to consider the rationalist conception of action as applied to Parsons's approach. According to Savage, this conception of action involves a distinction between two spheres, 'on the one

hand a level of “culture” (values, meanings, ideas, rules, etc.), and on the other a level of what may be generally referred to as “nature”, a non-ideational realm which can incorporate anything from biological organisms to social systems’.³² This conception entails a ‘fundamental distinction between the ideational realm and the sphere in which that realm is realised’.³³ Accordingly, action is ‘defined by a specific *relation* between the two spheres’.³⁴ For Savage, the problem is that this relation cannot be determinately conceived and Parsons’s position has, in consequence, two tendencies, either the ‘eclecticism’ of a multi-factor theory, or a ‘sophisticated yet arbitrary idealism’.³⁵ In fact, this criticism of Parsons has a prior provenance. It is taken almost directly from Finley Scott’s behaviourist critique of the foundations of the Parsonsian action schema. For example, Scott argues that for Parsons, ‘action participates in two metaphysical realms; that of ideas and values for its formation, and that of material fact for its realization, it gives metaphysical dualism as the foundation for sociology as a science’,³⁶ and, further, that ‘there are two realms of being: the world of material fact; and the world of ideas from which comes value. Material facts relate to values as conditions of their realization, but there is an aspect of valuation which is distinct from the world of fact and is not reducible to it.’³⁷ The rationalist conception of action, then, is not original as a criticism of Parsons’s approach, but is it adequate?

One consequence of Savage’s concept of grid-reading is that he does not discuss Parsons’s analysis of the sociological problems he was trying to resolve. In fact, in *The Structure of Social Action* dualism is one of the problems, *not* a solution, and Parsons discusses it in terms of the theoretical failures and residual categories found in apparently distinct approaches. It is worth outlining Parsons’s views on theoretical development since they show the superficial nature of Savage’s criticism and the serious consequences that follow from the attempt to analyse ‘discourse’ in abstraction from theoretical processes.

In *The Structure of Social Action* Parsons identifies two theoretical processes – the expansion of residual categories and the positive reconstruction of theory. Basic to Parsons’s argument is his conception of facts as *internal* to theory. He writes that, ‘a theoretical system must involve the positive definition of certain empirically identifiable variables or other general categories.’³⁸ By positive definition Parsons means that they are specified *within* a theoretical system. However, there are also categories which are negatively defined; that is, ‘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.’³⁹ These categories are not, however, unimportant. Residual categories are an indication of the problems of a theoretical system – they reflect

'facts' external to theory, but 'known' by virtue of its deficiencies.⁴⁰ They will be specified by *ceteris paribus* clauses since they are not internal to the system of theoretical categories to which they relate. According to Parsons, the role of residual categories 'may be deduced from the inherent necessity of a system to become logically closed' in that, '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.'⁴¹ Finally, development involves the transformation of categories (including those positively defined in the previous statements of theory) and the extension of explanations. Parsons writes,

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. But this should be said: the original empirical insights associated with the positive categories of the system will be restated in different form, but unless they entirely fail to stand up to the combined criticism of theory and renewed empirical verification, they will *not* be eliminated.⁴²

Parsons discusses positivism and idealism and finds residual categories in each which are indicative of the breakdown of their respective systems. However, since Parsons argues that a positive definition of residual categories requires the *reconstruction* or transformation of theoretical categories, rather than the combination of what is positively defined in each of the previous systems (that is, eclecticism) it is difficult to see that the rationalist conception of action could be an adequate statement of Parsons' concerns. Indeed, although he attributes such a conception to all phases of Parsons' theory most of Savage's arguments are set out in relation to the later phases. He connects the early formulation to these later positions by the claim that in *The Structure of Social Action* Parsons accepts dualism and a 'basic indeterminacy of values' as necessary to the sociological undertaking. According to Savage, this dualism

may be referred to as one sphere which is susceptible to scientific explanation and another which is itself beyond scientific investigation *in so far as it does not operate according to determinate laws* . . . it is an opposition which Parsons expresses as the distinction between the "empirical" and "non-empirical" worlds or between "factual" and "normative" orders.⁴³

This is a basic misunderstanding of Parsons's argument. Savage takes it from Parsons's discussion of the breakdown of the positivist system in Pareto. What Savage attributes to Parsons as a statement of

his position is, in fact, Parsons's account of the relation between a theoretical system (where categories *positively* identified *within* it are part of a *determinate* system) and the residual categories which it generates (which are *outside* the determinate system). Since Parsons is explicitly concerned with the *positive* reconstruction of theory he cannot be arguing that entities relevant to the action frame of reference do not operate (in their relation to action) as part of a determinate system. Indeed, Parsons's references to 'factual' and 'normative' orders makes the opposite point to that attributed to him by Savage. Parsons writes that 'a social order is always a factual order in so far as it is susceptible of scientific analysis',⁴⁴ and he goes on to argue (against positivism) the necessity of conceiving of social order in terms of the 'effective functioning of normative elements'.⁴⁵ He is not arguing that a normative order is not a factual order.

Savage abstracts Parsons's theory from theoretical processes and claims its *essential* incoherence. In so far as Parsons' later arguments involve a collapse into positions which he had previously criticized the theory of discourse is unable to identify the source of the breakdown. Moreover, the application of the approach in the interpretation of Parsons's theory involves procedures which in other interpretations Savage claims are deficient. Nor surprisingly, the substantive content of Savage's critique is unoriginal. It is to the issue of theoretical breakdown in the Parsonsian system that I now turn.

III

The deficiencies in Savage's interpretation of Parsons's theory indicate the need to discuss theoretical processes in the evaluation of theoretical systems. Although Adriaansens is concerned to rebut the arguments of Parsons's critics he is aware of problems in the approach and he accounts for the development of the theory in terms of these problems and their attempted resolution. In contrast to Savage he summarizes his approach thus,

we have laid particular emphasis on the continuity in its epistemological and methodological premises which, for half a century, have formed the constant element in Parsons' work on the action theory. Certainly there is discontinuity on the conceptual level but *it should be interpreted in the light of the premises and not as a thing apart*.⁴⁶

I shall argue that Adriaansens's thesis is unsuccessful, but it is the merit of the book that it illuminates theoretical processes in Parsons's sociology.

Adriaansens distinguishes three crucial phases in Parsons's theory: first, the early formulation of the action frame of reference; second, the structural-functional analysis of systems of action; third, the specification of functional imperatives. He believes that the problems of Parsons's approach occur in the middle phase with the position formulated in *The Social System*. These problems concern a disjunction in the theory between the analysis of processes of the system and the analysis of the orientations of actors. The nature of this disjunction is easily set out. According to Parsons, the processes of a total action system may be interpreted in terms of a theoretical assumption of 'perfect integration'. There are two primary modes of the orientation of action; the internalization of a value-standard and expediency. However, only the former is located in terms of *theoretically specified* (positively defined) processes of the system. This is illustrated in Parsons's comment 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 internalisation of the standard . . . *the latter is to be treated as the basic type of motivation with a normative pattern structure of values.*⁴⁷

Expediency, then, is a residual category in the sense that it is negatively defined, related to theoretical processes of the system in terms of concrete (theoretically unlocated or 'given') motives of deviance.

There is an implicit recognition on Parsons's part of the limitations of his position. For example, he distinguishes between 'structure' and 'process' and refers to the abstract or 'structural' character of his theoretical constructs. He claims that this is contingent upon the 'present state of theory', and writes that, 'the system of structural categories is the conceptual scheme which gives . . . the setting for dynamic analysis. As dynamic knowledge is extended the *independent* explanatory significance of structural categories evaporates'.⁴⁸ Adriaansens emphasizes that dynamic knowledge is the aim of science and that consequently Parsons's scheme at this point is flawed and his theoretical constructs must be represented as 'ideal types'. Moreover, the division of 'structure' and 'process' is a direct reflection of the division between the 'systems' component and the 'orientations' component of the theory. Adriaansens notes that

Parsons's structural-functional theory is not complete until the apparatus is there for dealing with motivational processes as such. As soon as the structural apparatus is there a start can be made on the analysis of motivational processes. After all, it is this analysis

of motivational processes with which Parsons is concerned; this is what will provide the dynamic knowledge he seeks.⁴⁹

However, the two forms of analysis are brought together only in the assumption of 'equilibrium' or 'perfect integration' which does not contain an adequate theoretical specification of motivation.

In *The Social System* Parsons claims that 'perfect integration' is a theoretical assumption and is not descriptive of concrete societies. Adriaansens argues that this theoretical assumption may be utilized in order to analyse the mechanisms by which systems accommodate 'disturbances'.⁵⁰ However, this involves another problem in the scheme which Adriaansens does not identify. There is a disjunction between the theoretically specified processes and the empirical circumstances to which these processes are intended to apply. This appears in Parsons' writings as an issue of the relation between a system and its 'environment'. In part, this is obscured by the fact that there is also a conception of 'environment' as *intrinsic* to the theory in the sense that a total action system is composed of different levels of systems and that each level operates as an environment for the others. However, there is a 'negatively' defined environment which contains the wider circumstances of ('concrete') societies to which the concept of a perfectly integrated total action system (and its component levels of system) is applied.⁵¹

These problems come to crystallize around the issue of the pattern-variables. As Adriaansens points out, the consequence of the disjunction between processes of the system and orientations of actors is that the pattern-variables are not generated by the theoretical propositions contained in *The Social System*. On the one hand, pattern-variables are specified in terms of the orientations of actors. On the other hand, they must be located in the system. However, these two reference points are not part of a coherent theoretical system. According to Adriaansens this is a problem from Parsons' perspective too, since the lack of integration of the components of the theory contradicts the logical requirement of closure which Parsons had set out in *The Structure of Social Action*. In consequence, writes Adriaansens, 'at this stage of his development Parsons does not seem to be very clear about the criteria on which to base the differentiation in the action system. The confusion . . . shows the lack of uniformity in the different criteria used.'⁵²

Adriaansens believes that Parsons overcame these problems in the specification of the functional imperatives where he did 'discover the criteria which made it possible to differentiate the action system in a systematic manner'.⁵³ In dealing with these theoretical adjustments he does illuminate an aspect of Parsons's theoretical development — the 'history' of the pattern-variables — which is usually seen in terms of arbitrary shifts in definition. In this respect Adriaansens'

treatment may be contrasted to Savage's treatment of the same issue. Savage deals with pattern-variables in terms of discrete and discontinuous aspects of Parsons's theory. They are viewed as part of an early phase which dealt with the 'actor-situation' relation (that is, modes of orientation) while functional imperatives are seen to belong to a phase dealing with the 'system-environment' relation. The problem which Adriaansens addresses disappears under Savage's treatment since, for him, the problem is not the relation between the phases but the attempt to see them as related!⁵⁴ He writes that, 'the basic structure of the functional prerequisites cannot possibly be generalised from the pattern-variables . . . *the actor-situation relation cannot be equated with the system-environment relation.*'⁵⁵ However, as the discussion of Adriaansens shows the true situation is the reverse of this: an apparent disjunction is produced in the insufficiency of the 'system-environment' relation. The very concept of system which Savage is so concerned to maintain (against a supposed collapse into phenomenology) is one that depends upon a negatively defined concept of environment. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile Savage's argument with the fact that Parsons *does* specify functional imperatives in terms of pattern-variables and that he *does* argue that they have a necessary reference to the orientations of actors.

It is not necessary to deal in detail with Adriaansens's argument to see that his thesis cannot be sustained. Parsons's failure to resolve the limitations of the approach in the specification of functional imperatives is quite easily seen. The *five* pattern variables are translated into *four* functional imperatives by the argument that the 'self-interest/collectivity' pair does not constitute a variable (in terms of the orientations of actors) or a differentiated phase of a theoretically specified system.⁵⁷ However, it is precisely this pattern-variable which reflects the 'expediency/internalisation' poles of *The Social System*. Moreover, the argument is a logical extension of that set out in *The Social System*. According to Parsons, the 'self-interest/collectivity' pattern-variable does not constitute a variable or a differentiated phase or sub-system because the 'collectivity' referent is *intrinsic* to a total action system *considered as a perfectly integrated system*. The problems of the middle phase are contained not solved in the later development since they are entailed by the assumption of perfect integration which is common. Thus, there is no substance to Adriaansens's claim that

the new version of the action theory fulfils the pretension expressed by Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* of overcoming the dilemma of individualism-collectivism not only on the level of methodological thought patterns but also on that of conceptual systemization.⁵⁹

IV

Unlike Adriaansens, Bourricaud is not concerned with problems of theoretical specification and development. His book is accurate in its depiction of Parsons's arguments, but it treats the development of the theory as a direct extension of the early position and does not get 'inside' the theoretical processes of the development to any extent. None the less, the failure of Parsonsian theory finds unconscious confirmation in arguments made by Bourricaud. He begins his study with a brief account of the epistemological arguments set out in *The Structure of Social Action* and he notes, in particular, Parsons's concern with 'logical closure' and the 'determinate structure of theory'.⁶⁰ On the other hand, he also recognizes the abstracted character of Parsons's theory and the division of 'structure' and 'process' that is produced in *The Social System*. However, in an argument reminiscent of that made by Savage, he argues for the *necessity* of this distinction. In this respect he draws the opposite conclusion to Parsons (and Adriaansens) concerning the 'evaporation' of 'structural' categories as dynamic knowledge is extended (and thus indicates the continuity of the problem in Parsons's theory). Bourricaud argues that, 'at bottom, the very concept of a system of action is at stake when the term process is substituted for the term structure.'⁶¹

In maintaining this argument Bourricaud demonstrates how it rests upon an environment exogenous to the theory. He writes

a closed system surrounded by impermeable boundaries may legitimately be treated as a structure, that is, a stable set of relations among the elements of a self-subsistent entity. If, however, the system is open to one or more environments, which may themselves be subject to exogenous changes, then its structure can no longer be studied independently of the processes that impinge upon it, that is, independently of the transactions that take place between the system and its environments.⁶²

The problems of this argument are the same as those discussed in the previous section. Theoretically specified processes ('structure') do not apply directly to the circumstances of concrete societies, but the theory is justified as the means of analysing 'given' (that is, untheorized) disturbances and how they are accommodated. However, the theory is not now a 'determinate structure' since it does not determine the circumstances of its application.

Parsons utilizes a cybernetic hierarchy to express this separation of theory from concrete circumstances. 'Perfect integration' is an abstract statement, a 'theoretical assumption'. It is specified in terms of cultural values and internalized need dispositions. However, there are 'realistic' exigencies which are *external* to theoretically specified

processes. The 'concrete', then, is composed of theoretically specified processes and un-theorized 'facts'. The 'concrete' is not theoretically determined, but while it is recognized that 'perfect integration' does not apply directly to concrete circumstances it is claimed that it somehow contains their essential statement; that is, it is more important than 'lower level' exigencies in explanations of social processes.

Confronted by this cybernetic hierarchy Bourricaud is uneasy. He writes that, 'the hierarchical metaphor is as little apt to explain the relations between the functions as is the Marxist theory that the superstructure reflects the material reality'.⁶³ However, his response is merely to accept the basic categories of Parsons's theory and to deny the possibility of *determinate* relations among them. In this respect it resembles Merton's argument that the postulates of functionalism are to be understood as 'orienting' devices, to be treated as empirically variable. The problem with such responses is that they *accept* the problems which require to be solved and seek to justify this by the argument that these limitations are inescapable. For example, Bourricaud argues that the concept of 'perfect integration' is intrinsic to a sociology of action and thus necessary to the interpretation of social processes; 'social facts can be explained only in terms of the actors and their attempts to achieve mutual compatibility'.⁶⁴ However, 'theoretical indeterminacy' is also intrinsic to a sociology of action and reflects the 'importance of the unanticipated consequences of our acts and intentions'.⁶⁵ Set out in this way, sociology could not aspire to logical closure of its theoretical system and Bourricaud has 'rescued' Parsons theoretical categories at the cost of his theoretical project.

V

An enduring feature of discussions of Parsons's theoretical development is the concern with continuities and discontinuities. Despite their different approaches each of the writers discussed here argues that Parsons's writings reveal a *continuous* epistemological argument. Bourricaud argues that Parsons's substantive theoretical constructs are continuous and adequate, while Adriaansens and Savage argue that there are basic discontinuities and problems in the approach. One difference between Adriaansens and Savage is that the latter believes that these constructs can be analysed in abstraction from theoretical processes, while Adriaansens attempts to relate the different phases.

The implication of my criticisms of these arguments is a different interpretation of Parsons' theoretical development. Against Adriaansens and Savage, there is a relation and a basic *continuity*

between the phases in terms of *substantive* concepts and problems; for example, the assumption of perfect integration and the problem of relating orientations of actors and processes of systems of social action are present in all phases (elsewhere, I have traced the emergence of such concepts in *The Structure of Social Action*⁶⁶). Against Bourricaud, the development of Parsons's theory should be viewed in terms of processes of theoretical breakdown. One clue to this breakdown is *discontinuity* in Parsons's epistemological arguments. In fact, this discontinuity serves to locate the rationalist conception of action and its perceived role in the Parsonsian scheme.

It will be recalled that, according to Savage, one aspect of such a conception is theoretical indeterminacy; the conjunction of one-sided cultural determinism and 'eclecticism'. On arguments made in *The Structure of Social Action* such indeterminacy is the product of theoretical breakdown. In the breakdown of a theoretical system, the positively defined categories will come to appear one-sided in that they do not contain the circumstances they are designed to interpret. The 'wider' circumstances — the 'facts' which do not 'fit' — will be negatively identified; that is, specified outside the determinations of the theoretical system. The various specifications of theoretical categories, then, will not exhibit logical closure. In this sense, Parsons's cybernetic hierarchy has the characteristics which he previously attributed to deficient theory. Moreover, in contrast to the earlier argument, cybernetic hierarchy gives rise to the claim (as in Bourricaud) that theoretical indeterminacy is intrinsic to sociology conceived as a sociology of action.

This is not, however, a vindication of the 'theory of discourse'. Rather, it serves to explain its contradiction; that is, it explains how the rationalist conception of action can be applied to different theoretical systems despite the claim that there is a plurality of specific discourses and no 'knowledge-in-general'. Its apparent generality is contingent upon theoretical breakdown in different approaches, but it could not provide the means of analysing the processes of theoretical breakdown since the insufficiency of theories is treated as *essential*. Nor does it serve as the necessary prelude to the development of more adequate theory. In these respects Parsons's judgment on a purely 'logical' analysis is apt:

it would lead to the worst kind of dialectical sterility to treat the development of a system of theory without reference to the empirical problems in relation to which it has been built up and used.⁶⁷

Indeed, the final irony is that the breakdown of Parsons's theory involves the production of a distinction between 'structure' and 'process', while the 'theory of discourse' itself codifies a distinction between theoretical 'structure' and theoretical 'processes'.

It is contained within the very contradiction it claims to have exposed.⁶⁸

Although each of the writers discussed in this review characterizes Parsons's epistemology as continuous, they relate it to arguments which Parsons utilizes to justify his theory despite its deficiencies. For each of them, cybernetic hierarchy is a statement of the essential features of this epistemology.⁶⁹ However, this hierarchy involves a separation of empirical and theoretical issues, a recognition of 'facts' as independent of theoretical relations, which reflects the breakdown of Parsons's theory and against which Parsons argued in *The Structure of Social Action*.

The last word can be left with Parsons. He did not — as far as I am aware — ever claim not to be a 'Parsonian', but in *The Structure of Social Action* he posted a warning to his sympathisers (although he did not heed it himself):

in the work of the mediocre proponents of a theoretical system the qualifications of their empirical deductions from theory which are necessitated by the existence of . . . residual categories are often ignored . . . in the case of the dogmatists of the system their existence, or at least their importance for the system, may even be vehemently denied.⁷⁰

Bourricaud and Adriaansens are dogmatists, but this judgment is harsh in that their books have value as secondary interpretations of Parsons's theory. Nevertheless, the task enjoined by Parsons when confronted by the breakdown of a theoretical system is different from that which they undertake. What is enjoined is the positive reconstruction of sociological theory and explanation. Savage is critical of Parsons's approach, but this task, the *practice* of sociology, will gain nothing from his critique.

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Hans P. M. Adriaansens, *Talcott Parsons and the Conceptual Dilemma* (adapted from the Dutch, Van Loghum Slaterus 1976) Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980, 200 pp., £12.50.

François Bourricaud, *The Sociology of Talcott Parsons* (translation of *L'individualisme institutionnel*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1977) University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, 326 pp., £16.10 (paper).

Stephen P. Savage, *The Theories of Talcott Parsons: The Social Relations of Action*, Macmillan, London, 1981, 279 pp., £20.00.

NOTES

1. Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Emphasis in original.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3. Emphasis in original.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

4. There is a nice irony here in that one of the problematic features of Parsons's approach is the abstraction of 'structure' from 'process'. See below.

5. Cf. the different arguments of Lakatos and Feyerabend (I. Lakatos, 'Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes' in I. Lakatos, A. Musgrave, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970. P. K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, New Left Books, London, 1972).

6. Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 12. Emphasis in original.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 30. Emphasis in original.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

17. Here Savage has in mind Dawe's conception of 'two sociologies' and Gouldner's reflexive sociology (A. Dawe, 'The Two Sociologies', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1970. A. Gouldner *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, Heineman, London, 1970).

18. Especially Gouldner, *op. cit.*

19. Here the examples are Bershady and Finley Scott (H. J. Bershady, *Ideology and Social Knowledge*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1973. J. F. Scott, 'The Changing Foundation of the Parsonsian Action Schema', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1963).

20. Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 239. In fact, each of the writers referred to by Savage is directly concerned with discontinuities in Parsons's theory!

21. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 91. My emphasis.

23. Cf. B. Hindess, P. Q. Hirst, *Mode of Production and Social Formation*, Macmillan, London, 1977 and B. Hindess 'Humanism and Teleology in Sociological Theory' in B. Hindess (ed.), *Sociological Theories of the Economy*, Macmillan, London, 1977.

24. Savage, *op. cit.*, esp. p. 161ff.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

28. I have argued elsewhere that this is a basic (though common) misunderstanding of *The Structure of Social Action* and that the central features of Parsons's functional analysis of systems of action is already set out in the early formulation of the action frame of reference. (J. M. Holmwood, 'Action, System, and Norm in the Action Frame of Reference', *Sociological Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1983.)

29. Cf. Bershady, *op. cit.*, D. Martindale, 'Talcott Parsons Theoretical Metamorphosis from Social Behaviourism to Macro-functionalism', in H. Turk, R. L. Simpson (eds), *Institutions and Exchange: the Sociologies of Talcott Parsons and George Caspar Homans*, Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1971).

30. Hindess, *op. cit.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 92. Emphasis in original.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

36. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 723.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 723. Scott's argument is discussed in Holmwood *op. cit.*

38. T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1937, p. 17.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

43. Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

44. Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

46. Adriaansens, op. cit., p. 174. My emphasis.

47. T. Parsons, *The Social System*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1951, p. 37. My emphasis.

48. Ibid., p. 21. Emphasis in original.

49. Adriaansens, op. cit. p. 83.

50. Ibid., p. 84ff.

51. Parsons, op. cit. He writes, 'the integration of the total action system, partial and incomplete as it is, is a kind of "compromise" between the "strains to consistency" of its personality, social, and cultural components respectively, in such a way that no one of them closely approaches "perfect" integration' (p. 17).

52. Adriaansens, op. cit., p. 73.

53. Ibid., p. 73.

54. Savage, op. cit., p. 162.

55. Ibid., p. 163. Emphasis in original.

56. Ibid., p. 164.

57. Cf. T. Parsons, 'Pattern Variables Revisited: a Response to Professor Dubin's Stimulus', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1960.

58. Note that the pattern variable is not *dropped* in the sense that its referents are no longer relevant to the statement of processes of the system. The collectivity referent is intrinsic to the system. Savage argues that the pattern variable is dropped and that this indicates the basic discontinuity that exists between the different theoretical formulations. (op. cit., p. 165). In contrast, the fact that the collectivity referent is maintained indicates continuity, but at the same time it also indicates the problems inherent in the approach. Elsewhere, I have argued that a similar conception is found in the analysis of unit acts and systems of social action in *The Structure of Social Action* (Holmwood, op. cit.).

59. Adriaansens, op. cit., p. 163.

60. Bourricaud, op. cit., p. 18ff.

61. Ibid., p. 94.

62. Ibid., p. 94.

63. Ibid., p. 272.

64. Ibid., p. 298.

65. Ibid., p. 299.

66. Holmwood, op. cit.

67. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, op. cit., p. xxi. It is not accidental that Savage does not deal with Parsons's empirical arguments and explanations. He justifies this neglect on the grounds that he had dealt with the 'conceptual conditions of his various theses' (op. cit., p. 234). However, since he argues that these concepts are essentially incoherent, he provides no basis for the explanatory facilities of Parsons's theory. It is difficult to see how the explanatory content of theories could be determined except in relation to the development of theory; that is, in relation to theoretical processes.

68. For a more extensive discussion see J. M. Holmwood, A. Stewart, 'The Role of Contradictions in Modern Theories of Social Stratification', *Sociology*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1983.

69. For example, Savage writes that 'one thing is clear from all Parsons's writings on the issue: the relation between theoretical systems and the empirical components of science is a hierarchical one'. (op. cit., p. 68). The lowest order of elements are 'facts', next are facts 'which have been subjected to some form of processing and which are related to theory itself, the "substantive" theory which involves the integration of empirical knowledge according to logical criteria. The highest order of the hierarchy is the realm of theory involving the general frame of reference'. (ibid., p. 70).

70. Parsons, op. cit., p. 18.