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PARSONS AS ONE OF THE FIRST ICONIC FIGURES IN AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

Annotation. In the history of sociological theory, Talcott Parsons holds a very special place. Parsons advocated the "grand theory" approach, encompassing not only sociology but also all the social sciences. Parsons' work nonetheless provided a positive image of human society and social action as evolving towards greater harmony and the possibility of a peaceful world.

Key words: Talcott Parsons, sociology, harmony, peaceful world.

Talcott Parsons (December 13, 1902, Colorado Springs, USA – May 8, 1979, Munich, Germany) was an American sociologist who served on the faculty of Harvard University from 1927 to 1973.

Parsons developed a general theory for the study of society called action theory, based on the methodological principle of voluntarism and the epistemological principle of analytical realism [1; 2].

Parsons analyzed the work of Émile Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto and evaluated their contributions through the paradigm of voluntaristic action. For Parsons, "structural functionalism" was a particular stage in the methodological development of the social science, and "functionalism" [3] was a universal method; neither term was a name for any specific school. In the same way, the concept "grand theory" is a derogatory term, which Parsons himself never used [7; 10].

The differential effect of dynamizing and ordering forces on any given action is determined by its location in the action space and by the kind of relation obtaining between the subsystems of the action space. The relation between these subsystems which enables them simultaneously to expand their areas of effectiveness is interpenetration. The entire development of Talcott Parsons's theory of action is a progressive refinement of the theoretical devices available for the analysis of such processes of interpenetration. This is demonstrated in this essay for all the various stages of Parsons's theoretical development, from the laying down of the theoretical core in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) through *The Social System* (1951) to *Action Theory and the Human Condition* (1978) [6; 5].

Parsons produced a general theoretical system for the analysis of society, which he called 'theory of action' based on the methodological and epistemological principle of "analytical realism" and on the ontological assumption of "voluntaristic action." Parsons' concept of analytical realism can be regarded as a kind of compromise between nominalist and realist views on the nature of reality and human knowledge.

The Structure of Social Action, (SSA) Parsons' most famous work took form piece by piece. Its central figure was Weber and the other key figures in the

discussion was added little by little as the central idea took form. Parsons' action theory can be characterized as an attempt to maintain the scientific rigour of positivism, while acknowledging the necessity of the "subjective dimension" of human action incorporated in hermeneutic types of sociological theories. It is cardinal in Parsons' general theoretical and methodological view that human action must be understood in conjunction with the motivational component of the human act. What was essential in human life, Parsons maintained, was how the factor of culture was codified. Culture, however, was to Parsons an independent variable in that it could not be "deducted" from any other factor of the social system. This methodological intention is given the most elaborate presentation in *The Structure of Social Action*, which was Parsons' first basic discussion of the methodological foundation of the social sciences [8].

In the theoretical system of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons began with the unit act, and then examined ways these acts are oriented toward ends. In other parts of his writings, he argues that the combined results of such acts produce and maintain the institutions and structures of society. His aim was to build a model of society and the social system and explain the various parts of it, beginning with action theory. In this, he emphasizes the actor and the way in which subjective consciousness and mental acts shape social action [11].

For social action, the basic unit for a social system is the *unit act*. This has several characteristics that are essential to its definition (in the 2nd paragraph, p. 1): **1) An actor or agent** – presumably a human individual with a mind and body and an individual who is able to exercise some form of action; **2) An end:** each act must have some purpose or end – “a future state of affairs through which the process of action is oriented.” By identifying an end, this identifies the process as in time and resulting in some particular state of affairs. This may also imply conscious action, in that Parsons implies that the actor is consciously aiming at this end – the action is oriented at some future state of affairs; **3) Situation:** the act is initiated by the actor within a certain situation – again there is an implication here, that of initiative or motivation on the part of the actor. There are two aspects to the situation: *Conditions of action*, over which the actor has little or no control. These refer to the natural environment or the social structures within which the action takes place. Or in the context of economic or rational choice models, these are the constraints within which the actor makes choices. *Means of action*, over which the actor does have some control. These refer to aspects of the situation that the actor can control and can change. These are items such as particular courses of action or selections that the actor can make. As an example, an actor with employment in a workplace situation may have no control over hours of work or structure of the business, but can act with respect to how the work is carried out, and how customers, subordinates, and superiors are dealt with; **4) Normative orientation:** Parsons says that means cannot be selected at random or that any possible means of pursuing the ends are acceptable. Neither are the means constrained by “conditions of action” – that is, entirely dictated by nature, environment, or other constraining factors. Rather, the orientation toward

the ends is guided by norms. The actor has some understanding of what these norms are and these guide the actor. As a result, there is a normative orientation to social action. Parsons notes that these are of no specific type, just as Weber noted that authority could be based on any characteristic – it was not the nature of the content that was important but its existence. For example, the normative orientations of Parsons could include the different values in different societies associated with proper forms of childrearing – there is a range of choices in any society, but not a complete or random set of acceptable choices either [6].

Parsons formulates four functional prerequisites that must be met by the community, namely: 1) *Adaptation*, adjusting the demands of the environment and its needs (to the physical and social environment); 2) *Goal Attainment*, the actions of individuals in the community systems are directed at a common goal in which its activities are the means (the need to define primary goals and enlist individuals to strive to attain these goals); 3) *Integration*, the level of solidarity for a unit in social systems (the coordination of the society or group as a cohesive whole); and 4) *latency* (pattern maintenance), from within the social system itself should be attempted to maintain the pattern of interaction (maintaining the motivation of individuals to perform their roles according to social expectations). Usually cultural systems become part of this maintenance, such as ritual, may be education [12; 9; 4].

To sum up, T. Parsons developed a sophisticated theoretical model that appears to provide a reasonable explanation for social action on the basis of subjective consciousness and rationality. While focused on instrumental forms of action, it avoids some of the difficulties of the more narrowly utilitarian explanations of social action. Through the definition of *the unit act*, considering the viewpoint of *the actor*, through chains of *action*, and through some of *the systems and structures* that form part of the analysis of Parsons, the theory is social and reasonably all-encompassing. That is, Parsons begins with the unit act and builds an overall model of the systems and structures of society, at the same time keeping in mind the actor and his or her motivation and interests [11].

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