A Blueprint for Inclusion: Talcott Parsons, the Societal Community and the Future of Universalistic Solidarities

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Abstract

In the last decades of his life, Talcott Parsons was often indicted as conservative. More recently, his analyses of contemporary society have been perceived as obsolete. In the present paper, I argue that both these accounts are wrong. Parsons's biographical and intellectual profile is clearly – and rather consistently – that of a New Deal liberal. His “ate” works, moreover, articulate an original view of the integrative processes in modern societies that is still both theoretically compelling and politically relevant. Parsons's view of modernity has made possible the development of a sophisticated theory of societal pluralism, able to deal analytically with the astonishing variety of structural strains (and resources) arising from an increasingly diverse – in racial, religious, ethnic, sexual and moral terms - membership in contemporary societies. His sociological enthusiasm for inclusion has never been blind to the likelihood of backlashes and the strength of discontent such inclusion may bring. His work provides thus some important directions in the current storm.

Keywords Talcott Parsons · Inclusion · Pluralism · Multiculturalism · Modernization

The great question [...] is, I think, more empirical than theoretical. It concerns the balance among the alternative responses to value-innovation. [...] Which is more important: (1) fundamentalist regression to more primitive levels, (2) schismatic revolutionary outcomes, which will tend to maximize conflicts, or (3) institution-alization of new levels of generality in value systems? Sociology has a grave responsibility to clarify the understanding of what is going on and of what lies at stake in the balance among these possibilities. (Parsons, 1969:472)

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Parsons's work has suffered a peculiar fate. For quite a long time, his analyses of contemporary societies have been indicted as "conservative". Many critics have claimed his complex theoretical framework was nothing but a jargon-laden smokescreen designed to mask the fundamental injustice of contemporary society. For decades, the claim that Parsons's sociology was conservative – if not utterly reactionary – was taken as an undisputable fact. The figure of Talcott Parsons became so politically tainted that even accusing him of having been a Nazi-smuggler become feasible (Wiener, 1989; Wrong, 1996).

If somebody tried to salvage something from such damnation, the choice would always fall on his early works. A popular tale told of a "young" Parsons whose ideas had not been yet spoiled by his later sins. The young Parsons was "voluntarist", interested in social change, seriously concerned with the shortcomings of the capitalist order. The late Parsons was "systemic", static and lost in the worship of American society (Nielsen, 1996).

The young-against-old Parsons narrative – fashioned after the most famous distinction between the "young Marx" and the "old Marx" – was surely intriguing. Besides being historically wrong, however, it has had an unfortunate consequence. It has made latent the string of highly innovative works Parsons had written in the last two decades of his life (Sciortino, 2007). In fact, in his "late" phase, Parsons introduced several radical developments to his theoretical framework. Many of these innovations were motivated precisely by the desire to deal satisfactorily with the sociological problems his critics claimed he could not see: the tendencies of long-term social change (Parsons, 1966a, 1971), the structural impact of the knowledge revolution (Parsons & Platt, 1973), the mechanisms triggering the inflation and deflation of power, influence and value-commitment in differentiated societies (Parsons, 1969), the increasing complexities of social stratification (Parsons, 1984) and the consequences of the expressive transformations of Western individualism (Turner, 2005). Parsons dealt with all these issues as part of a single, and ambitious, project: to develop an adequate theory of the social integration of contemporary modern society (Parsons, 2007).

Altogether, his analyses provide an important – and highly progressive – framework for the analysis of modern society. In the next pages, it will be shown how a main theme in Parsons's later work is precisely the systematic exploration of the modern possibility of institutionalizing a social order able to remove all second-class statuses, to create "a single societal community with full citizenship for all" (Parsons, 1965:740). More than 40 years after his death, however, these contributions have still not achieved the critical recognition they deserve.

The vision of Parsons as a conservative theorist started to crumble in the early 1990s. The general intellectual climate was, by then, less willing to accept uncritically radical political indictments. The idea of Parsons-as-a-conservative appeared increasingly incongruous with the biographical evidence. In fact, Parsons's steadily progressive record – from his young support for Robert La Follette to his early opposition to Nazism and Fascism, from his outspoken opposition to McCarthyism to his support for the civil rights movement and his opposition to the Vietnam War – revealed him as an active liberal New Dealer (Lidz, 1986). His lifelong stance against communism, in the climate of 1989,

was eventually hailed as prescient (Mouzelis, 1993). Parsons's action theory was often presented as a sociology for liberals, an attempt to make social complexity safe for democracy (Holton & Turner, 1986; Robertson & Turner, 1991; Alexander, 2001). In a few years, an intellectual movement was able to establish a more accurate view of Parsons, both as an historical figure and as a sociological theorist. The characterization of Parsons as a conservative ideologue can still be found occasionally in some textbooks, but it is irremediably *passé*. Very few people feel the need today to define themselves in opposition to his figure. In recent accounts of the discipline, Parsons is located largely uncontroversially among its classics.

Such intellectual movement, however, has largely failed in bringing to the attention of the discipline the enduring importance – and political significance – of Parsons's action theory. Parsons has been recovered; his theory has not (yet?) attained the status of a generalized resource. Already in the 1980s, Jürgen Habermas stressed the need for contemporary theorists to engage with Parsons in a sustained way (Habermas, 1987). Very few scholars were convinced. Attempts to bring Parsons's legacy inside contemporary debates have also had rather limited success (Alexander, 1983; Robertson & Turner, 1991; Pollini & Sciortino, 2001; Fox et al., 2005). For too many scholars, Parsons belongs to the history books and to the (increasingly rare) courses on the “History of Sociological Thought”.

This may not be surprising: the 1990s “rediscovery” of his legacy took place while the academic world was struggling to understand the brave new world unleashed by the end of the Cold War, the successes of neoliberal finance and a strong wave of technological innovation. For many, Parsons was now associated with a previous epoch, his works of limited use in dealing with the flexible chaos that defined the upcoming new millennium. As his legacy was nearly exclusively identified with his “early” and “middle” work, many failed to notice how the last two decades of his life had been dominated by an interest in the instability and strains of highly differentiated societies (Parsons, 1971). It was *Leave It to the Beaver* in the age of *Twin Peaks*. The “conservative Parsons” had been quickly substituted by a much more pervasive “obsolete Parsons”.

In the following pages, I will argue that the time for confining Parsons to the history of the discipline has not yet come. His theory is still a relevant resource, both scientifically and politically. I will also claim that better knowledge of Parsons's “late” phase – his work in the 1960s and 70s – may help to clarify both the contours of his progressive political stance and the relevance of his sociology for an adequate understanding of contemporary collective life. Parsons has provided what is still the most consistent (and empirically sound) alternative to the nostalgia for (fuzzily defined) pseudo-*Gemeinschafts* endemic in many (apparently) more radical strands of social theory (Holton & Turner, 1986). An important – and underappreciated – dimension of his critical view on modernity has precisely been the development of a sophisticated theory of societal pluralism, able to deal with the astonishing variety of structural strains (and resources) arising from an increasingly diverse – in racial, religious, ethnic, sexual and moral terms – body of membership in contemporary societies. These are quite useful sociological resources.

Modernity Is an Unfinished Business: Parsons as a Friendly Critic of Modern Society

Among the classics of sociology, Parsons stood up for his radically anti-nostalgic appreciation of modern society and its core values (Robertson & Turner, 1991). A main ambition of his theory was precisely to chart a path that might allow social theory to escape – in a single stroke – the traditionalism of modern conservative thought, the rationalistic futurism of libertarians and the Jeremiads of critical theory.

For him, modernity meant, first and foremost, the rejection of the ascription-based matrix of roles and expectations as the dominant social frame (Mayhew, 1984). Relying on his pattern variables scheme, Parsons defined modernity as a secular order characterized by role differentiation, universalism, affective neutrality and the priority of performance/achievement. Such a secular order was not only enshrined in political charters and legal treaties. It was also the driving force behind a growing number of important sociological phenomena, such as the rise of the professions, science, the birth of mass education systems, the centrality of citizenship and the rule of law. It was, above all, a *meaningful* order, able to differentiate the requirements of common membership from the conformity pressures exercised by particularistic traditions.

Parsons's stance was surely distinctive. Where others had seen in modernity the breakdown of a common cultural tradition into fragments of highly specialized, narrowly developed tastes, Parsons stressed the legitimation of modern normative orders. Where others had identified in the existence of segmental loyalties a danger to the unity of the “national” community, Parsons highlighted how such networks – once embedded in universalistic individual rights – were a key source of strength and flexibility for a democratic society. Where others had lamented the end of the common good, Parsons explored the highly institutional premises of the “freedom from ascription and from compulsory allegiance” (Parsons, 2007:57). Where others had predicted the eventual corruption of the moral order, Parsons identified the possibility of the emergence of a pluralist societal community existing in relation with, but analytically independent from, economic control, political power and cultural imposition.

Parsons's stance, however, was also different from those of the other modernization theorists. He never assumed that such secular order would have simply made obsolete – or residual – other forms of solidarity. For Parsons, modernity meant the development of a fertile tension between mechanical and organic solidarity, not the displacement of the former by the latter (Parsons, 1960). As a consequence, Parsons was able to focus on the importance of modernization processes without losing sight of the enduring *modern* importance of many forms of ascriptive belonging.

Parsons's positive assessment of the civil *potential* of modern society need not imply that he was blind to the flaws and fragilities of modern society. On the contrary, Parsons always started from the enormous amount of mimetic desire and free-floating aggression produced by the development of modernity (Parsons, 1945b, 1946, 1968). He insisted the universalism of the modern order was deeply vulnerable, as its own structure – its own highly developed differentiation – inevitably engendered built-in “anomic” and “motivational” instabilities (Sciortino, 2007). Even in his more “optimistic” writings, he always stressed that the normative project of modernity was largely incomplete, its culminating phase a long way off, “very likely a century or more” (Parsons, 1971:142). The very

same elements that constituted the major achievements of modern societies also made them structurally unstable and always in need of intervention and repair.

What distinguished Parsons from most left-wing critics of modern society was his belief that *institutionalized individualism*, the embodiment of the liberal values of individual freedom and personal autonomy in a complex network of differentiated social institutions, was not a mere ideological decoy. Nor, for that matter, did he believe, as many conservative critics do, that individual autonomy and societal pluralism are the Achilles's heel of democratic societies, fostering privatization, segregation and isolation. On the contrary, Parsons asserted that institutionalized individualism is the key adaptive resource that can help modern liberal societies reform themselves and upgrade their institutions in an inclusive direction (Bourricaud, 1977). It is this liberal normative order, not the forces of the free market per se, that has allowed Western society to surpass its rivals (Parsons, 1964).

It must be added that Parsons was actually willing to acknowledge *more* sources of structural tension than usually identified by critical theories. Parsons struggled to analyze how the emerging “storm centers” of contemporary societies would - or could – combine and interact with more traditional cleavages. As he wrote in the conclusion to his evolutionary analyses:

The salient foci of tension and conflict, and thus of creative innovation, in the current situation does not seem to be mainly economic in the sense of nineteenth-century controversy over capitalism and socialism, nor do they seem political in the sense of the “justice” of the distribution of power, though both these conflicts are present. A cultural focus, especially in the wake of the educational revolution, is nearer the mark. The strong indications are, however, that the storm center is the societal community [...] The most acute problems will presumably be in two areas. First is the development of the cultural system as such in relation to society [...] Second is the problem of the motivational bases of social solidarity within a large-scale and extensive society that has grown to be highly pluralistic in structure [...] Neither set of problems will be “solved” without a great deal of conflict. (Parsons, 1971:121,143)

Contrary to the folk image of the mature Parsons as inclined to conservatism, his writings in the 1970s considerably sharpened his understanding of modern societies as facing endemic tensions and strains that are dealt with, albeit not necessarily successfully, through the growing pluralization of its social structures, an increasing sophistication of its normative regulative mechanisms and an increasingly generalized definition of its memberships.

These elements stand at the center of his notion of the societal community as a fundamental subsystem of modern society, structurally differentiated from both political power and cultural and religious traditions. Such a subsystem – defining the boundaries of belonging – is made possible by the fact that the values of institutionalized individualism are deeply intertwined with, first, the importance of modern pluralism, and second, the role played by the *legitimate* existence of large, complex and overlapping networks of heterogeneous identifications and groups in modern

society. The civil, emancipatory potential of such societal community is at the core of Parsons's progressive vision (Sciortino, 2005).¹

The Emerging Societal Community

Parsons's legacy reveals a compelling paradox. From one side, Parsons had always stressed the centrality of social integration for the sociological project. Already in his major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), he had claimed that the study of integration was what legitimized the discipline of sociology. He also frequently expressed his dissatisfaction with the available theories, which he deemed inadequate because they failed to distinguish among analytically different issues and were rooted in a simplified vision of social life. Still, the integrative sub-system remains the *least* explored in his work (Baum, 1975). Only in the early 1970s, after having tried unsuccessfully several times to write a monograph on U.S. society, did Parsons embark on the project of writing a major work on what he had started to call a few years before the “societal community”. The result was a large and complex manuscript, left unfinished at his death and published only three decades later (Parsons, 2007).²

The manuscript allows for a more precise understanding of the kinds of analytical problems the notion of societal community was designed to answer. Parsons conceives the integration of large-scale, complex social systems as a second-order problem. Differentiated societies are made of many kinds of coordination structures, all of them embedding specific strains and producing significant externalities. The specifically “modern” problem is how to manage the coordination of mechanical solidarities, which define the units of the system as equally included, and of organic solidarities, which define the same units in terms of their differentiated identities (Parsons, 1960). Parsons refuses the idea that modernity implies the “substitution” of one type of solidarity for another. He claims that no society could be defined by a single type of solidarity, nor is there a form of solidarity that is politically or morally “superior” to another.

In a differentiated society, mechanical solidarity is rooted in the institution of citizenship, which applies equally to all included individuals. Organic solidarity, on the other hand, is more visible in the institution of the contract, in the unity of differentiated interests and roles. A main task for any theory of societal integration is to explain how a structurally differentiated society may achieve a sufficient degree of compatibility among its many forms of coordination, in other words, how the structures produced along *both* types of solidarity are made compatible and regulated (Parsons, 2007).

At the same time, modern societies are characterized by both functional differentiation and segmentation. This is a main difference between Parsons and most other modernization theorists: the existence of a plurality of ascriptive status groups (defined by different solidarity styles) is not an anomaly, a relic from previous stages of societal evolution or a social pathology. It is, on the contrary, one of the founding features of

¹ For a contrasting opinion, see Alexander (2005).

² For a brief history of the project, see Lidz (1989). In recent years, some drafts of the previous attempts to write on the integration of U.S. society have been published, making possible to understand better the evolution of his thinking. See Parsons (1989, 1999) and Parsons and White (2016, 2021).

modern society (Parsons, 1975). The key element, for a satisfactory theory of social integration, is not the absolute range and depth of social differences. It is the structural configuration that allows – or impedes – social influence to flow through interpenetrating solidary groups (Parsons, 1969:405–38). The ways in which institutional coordination and societal pluralism are highly intertwined is particularly evident in Parsons's analysis of the citizenship complex.

Beyond Marshall: Ethnic and Religious Differences in the Citizenship Complex

In the early 1960s, studying the civil rights movement, Parsons started paying increased attention to the fact that the societal community was rooted in a patterned notion of membership, distinguishing those who do or do not belong. He stressed that the modern societal community, having both ascriptive and contractual elements, had in the citizenship complex one of its main institutions (Lechner, 1998; Lidz, 2009; Sciortino, 2010).

Parsons had always presented, quite modestly, his analyses of citizenship as a mere application of T. H. Marshall's ideas. He has in fact significantly revised and expanded Marshall's analysis.

It should not be forgotten that, in his original canonical treatment, T. H. Marshall defined citizenship nearly exclusively in reference to social class. He defined citizenship as an egalitarian status that stands in tension with the structural inequalities of the social positions endlessly produced by the dynamics of capitalism (Marshall, 1964). Read today, it is striking how little attention Marshall paid to ethnic, religious and cultural differences. Moreover, he was concerned only with the amelioration or removal of class-based subordinated statuses, without paying any attention to migration and the diverse compositions of the population. Of the three markers of contemporary citizenship – income tax, pension and passport – Marshall dealt exclusively with the first two (Turner, 2009).

Parsons, following Marshall, paid a good deal of attention to redistributive issues. He agreed that social rights were an essential condition for stabilizing any inclusion process.³ The major difference between the accounts of citizenship provided by Marshall and Parsons lies rather in the fact that Parsons was much more aware of the need to complement the issue of class inequality with considerable and constitutive attention to religious, racial and ethnic diversity.⁴

Reflecting a rich North American tradition of social inquiry into ethnic hierarchies, Parsons had stressed the significance of citizenship as a bounded criterion of membership and the empirical existence of a variety of ascriptive second-class statuses (Kivisto, 2004). The latter were predicated on the assumption that specific

³ Moreover, like Marshall, Parsons was inclined to see social rights as part of the “natural” evolution of modern citizenship, thus largely underestimating the possibility of serious contractions in the entitlements and provisions attached to it. See Sciortino (2010).

⁴ In fact, his very definition of society paid resident foreigners and transnational allegiances their due (Parsons, 1966a). He moved beyond what is now fashionable to call “methodological nationalism”, taking into consideration the transnational links cutting across all units of the “system” of modern societies (Parsons, 1971).

religious, ethnic or racial markers render the members of given categories unable to fulfill adequately the duties and obligations of full citizens (Parsons, 1965). They represented grounds for exclusion and symbolic degradation.

Parsons sees the development of modern citizenship as having an effect not only on the external relationships among the societal community, the market economy and the polity but also within the societal community itself. The introduction of (relatively) generalized criteria for membership – and the notion of citizenship as shared and equal participation in the civil sphere – modifies the existing structure of the system of social solidarities. Democratic citizenship does not destroy prior forms of collective identification, such as religion, ethnicity, region or subculture; it changes their structural meaning. With the enactment of a general status of citizenship, the range of difference-based affiliations and attributions compatible with a common membership increases enormously.

Such growth is not an indicator of weakness. Parsons argues that social heterogeneity stabilizes the very existence of a common public space and the variety of channels for social participation. Eventually, the effects of differentiation on previous solidarities and identities are such that structural pressure originates for further generalizations of the cultural definition of societal membership. A main trend in contemporary society is precisely the decoupling of societal membership from neatly defined expectations of cultural uniformity (Turner, 1993).

Writing in the '60s, Parsons tended to assume this symbolic membership was bound to be increasingly generalized and abstract, able to cover an increasing number of claims to recognition. In his work there is consequently a certain level of liberal overconfidence. At the same time, however, it is important to stress that – even in the '60s – Parsons never underestimated the dark side of citizenship, the many ways in which the symbolic perception of a common membership may be actually used to disqualify certain groups or to weaken their claim to a solitary membership. Parsons always stressed the importance and ubiquity of “fundamentalism”, the endemic attempt to re-establish less abstract, more culturally specific understandings of membership in the societal community. Such fundamentalism may be expressed in legal reforms, as in the case of the restrictive reforms of citizenship laws. The Indian *Citizenship Amendment Act* of 2020 is only the last among a long list of projects, many of them successful, to disenfranchise and exclude sectors of a population on ascriptive grounds. Even in largely liberal-democratic states, moreover, long-term residents may be wholly or partly disenfranchised by administrative means. Fundamentalist reactions, however, may also develop, as in many current populist outbursts in Western countries, through the claim that the special symbolic and social statuses of “core” groups have been “abused” by unworthy newcomers. Populist hostility toward immigrants – particularly, but not exclusively, if they are “undocumented” or “illegal” – is often grounded in the feeling that their presence pollutes the quality of common membership (Sciortino, 1999). Although Parsons never explored systematically this darker dimension of citizenship, his emphasis on citizenship as rooted in a template of symbolic belonging provides a fertile ground for the much-needed attempts to understand the current wave of exclusionary politics. Citizenship is not the opposite of social conflicts; it's a ground over which they are performed.

Inclusion and Its Discontents

The modern societal community is predicated upon an abstract, generalized, definition of common egalitarian membership. At the same time, discrimination and exclusion are rife in it. The universalism of membership is always understood and refracted through the prisms of more particularistic traditions. Parsons never thought, like Bourdieu, that cultural and social boundaries are largely homologous. On the contrary, he assumed that, in post-axial societies, the mismatch between the two is endemic: symbolic boundaries are usually wider – and more abstract – than sociability networks and personal groups. Current social arrangements may always be evaluated – and challenged – in the light of a transcendent standard. Such mismatch provides one of the most important, and undervalued, sources of social dynamism (Sciortino, 2012).

Subordinated groups may invoke their common membership as a ground to claim both justice and recognition. Citizenship provides a powerful vocabulary to articulate claims and grievances about both inequality and misrecognition. Such vocabulary is not restricted to the case of ethnic and racial minorities: the successes of the international movements for marriage equality – with its emphasis on mass-media involvement, cross-cutting social movements and judicial activism – are a textbook example of what Parsons defined as inclusion. The cultural and social qualities associated with membership are redefined in a more abstract way, thus making it possible for members of other groups to feel – and be treated – as bona fide full members. All inclusion processes, however, are bound to generate widespread anxiety and, not rarely, an amount of explicit aggression. The fuller inclusion of subordinated group raises the fear that their arrival will pollute and debase the value of membership itself. Backlashes are frequent and, often, successful. Still, according to Parsons, modernization provides the *possibility* for an unprecedented development of inclusion processes.

Parsons always insisted on the importance of societal heterogeneity in all kinds of social formations. He did not, however, ignore that such difference is experienced often in terms of strains, tensions and conflicts. Already in his early analysis of anti-Semitism, he stressed how any categorical difference to which subcultural features have become attached is a potential cause of strains (Parsons, 1942). Quality-based identities are often linked with “culturally patterned conflicts in *claims* to status, power, resources, etc.” (Parsons, 1945b:191). Not to mention that any categorical difference is a fertile ground for scapegoating, distortion and overreaction.

It is consequently evident that Parsons did not underestimate the extent to which societies are filled with strains, tensions and conflicts. On the contrary, the theoretical centrality that he accorded to the mechanisms of social integration derived precisely from his acknowledgement of the potential for conflict. Parsons never underestimated the depth of societal cleavages. He also acknowledged that most of them could not be solved with a political “quick fix” (Parsons, 1945a, 1946, 1968, 1979b).

The problem for Parsons was never social heterogeneity per se. In fact, ethnic and cultural pluralism does not necessarily constitute a challenge for societal integration. Pre-modern empires often had a population of subjects more culturally and ethnically diverse than contemporary metropolises. The Ottoman millet system has been for centuries a quite effective scheme of group-differentiated rights, able to regulate interaction across a large set of different social groups. The *fondaco* system in the quintessential global city of the past, Venice, provided an equally effective modality of

incorporating cultural difference on group-basis. In the XIV century, the Genoese base of Caffa – yesteryear’s equivalent of Deep Space 9 – accommodated a variety of Roman Catholic Churches of different rites, several Christian Orthodox Churches (both Greek and Armenian), as well as a mosque and a synagogue. Around 50 languages were spoken within its walls and the Genoese authorities were even printing Tatar currencies. On the contrary, many of contemporary “super-diverse” metropolises are inhabited by people sharing a largely overlapping set of cultural referents and endorsing very similar individual preferences. Freud’s narcissism of small differences is often an accurate description of the contemporary situation. What makes ethnic, racial and religious differences so controversial in modern societies is consequently not the extent of difference. It is the fact that all these differences have to be managed without an institutionally explicit (and consistently sanctioned) hierarchy of ethnic, cultural and religious groups (Sciortino, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, Parsons believes that also difference-based conflicts cannot be explained by the difference itself. They are always caused by the linkage of ethnic or religious differences with structural sources of free-floating aggression in the absence of countervailing controlling forces. In his analyses of anti-Semitism, Parsons always denied that racial prejudice could be explained away as the outcome of a flawed socialization process or particular forms of psychopathology.⁵ He argued that the configuration of some key structures of Western society – particularly the family and the occupational system – made frustration and anxiety an endemic feature of modern settings. Such feelings were often channeled toward a social scapegoat. As the precipitating events emanate mainly from the paradoxes of achievement, the channeling of affect that takes place tends to identify the scapegoat according to quality-based symbolism. The existence of a racially defined minority functions as a safety net for the lower strata of the majority population. As a consequence, escape from the role of scapegoat is often possible only when a new category of outsiders may absorb the same function (Parsons, 1946).

Many years later, analyzing the civil rights movements, Parsons similarly insisted that the bases of the “resistance to inclusion” were structural. The backlash he was already observing could not be attributed only to the racial prejudice of wide sectors of the population (Parsons, 1966b). Without denying the diffusion of racist attitudes, he claimed that the emergence of polarized subcultures (and the subsequent cumulative segmental differentiation) could not be considered a direct consequence of individual attitudes. Polarization takes place due to the failure of the control mechanisms operating in all of the societal subsystems (Parsons, 1968). Consequently, it was vain to expect that deep-seated discrimination could be changed only through cultural reform and normative appeals.

Parsons always stressed the dismantling discrimination required deep changes in the occupational system and the political promotion of an active stance toward social mobility (Parsons, 1965). Writing in the mid-60s, Parsons was fundamentally optimistic about the possibilities of these further developments. With the benefit of hindsight, we may acknowledge these inclusion-derived changes in other functional subsystems are much more difficult than expected at the time. The process of inclusion may be

⁵ Parsons revisited his 1940s research on anti-Semitism in one of his last contributions (Parsons, 1980). On the importance of Parsons’s analyses of anti-Semitism, see Sciortino (2005) and Judaken (2014).

stalled – or at least ferociously slowed down – by the lack of related changes in other sub-systems of society. In the case of the civil rights movement, the enduring unequal distributions of opportunities in the economic and education systems have proved over and over again how the relation between the societal community and the other subsystems of society presents complications that, although addressed in places by Parsons, have tended to be more difficult than he anticipated. Similar considerations may be advanced concerning the – very slow – progress of women towards equal career opportunities. Moreover, it has become evident how the – often indispensable – use of political power to ensure a fuller citizenship for a disadvantaged group implies costs – in terms of resources and regulatory constraints and burdens – that may contribute to strengthen the fundamentalist backlash against inclusion. The tension between the normative definition of membership established in the societal community and the operations of the economic, political and fiduciary systems is a structural feature of modern society and a main engine, for better or worse, of societal change.

Structural factors, however, are a necessary, but not sufficient, explanation. To understand how membership criteria may become more generalized, less tied to particularistic features, the starting point is precisely to account for the fact that comparatively high levels of structural differentiation and value generalization may coexist for a long time with ascriptive discrimination at the institutional and social levels. For this reason, Parsons complemented his evolutionary analysis of the pre-conditions for egalitarian citizenship with an interactional scheme targeted at explaining the dynamics of inclusion processes (Lidz, 2009; Sciortino, 2010). He suggested they are to be studied in terms of the “demand” for and the “supply” of inclusion (Parsons, 1965; 1966b).

On the “supply” side, Parsons lists the “qualifications for membership” of the excluded group that make its participation viable within the broader structural conditions and the framework of the basic citizenship complex. In other words, the “supply” side consists of factors that foster the organic solidarity between the included and the excluded as well as the elements that make a normatively prescribed solidarity feasible: the degree of value generalization, the opportunities for political mobilization, the structure of the normative system and the circulation of influence.

Inclusion processes, however, will not advance without a “demand” for inclusion, collective action to exploit the opportunities for (and to manage the consequences of) inclusion.

In some cases, the inclusion process may occur in a decentralized, barely visible way. Where the gap between normative definitions and reality is highly entrenched, however, the inclusion process requires the emergence of a public social movement able to challenge established structures of social identity. In his analysis of the civil rights movements in the United States, Parsons elaborated the conceptual foundations for a voluntaristic theory of social movements. He argued that, on the supply side, the success of such movements depends on the historically specific relational composition of resources in the other subsystems. These resources, however, are necessary but not sufficient factors for inclusion processes (Parsons, 1966b).

Once available, they must be exploited on the demand side, by a social movement able to establish solidaristic ties among groups across established divisions, which form the essential character of the inclusion process. The social pressure for inclusion requires that wide sectors of both the excluded *and* the already included groups are

persuaded that inclusion is both normatively desirable and practically achievable. These actors, moreover, must also be willing to work toward this goal. According to Parsons, any successful inclusion politics requires inevitably the building of vast social coalitions, able to motivate to action a vast number of citizens not personally impacted by the discrimination and misrecognition to be addressed. Here lies the importance of shared solidary languages and universalistic story-telling. When the particular experiences of members of some groups – MLK’s children, the committed gay person who is not allowed to live publicly his or her love, the qualified woman who is passed over for promotion, the native dispossessed of ancestral land, the teenagers marginalized by the peer group owing to their sexual identity – are successfully translated as instances of a civil morality play. They may foster identification across cleavages and strengthen pressure to action. Such discursive translations, as supporters of identity and queer politics have repeatedly stressed, always imply a certain degree of existential betrayal, a preemptive sanitation of the publicly acceptable dimensions of the life of the disadvantaged group. Only such translation, however, may ensure a degree of voice to social groups that would otherwise be – for demographic and economic reasons – left largely at the margins of public attention.

The existence and ramification of a shared universalistic language of membership makes easier to generate such narrative claim to inclusion. To be perceived as authentic and compelling, however, such narrative claims have to appear embedded in actual lifeworlds. When he writes about the civil rights movement, Parsons stresses that the demand for inclusion would have been much more difficult to develop without the existence of segmental, quality-based, institutions of the excluded community, such as African American churches. The existence of strong, quality-based groups and institutions does not consequently necessarily constitute an obstacle to the development of generalized concepts of common membership. On the contrary, they may well be a prerequisite. Such associational life is also useful to respond critically to anxieties over the possible debasement of the value of membership.

An important aspect of the analytical framework provided by Parsons is that it may be generalized to account not only for the change in diffuse, quality-based solidarities, but also for the emergence of new ones. Rather than assuming that ascriptive discrimination is always a legacy of previous social formations, the supply and demand scheme may cast light on the ways in which modern society may generate new ascriptive groups and new forms of discrimination. Even highly differentiated societies produce, in fact, distributions of societal resources that selectively tailor certain quality-based groups and institutions (Mayhew, 1968). Quality-based criteria enter into the decision making of actors as secondary selection devices and as ways to reduce the complexity of the decisions to be made (Luhmann, 1995). These biased distributions of resources usually tend to follow established patterns of exclusion, thereby reinforcing previous symbolic definitions of membership (Alexander, 1990). It is consequently not surprising that strong movements towards inclusion often generate powerful social “backlashes”, centered on the fears of a debasement in the value of membership. Inclusive movements show a structural tendency to generalize their grievances, as a way to broaden their coalition base and acquire additional resources. The same, however, is true of counter-movements. Unless checked by countervailing factors, their opposition may escalate into complete polarization (Parsons, 1966b). Here, as it seems

the case in many contemporary instances of populist mobilization, the process of symbolic generalization is challenged, and often defeated, by the development of a restrictive yearning for a traditional – taken as “authentic” – definition of membership (Kivisto & Sciortino, 2021).

Difference-based interactions, however, may also take creative forms. Even in modern, secularized, societies, new, quality-based identities and solidarities may emerge. Members of different categories combine with one another and reformulate their prior quality-based symbolism. Leadership entails a capacity of social “entrepreneurs” to combine diverse and even distant sources of influence to promote common interests across the cleavages separating social groups (Lidz, 1989). Yet, such leadership may also produce exclusionary outcomes, as an ample variety of invented traditions – tying up civil qualifications to more or less stringent ascriptive criteria – demonstrate. Still another possible outcome is that social entrepreneurs will promote new quality-based categories, challenging the established system of social identities with the claims that new “identities” deserve the community’s attention. The increased autonomy of the symbolism, and the availability of empty symbols in modern cultures, make outcomes of this kind more, rather than less, likely. To be sure, the processes of creation of new segmental categories and social networks are far from diminishing in scale in modern society (Sciortino, 2012). Far from being increasingly homogenized, contemporary societies exhibit constant attempts to institutionalize new quality-based categories. Parsons’s scheme of the demand for and supply of inclusion, if properly reconstructed, may play a significant role in helping theorists identify and study the social conditions under which such processes occur and come to be stabilized.

Parsons knew perfectly well that the elimination of “*any* category defined as inferior in itself” is a highly *unlikely* normative goal for any known society (Parsons, 1965:739). He also acknowledged the tremendous difficulties of such a task. What he was most interested in, however, was the fact that such an unprecedented and difficult goal had indeed become (no matter how ambiguously) an integral part of the self-understanding of modern society. Modern society, in his view, was precisely the structural form that makes possible this recognition as a paramount value of individual rights and egalitarian inclusion. At the same time, with a rather large dose of optimism, Parsons claimed that the institutionalization of an inclusive “single societal community with full citizenship for all” (Parsons, 1969:740) was not only a normative project but also a practical emergency – one able to sustain and nurture a fully pluralistic large-scale system of social solidarities. It was, he claimed, also a necessary evolutionary stage for contemporary societies. Here, Parsons could have exercised more caution: his own scheme highlights how differentiation triggers the *possibility* of inclusion but does not “cause” it. At any step in any process of social change, societies face very different alternatives. An ascriptive hierarchy among groups may be re-established coercively. Fundamentalist reactions may repress the structural bases of such a challenge. Even if differentiation successfully alters the structure of ascriptive loyalties, the outcome may still vary from subordinate incorporation to structural polarization. Parsons was right in stressing that the universalistic solution he advocated has become feasible, indeed conceivable, only in modern societies. Such dramatic normative achievement does not imply that such possibility will be pursued.

A Theory of Social Pluralism

A final element in Parsons's analysis of the societal community is the importance of social pluralism as a countervailing force to structural polarization. In Parsons's view, modern society is, above all, a pluralistic society (Sciortino, 2005). Organized around both social class *and* ethnicity, the societal community mediates horizontal and vertical differences (Parsons, 2007). It requires the differentiation, albeit uneven and incomplete, of a sphere of pluralistic social relationships held together, not only by domination and exchange, but also by crosscutting ties of sociability, identification, solidarity and persuasion. In short, modern society is both structurally differentiated and socially pluralistic.

Parsons was the first sociological theorist to pay significant attention to issues of difference in his theory of long-term social change (Parsons, 1968). In the last decades of his life, Parsons often saw modern societal pluralism as one of the most important structural consequences of: (a) the detachment of ascriptive categories from a normatively prescribed hierarchy of higher and lower statuses, as well as (b) the breaking of normatively sanctioned connections between membership in diffuse categories and social capacities in other roles.

Within this framework, Parsons was particularly interested in studying the institutionalization process of a more generalized definition of membership in the societal community. How does the changing normative definition of societal membership (even when sustained and protected by juridical means and welfare state provisions) interact with the constellation of social solidarities? Parsons defines modernization as a set of “inclusive *and* pluralizing” forces (Parsons, 1968:367). This may seem a bit surprising. Heterogeneity, for many classical and contemporary social theorists, is a divisive force. Many claim that ethnic diversity is bad for social cohesion. Others contend that any increase in social heterogeneity, no matter how beneficial in demographic or economic terms, implies a lowering of the levels of interpersonal trust, social participation and a willingness to support welfare spending.

Parsons's approach is remarkably different. He does not celebrate diversity as such. Still, Parsons sees social heterogeneity and pluralism as strong, indeed indispensable, stabilizing forces, *when and if* matched by an adequate normative order. Normative or structural change, if in isolation, would fail to trigger the development Parsons is trying to show possible. The redefinition of membership without a structural change in the societal configuration would end up producing only a heavy strain on the systems of expectations and create the conditions for a polarizing backlash engendered by fears of a debasement of the value of membership (Parsons, 1945a).

However, the mere increase in societal heterogeneity does not necessarily trigger an inclusionary dynamic. The highly unlikely success of the modern societal community lies in its institutionalization, which occurs *at the same time* as social pluralism and democratic individualism. When it does occur, pluralism becomes much more than a benefit generated by the cumulative processes of inclusion. It becomes a key element both for further inclusion and for societal resistance to polarizing strains.

The modern societal community Parsons identified is both a generalized normative system in which all actors are linked by common rules and are legitimized – no matter how different their specific identities – by common membership and a pluralist structure of social solidarities. It requires a restructuring of the juridical bases of social

membership – the citizenship complex reviewed above – as well as the establishment of institutional procedures and organizations focused on the interpretation and adjudication of social conflicts pertaining to the consequences of such common membership.

In other words, it requires the detachment of the public sphere from both ascription-based allocation processes and particularistic cultural traditions. Effective membership in a modern pluralist society, according to Parsons, requires that the duties of the public sphere be differentiated from the protection of particular cultural traditions and from the collective rights of any collectivity over its members. Here, Parsons relies on the well-established notion of Jefferson’s “wall of separation between church and state” and expands its logic to all forms of social diversity (Parsons, 1979a). Only a generalized normative order makes it possible for societal pluralism to morph into a stabilizing force.

In the light of contemporary concerns, the most important claim by Parsons is that pluralism, in the absence of segregation, ultimately prevents an excessive polarization. Fundamentalist reactions – no matter how strong they may appear in the short run – are ultimately an attempt to establish a strong correlation between existing social norms and membership in a specific subgroup. The legitimate existence of many overlapping differences cutting across categories and groups make its long-term success increasingly difficult. *Societal pluralism*, in other words, *plays a selective role in the evolution of normative systems towards increasingly abstract definitions of membership*.

Parsons believed that, when coupled with common membership, societal pluralism also has a further important integrative function. From an action theory perspective, the main integrative problem for a complex social system is not social conflict but rather social polarization. Any social system has to avoid a breakdown in the structural interdependencies as well as in the motivational basis of its members. Parsons stresses how polarizing tendencies are active in the development of all social systems. Pluralism, however, is a strong counterforce. Parsons argues that, when embedded in a generalized societal community, social pluralism implies multiple memberships spanning across each cleavage. A pluralist society is, according to Parsons, an environment in which “an increasingly ramified network of crisscrossing solidarities has been developing” (Parsons & White, 1969:75). Multiple memberships are the best check for polarizing tendencies, even under conditions of heavy strain:

[T]he very looseness of the relation between structural solidarities other than the political party and the party structure itself can be said to constitute an important protection against the divisive potentialities of cleavage. The essential fact is that the most important groupings in the society will contain considerable proportions of adherents of both groups [parties]. [...] The pressures of political cleavages – by activating ties of solidarity at the more differentiated structural levels that cut across the line of cleavage – tends automatically to bring countervailing forces into play (Parsons, 1959:223).

Parsons believed the failure of many radical critics of modern society, both progressive and conservative, was primarily the failure to appreciate the integrative function of the combination of societal heterogeneity and individual rights. From one side, Parsons observed that their theories underestimated the factors that prevented polarization. Among them, he paid particular attention to the proliferation of both roles and statuses.

The growth of such diversity, according to him, did not derive only from heightened economic development. It derived also from the increasing autonomy of what Parsons called the *Gemeinschaft complex*: differences in ethnicity, kinship, religion, style of life and education (Parsons, 2007). Such proliferation made difficult – although far from impossible – the long-term division of large-scale membership along heavily polarized lines. The contemporary importance of his work lies precisely on his emphasis on the genuine emergence of a complex and overlapping network of solidary collectivities tied together by common membership.

In recent decades, there has been an increasing concern for the growing polarization of many contemporary societies. A variety of strains, triggered by the intertwined effects of ICT-mediated communication and increased economic inequality, are held responsible for the weakening of the liberal order (often defined, Schlesinger-like, as the vital center of modern societies), the loss of solidarity and the increasing popularity of mutually incompatible visions of the good life. Many openly doubt that modern societies develop, although among serious backlashes and huge fluctuations in social attitudes, in an ultimately inclusive direction.

If Parsons's analyses are correct, such diagnoses, no matter how popular, are inadequate. While they identify some important symptoms, they seriously understate the strength and reliance of cross-cutting solidarities and embedded liberalisms in protecting the core of a pluralistic societal community. As such, they may provide – through rigorous theoretical and empirical work – an important intellectual alternative both to radical disruptions and to widespread despair.

Conclusions

The image of Parsons as an arch-conservative sociologist (and an acritical propagandist of the “American way of life”) emerged in the 1960s out of a confluence of circumstances. Its success made latent the many innovative works and empirical analyses Parsons produced in the last two decades of his life, works that, articulating an original view of the integrative processes in modern societies, are both theoretically compelling and politically relevant.

Starting in the 1990s, a wave of scholarship successfully restored a realistic biographical profile of Talcott Parsons. It was acknowledged that his life and attitudes embodied rather well the trajectory of a New Deal liberal. His work has also attained a relatively stable classical status, nearly universally acknowledged in textbooks and handbooks. The knowledge of Parsons's legacy, however, remain quite spotty in the discipline. Important analyses, which could positively resonate with contemporary concerns, are still largely ignored. Among them is the important effort Parsons developed to provide a satisfactory theory of social cohesion and solidarity in modern societies. His theory places at the center the differentiation, within a generalized definition of common membership, of a pluralist set of social relationships, both segmented and functional. It also highlights how the relationships between these clusters are regulated not only by domination and exchange but also by crosscutting ties of solidarity and persuasion. He has used this framework to explore in detail the (historically unprecedented) possibility of a societal organization able to weaken and dissolve second-class statuses. No matter how critical we may be of Parsons's

achievements, his work still stands as the best example of the usefulness of a sustained and specialized theoretical effort. It also shows that only a highly abstract and analytically differentiated social theory may actually provide a sound antidote to inadequate readings of modern society and its emancipatory potential.

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