Parsons and Politics—Introductory Remarks

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For decades, most general courses in sociological theory focused on critical examination of classic figures in the field. The works of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim were central in most courses, although Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, and George Herbert Mead were often studied as well. Occasionally other figures, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, may also have been considered. Yet, sociological theory was built more on the conceptual frameworks of Weber and Durkheim than on any other sources. The idea was often emphasized that, in certain essentials, the two figures converged on a partly explicit, partly implicit set of conceptions, focusing above all on culturally shaped normative institutions.

More recently, theory courses have been emphasizing certain model studies, some of them also classics, as their focus of concern. W. E. B. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* is one such key work; Harriet Martineau's *Society in America*, Jane Adams' *Democracy and Social Ethics*, and Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* are others. C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* and *The Sociological Imagination* retain their popularity for their treatments of power relations, the resulting social inequality, and the centrality of these issues to sociology. When read as models, each of these works, perhaps especially DuBois's outstanding study, can be followed up by more recent monographs that extend their lines of analysis. However, the difficulty is that they do not provide general conceptual schemes in terms of which a comprehensive discipline can be developed. Although model works, they are not foundational for sociology as an intellectual discipline. Instead, they have introduced a particularism and narrowing of focus into the field. An examination of papers presented at American Sociological Association meetings in recent years or published in the major American journals, even in *Sociological Theory*, shows that the topics of race, gender, and, related in substantial part to race and gender, inequality, now occupy the principal research concerns of American sociologists.

This trend has increasingly replaced the previous focus on issues of foundational theories and conceptual schemes. An unfortunate concomitant of this trend has been

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neglect of the works of Talcott Parsons. It was Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action*, published in 1937, with later editions in 1949 and 1968, that first demonstrated the convergence in basic conceptual schemes between Weber and Durkheim. More than any other work, this study established the focus on Weber and Durkheim as well as the parallel theoretical concerns that can be identified in their writings. Having identified the importance of a shared frame of reference or basic conceptual scheme for the integration of knowledge in sociology, Parsons then devoted the rest of his career – he died in 1979, still working on issues of basic theory – to elaborating the system of theory based on the convergence demonstrated in 1937. As his theory became more elaborate, it incorporated various elements beyond the Weber-Durkheim convergence. For example, Parsons studied Freud and psychoanalytic theory, then added a conception of the motivated individual actor to his theory. He examined, perhaps less expertly, Keynesian economics and strengthened his previous analysis of the relationship between economic institutions and market processes. He studied the historical scholarship of his own generation on comparative institutional analysis and proposed a theory of societal development or evolution. He became familiar with the system theories of physiologists and other biologists as a basis for elaborating his own theory of systems of human action, including social systems. He incorporated Norbert Wiener's cybernetics to explain how "ideal" elements of culture and normative orders can control "material" elements in the operations of social systems. And he included other conceptual materials into his theory as well. The result was a more complexly formulated theory than any other developed by sociologists. It was also more comprehensive in scope and, as well, more precise than any other general sociological theory. It was – and still is – an unparalleled updating of the conceptual foundation established by the "convergence" of Weber and Durkheim.

It is often claimed that Parsons' work was not empirical. In fact, he did carry out empirical studies. In the late 1930s, he conducted field observations of physicians treating patients. He never published the actual study, but it informed his analysis of the doctor-patient relationship presented in Chapter X of his *The Social System* of 1951, a chapter often called the charter for the sociology of medicine because of its empirical as well as theoretical insights. In the early 1950s, he started a collaboration with his Harvard colleagues, Samuel A. Stouffer and Florence Kluckhohn, to study the social mobility of high school students in Cambridge, Massachusetts as they began the early phases of their adult careers. Unfortunately, after Stouffer died in 1960 and Kluckhohn proved unable to analyze the collected data, as she had promised, that study too went unpublished. From the early 1960s, Parsons conducted a study of the academic roles of faculty members of American colleges and universities. An unpublished monograph, written in collaboration with Gerald M. Platt and circulated to colleagues in mimeograph form, resulted from the study, along with a few published essays. However, the larger result was the substantial volume, *The American University* of 1973, that Parsons published with Platt. The volume included both empirical analysis and conceptual development; its motivating issue concerned the student demonstrations, social disturbances, and proposals for radical reform in the academic institutions of American colleges and universities during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In addition, as indicated in the essays that follow in this issue, Parsons addressed many practical and/or political conditions in essays that he wrote throughout his career, including Nazism in Germany, the distinctive nature of professional roles, the Joseph McCarthy movement in American politics, institutional aspects of economic and political development, patterns of social stratification, American foreign policy and international relations, a general interpretive analysis of American society (drafted with Winston White, but mostly abandoned when White left academic life), the social importance of the Civil Rights Movement, and cultural patterns and social institutions around death and grieving. All of these essays were also applications of his theory of social action; their analyses attest to the capacities of his theory.

The research projects on social mobility and academic roles involved drafting a number of working papers in order to specify the concepts needed for the specific studies. In both cases, it became apparent to Parsons that substantial creative work was needed to advance from his general conceptual scheme to the detailed analytical terms that could provide a firm basis for interview guides and questionnaires. Proteges who used his theory as conceptual frames for their research, notably Robert Bellah, Neil Smelser, and Renee Fox, had similar experiences. Many of their books and essays indicate the value of carrying through the process of theoretical specification.

Parsons' two small volumes, *Societies; Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (1971), based on readings in history and anthropology as well as sociology, showed that substantial theoretical specification was also needed for comparative institutional analysis of a wide range of historical and contemporary societies. Such specification is required to use a general theory effectively in all empirical research. Any conceptual scheme with the scope of Parsons' theory requires such preparatory work if it is to be fruitful in empirical research. However, as the many empirical studies by Parsons and his students and proteges demonstrate, the guidance provided by a good general theory can produce creative, interesting, and well-supported results. The guidance can also provide results that connect or interlock with the results of empirical studies conducted on other times, places, and institutions. That is, as Parsons emphasized in *The Structure of Social Action*, a common conceptual scheme is needed for a science or intellectual discipline, such as sociology, to compile an intellectually *coherent* body of knowledge from its many empirical studies. Without a common conceptual scheme, particular sociological studies may produce conflicting understandings of social life or specific aspects of social life – a form of intellectual chaos, as to a substantial degree we have in sociology today. Or the studies may prove to have no meaningful relationship to one another – an empty and discouraging intellectual situation.

There are a few points of conclusion from this brief consideration of Parsons' empirical works. First, the presence of the theory does not make its application easy. It is important not only to understand the general theory, but also to specify its basic concepts to the particular subject-matter of one's research, and that often proves to be a difficult undertaking. Second, the general theory contains the potential to guide a great many empirical studies across the range of sociological concerns. Consider, as examples, the differences among the research studies

of Neil Smelser on the Industrial Revolution in England, on collective behavior, and on academic institutions, Robert Bellah on Tokugawa Japan, on American civil religion, and on the cultural and institutional developments of Axial Age religions, and Renee Fox on medical research, on organ transplantation, and on ethnographic observation of how others in her neighborhood related to her as a person with physical disabilities or “limitations”, as she preferred to say, to cite key works of only a leading few among Parsons’ many proteges. Third, the general theory provides a capacity for sociological studies to produce cumulative knowledge – knowledge that connects diverse findings so that they have mutually reinforcing implications for one another and for the discipline as a whole. We suggest that it is the mutually reinforcing implications that, without a shared conceptual scheme, are most sorely missing in the present state of sociology. It is an important aspect of what our discipline has lost with its comparative inattention to the conceptual scheme that Parsons developed. We hope it is clear that our complaint about the “model studies” approach to theory is not their practical and empirical focus, nor that they take explicit political stances, for Parsons and his proteges have also written books and essays of that type. Our objection is that the “model studies” approach to sociological theory has often supplanted examination of general frames of reference or conceptual foundations in sociology.

In planning this special issue, the editors have been guided by a belief that the relative lack of attention to the works of Talcott Parsons is due to a common idea among American sociologists that he was politically conservative and that his theoretical system, because of its initial focus on the problem of social order, is pervaded by a conservative perspective. There can be no doubt, however, that the prime accomplishment and lasting achievement of Talcott Parsons was the construction of a theoretical frame for use in advancing knowledge of society and social matters in general. This theoretical frame has a value of its own. However, those who wish to change the social world or change any social systems, corporations, universities, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, etc., may rely on the knowledge it has generated. Specific socio-political goals or undertakings are not immanent to the theoretical frame; like any other basic frame, it can be used for either conservative or progressive purposes. Historically, Talcott Parsons was definitely not a conservative, but a political and social liberal, as essays in this issue demonstrate. However, his social and political views stand as independent of his general theory of action as such. Well-developed theoretical frames in sociology are, in a way, empty vessels that can be filled with diverse political content.

As Parsons himself emphasized, there is an incompatibility between a neutrally developed general theory and ideological theories that embody empirical distortions. This point holds true for all sorts of ideologies, whether conservative or progressive or something else. Because of their distortions in engaging the empirical world, ideologies are intrinsically less effective as means of making the world a better place than they claim. Interventions in the practical world require reliable and valid knowledge, and therefore the better the theory (which usually means a theory incorporating complexity and a capacity to analyze wide ranges of practical conditions), the greater the options for introducing desirable changes.

We have engaged a range of scholars with well-grounded knowledge of Parsons' writings and career to report on his political views, his political and ideological writings, and their representation in the discipline at its current state.

Some of the contributors, older ones, had firsthand experiences with Talcott Parsons as students and collaborators, such as Mark Gould and Victor Lidz. Other contributors are at early stages of their careers, showing that there is ongoing interest in and appreciation of Parsons' work. Notably, the authors come from four different continents, reflecting the worldwide interest in Parsons and his work.

Contributors to this special issue are:

Christopher Adair-Totef is a philosopher, political thinker, and social theorist who has specialized on the works of Max Weber, Ferdinand Toennies, and Ernst Troeltsch. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of South Florida in 1992 and he has a M. A. in philosophy from USF and a M.A. in philosophy from the University of Virginia. His most recent books include *Carl Schmitt on Law and Liberalism* (Palgrave 2020) and *Raymond Aron's Philosophy of Political Responsibility* (Edinburgh University Press 2018).

Mark Gould is Professor and former Chair of the Sociology Department at Haverford College. He received a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University with a dissertation on *Revolution in the Development of Capitalism: The Coming of the English Revolution* published 1987 with University of California Press. He was teaching and research assistant to Talcott Parsons.

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Jason Turowetz is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Siegen. He received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2016 in sociology with a focus on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. He has published in *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* and the *Journal of Classical Sociology*, among others. Bruce C. Wearne is a sociologist from Port Lonsdale, Australia. He was senior lecturer teaching at Monash University before taking early retirement. His doctoral dissertation *The Theory and Scholarship of Talcott Parsons to 1951: A Critical Commentary* was published with Cambridge University Press in 1989. Recently, he edited the bi-lingual, German and English, edition of Talcott Parsons' doctoral dissertation together with Guenter Stummvoll (LIT 2018).

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The resulting essays cover different periods of Talcott Parsons' life, different issues he engaged, different formulations he developed, and different students and colleagues with whom he worked. The outcome, we believe, is the most comprehensive overview available today of the actual political and ideological views of Parsons as reflected in his professional life and writings. The conclusion is that Parsons was a consistent liberal and, although his conceptual framework was designed to be politically and

ideologically neutral or, better, to be free of political or ideological commitment, his applied writings are liberal within the range of the American political discourse of his times.

Finally, we thank the editor of *The American Sociologist* Larry Nichols for providing the opportunity to edit a special issue on this hitherto unsettled and contested topic of great importance to the heritage of American sociology.

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