Editor's Introduction: Parsons in Contemporary Perspective: an Ongoing Moral Career

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In this issue we present a series of researches and reflections about the career and continuing relevance of Talcott Parsons, with particular attention to selected political, economic and ethical issues. Some articles also share personal experiences that reveal a deeply engaged human side of the self-professed “incurable theorist.” Special thanks to professors Victor Lidz and Helmut Staubmann, who organized the project, contributed papers of their own, and helped to assess other submissions. The final result is very much a product of their dedication and their scholarship, for which I am grateful.

International scholarly work on Parsons (1902–1979) has continued in the second and third decades of the new millennium. For instance, in Germany, Uta Gerhardt brought out *The Social Thought of Talcott Parsons* (2014). A year ago, in England, Scott (2020) published *The Emerald Guide to Talcott Parsons*. There is also the forthcoming *Handbook of Talcott Parsons Studies* (2021) edited by Javier Trevino (United States) and Helmut Staubmann (Austria). This activity, of course, can be interpreted in many ways, but perhaps it reflects the importance of large ideas in sociology, the value of systematic theorizing and the current relevance of issues that Parsons addressed.

It is interesting to consider the articles here in connection with efforts to “restore” various figures in the field of sociology to a place of honor—an issue that I explored some years ago (Nichols, 1989) in an analysis of the career of Pitirim A. Sorokin. There is much for sociologists to examine, in terms of when, where, how and why such restoration initiatives occur, and their receptions by various audiences and interest groups. One of the most famous and consequential cases, of course, was that of Karl Marx, whose works regained popularity in the United States during the late 1960s and the 1970s with the resurgence of the conflict perspective. Prior to that time, U.S. sociology textbooks would not have identified Marx as a founding figure, but subsequently many of them have presented

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him as such. Not long thereafter, scholars such as Mary Jo Deegan, Michael Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale made similar efforts on behalf of Harriet Martineau (Hoecker-Drysdale, 1993) and Jane Addams (Deegan, 1990), who are now also often identified as founding figures. Deegan also edited (1991) a “sourcebook” on unrecognized women in sociology. Related work by Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (1997) made the case for “women founders,” such as Florence Kelly and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in the period 1830 to 1930. More recently Aldon Morris (2015), in *The Scholar Denied*, argued that W. E. B. DuBois should be regarded not merely as a founding figure but also as a major theorist on a par with the “masters of sociological thought” celebrated by Coser (2003). Conner et al. (2019) have also edited a recent volume on other “forgotten founders and neglected theorists,” such as Marianne Weber, Annie Marion McLean and Luther L. Bernard.

Restoration efforts sometimes extend to larger networks, thereby supporting Edward Tiryakian’s analyses (1979) of the importance of “schools” or of “hegemonic schools” (Tiryakian, 1986), as well as that of the “theory groups” examined by Mullins and Mullins (1973). Thus, Deegan has made the case that researches by the circle around Jane Addams, especially *Hull House Maps and Papers* (1895), should be regarded as what might be called “Chicago-style sociology” some three decades before the florescence of the “classic Chicago School.” Similarly, both Morris and Wright (2016) have characterized the “Atlanta School of Sociology” around DuBois as the first school of sociology in the U.S., that carried out a series of researches on the lives of African Americans in the period 1897 to 1924. In the view of these advocates, sexism and racism explain why Hull House and Atlanta were largely ignored, while the writings and researches at Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s were accorded a special place of primacy.

There can be little doubt that some of these efforts reflect changing demographics and power relations. The writings of Deegan, Hoecker-Drysdale and Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley coincide with the “feminization” of sociology (Bucior & Sica, 2019; Turner, 2016) that now includes a preponderance of advanced degrees being awarded to women in the United States, along with their arguable hegemony in a number of professional organizations. In the same way, the researches of Morris and Wright reflect the increasing racial diversity of the field.

Such dynamics are arguably also related to what Camic (1992) has called “pre-decessor selection.” Many people in the field do not wish to see themselves as descendants of the often-celebrated trinity of Marx-Durkheim-Weber, or of European theorists, or of white males more generally. They incline, rather, to identify with others—a professional reference group (Merton & Rossi, 1968)—with whom they share some salient characteristic such as gender or race. Nationalities can also play a role. For instance, there has been a very strong “Pitirim Sorokin revival” over the past two decades in Russia and other former Soviet Socialist Republics. This is especially true in the Komi Republic, the land of Sorokin’s birth, where Syktyvkar State University was recently designated “in the name of Pitirim Sorokin.” Less frequently, the same can be said of religion, as in the case of the Catholic Social Science Association whose members would incorporate into sociology the teachings in papal encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (“of new things”) (1891) that dealt with

relations between labor and capital, along with older teachings on human spirituality. There are also others (e.g., Schipper, 2012) oriented toward bringing Buddhist thought and practice into the field of sociology.

Restorations can involve adding forgotten or neglected figures, but they can also mean the displacement of others from former positions of honor. For instance, until the 1990s, the works of Marx and Lenin were especially revered in the U.S.S.R., while the heterodox writings of others, such as Sorokin or George Gurvitch, were officially banned. But now the Marxist-Leninist era is over, and there is a search for other foundations. Meanwhile, in the United States, revisionist histories have attacked not only “classic Chicago” sociology but also its central figure, Robert Ezra Park, for alleged sexist, racist and racial accommodationist views and actions. Previously, Park had been a widely respected figure (Athens, 2020), a president of the American Sociological Society, admired also for involvement in the Congo Reform Association and for close collaboration with the famous black educator, Booker T. Washington, as well as later work at Fisk University, an historically Black institution.

Such shifts in valuations are partly captured in Erving Goffman’s (1961) concept of the “moral career,” which refers to a series of judgments—sometimes life-altering—made by relevant and powerful audiences about the worth of individuals. This idea was applied mainly in the literature on social constructions of deviance and the “labeling” of offenders, which included also the imposition of stigmas (Goffman, 1963) and efforts by those labeled to manage “spoiled identities.” But it can be applied in a positive direction as well, so that relative rises in status can be tracked along with descents (e.g., Nichols, 1989). And this can illumine much about the history and sociology of sociology.

Talcott Parsons can be said to have an ongoing moral career with at least four discernible phases, namely, an initial ascent to a place of prominence, a period of exceptional eminence, a descent and at least a partial restoration. Competing assessments of Parsons’s “worth” have been organized, it seems, around several focal issues, including (1) the value of Parsons’s ideas for building the field of sociology; (2) the value of Parsons’s approach in terms of gaining recognition and acceptance for sociology, especially within academia; (3) Parsons’s activity as teacher and mentor of new generations of students; (4) Parsons’s association with Harvard, a pillar of the American political economy; and (5) Parsons’s perceived attitude toward society, social justice and social change (including modernization).

Parsons began to gain widespread recognition in 1937, following ten years of struggle as an instructor at Harvard, as the result of a large and intellectually ambitious work, *The Structure of Social Action*. This volume tried to identify a core framework for sociology by reconciling two major traditions, namely, idealism and positivism, in a synthesis called “the voluntaristic theory of action.” *Structure* probably did not gain many adherents, but it marked Parsons as among the relative few who could carry out a high level of theoretical abstraction with an eye toward gaining greater legitimacy and respect for sociology within the academy. During the 1940s, Parsons moved in the direction of functional analysis, an approach that had become popular in anthropology, where it was used to examine societies around the world holistically, as integrated systems. This also accorded with other trends in the

World War II and immediate postwar era, such as the development of cybernetics theory by Norbert Wiener and others, which focused on processes of self-regulation via informational feedback loops.

The increasing esteem in which peers held Parsons was reflected in his election as president of the American Sociological Society for 1949, at whose conference he gave an address on the future of sociological theory. His career then reached a high point in 1951 with the publication of a second major work, *The Social System* (1951), and the co-editorship (with Edward Shils) of the volume, *Toward A General Theory of Action* (1951). Parsons argued that sociologists should study structure before analyzing change—a stance that would often be held against him—even though *The Social System* also included two chapters on change that were influenced by Weber's comparative sociology. Meanwhile, Parsons also attained a position of national prominence as the chair of the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, an interdisciplinary unit that he had done much to create. Parsons's eminence extended into the late 1960s. He served as secretary of the American Sociological Association in 1965, and as president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1967 to 1971. The Academy subsequently established a Parsons Award. A good case can be made that Parsons attained a relatively unique stature in this period.

There were always outspoken critics of Parsons's approach, including Harvard colleagues such as Sorokin (1966), Homans (1964) and Jerome Bruner. Dahrendorf (1958:122), in an article entitled, "Out of Utopia," complained that much of Parsons's work in the 1950s "represents an outstanding illustration of what I mean by the utopian bent in sociological theory." A collection edited by Max Black (1961), *The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons: A Critical Examination*, likewise focused on a range of alleged shortcomings. One contributor, Hacker (1961), charged that Parsons's sociology was actually the expression of a political ideology. The most famous critique of this period, however, was that of C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) which accused Parsons of building "grand theory" that was detached from "biography and history," that is, from people's experiences and their suffering. Such treatments asserted that portions of Parsons's works were inadequate or wrong in an intellectual sense, but they generally stopped short of attacking him on ethical grounds. Mills, for instance, said that much of Parsons's work, despite difficult wording and syntax—was "standard textbook sociology."

During the intense turmoil of the 1960s, however, a perspective spread in the U.S. that, as a contemporary slogan put it, "If you're not part of the solution, then you're part of the problem." This referred largely to perceptions of phony democracy and social injustice, and it was expressed in a burgeoning literature on elites, such as Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956) and G. William Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* (1967). Alvin Gouldner (1970) subsequently published *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* which directly attacked Parsons for allegedly being cut off from social realities such as urban poverty. Gouldner also asserted that Parsons's focus on the problem of social order "reeks of an oppressive, anti-emancipatory conservatism." Parsons, in other words, was a conscious or unwitting proponent of a fundamentally unjust system; he was "part of the problem." Parsons's association with Harvard was an important aspect of this critical portrait, as Harvard came to be seen as a bastion

of class-based privilege and a key supporter of questionable or unjust U.S. foreign policy, including the Vietnam War.

Despite such attacks, positive assessments of Parsons continued, as expressed for example in a two-volume festschrift (Loubser et al., 1976) after his retirement from Harvard. Following Parsons's sudden death during a 1979 visit to German universities, there was an outpouring of tributes. Even Gouldner (1979:299) praised his former adversary as "a thoughtful and kind man" who "more than any other American sociologist ... helped to overcome American parochialism."

There was also a memorial session at the annual ASA conference that became a special section of the May 1980 issue of *The American Sociologist*, a journal that Parsons helped found and of which he served as the initial editor. Five former students, most of whom had known Parsons before his rise to the pinnacle of the field, celebrated not only his intellectual achievements but also his personal character. Bellah (1980:60) praised Parsons for the attempt to "encompass the whole," an effort that "links him to the seminal minds in philosophy, religion, and poetry of all ages." Jesse Pitts (1980:62–64) eulogized Parsons as "noble," a "genuinely kind person" who had to endure much undeserved "abuse," despite his liberal political commitments. Williams (1980:66) lauded Parsons for intellectual integrity, rectitude, compassion and good taste. To John W. Riley (1980:67), Parsons, in addition to being an "indefatigable worker," was "a man of great good humor... a punster...[who] had an enormous sense of fun." Merton (1980:7), finally, one of Parsons's earliest proteges at Harvard, recalled especially how the then young instructor earned "an immense, abiding respect" by treating graduate students with respect.

Competing constructions of Parsons continued to appear during the 1980s. Thus Alexander (1984) provided both a tribute and a friendly critique in the fourth volume of his *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* which was entitled, "the modern reconstruction of classical thought: Talcott Parsons." A year later, William Buxton, in *Talcott Parsons and the Capitalist Nation-State* (1985), offered a contrasting critical, but not harshly polemical, analysis that characterized Parsons as deeply political, a proponent of a preferred social order. With the rise of feminism, in roughly the same period, Parsons also came to be criticized for allegedly wanting women to remain in their traditional, subordinated and restricted roles, as expressed, for instance, in *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (Parsons 1955). He was, in other words, an active supporter of patriarchy.

The high point of attacks on Parsons from an ethical perspective probably occurred with the publication in *The Nation* of an essay by historian Jon Wiener (1989) which alleged that Parsons helped the U.S. State Department bring former Nazi collaborators into the U.S. Wiener relied in part on a recently published book, *Blowback*, by freelance journalist Simpson (1989) that claimed to present "the first full account of America's recruitment of Nazis and its disastrous effect on the cold war." Wiener discussed a trip by Parsons to Germany in summer 1948 on behalf of the Russian Research Center then being organized at Harvard, drawing on correspondence in the Harvard University Archives that Charles O'Connell discovered and subsequently analyzed in a doctoral thesis (O'Connell, 1990). Wiener focused in particular on Parsons's actions on behalf of Nicholas Poppe, an expert linguist (Baitchura, 1977) and member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, who escaped

the U.S.S.R. by serving as an interpreter for the German military. Parsons, Wiener alleged, “seems to have assumed that the cold war justified ignoring crucial questions about enlisting former collaborators as Harvard Soviet scholars” (Wiener 1989[1991:77]). Ultimately, in Wiener’s judgment (1991:77), Parsons “contributed to some of the most anti-democratic and anti-intellectual trends in postwar American life,” violating his own proclaimed “value-free” approach to science in the process. Poppe always denied involvement in the SS-directed genocide of Jewish peoples, but Wiener contended that at least some of Poppe’s researches were probably used for this purpose. Wiener conceded that Parsons might not have known such details of Poppe’s background or of those of others associated with the collaborationist Vlasov Army such as Leo Dudin and Vladimir Pozdniakov, but he asserted that Parsons could have found out, had he wished to do so.

These accusations elicited defenses of Parsons. At Harvard, the *Crimson* newspaper published rebuttals of the allegations (Palmore, 1989). Nielsen (1991) observed that Parsons never met Poppe in person, never spoke with him and never wrote to him. In Germany, Uta Gerhardt brought out an edited collection of Parsons’s writings, *Talcott Parsons on National Socialism* (1993). In an introductory essay, Gerhardt lauded Parsons as an outspoken opponent of Nazism, beginning in 1938, a critic of anti-Semitism and a champion of democracy. Canadian sociologist Dennis Wrong (a self-professed democratic socialist) published an article questioning whether the attacks on Parsons were simply “left-wing McCarthyism.” Wrong (1996:613) asserted that there was “no definitive evidence that any of the people Parsons interviewed were ‘war criminals’ by Nuremberg standards,” rather than simply displaced Soviet citizens, some of whom—including Poppe—would very likely have been executed or at least imprisoned had they returned to the U.S.S.R.

But the accusations of collusion might, nonetheless, have damaged Parsons’s reputation and thus to have generated, to some extent, what Goffman (1961) called “stigma” (that is, a mark of shame) and a “spoiled identity” in some circles. The allegations seem, at a minimum to have created doubt even among some who otherwise respected Parsons. Thus, sociologist Jack Nussan Porter found the “ten letters” that O’Connell unearthed very troubling. Porter (1996:603) expressed his longstanding admiration for Parsons and mentioned how he had defended Parsons against “all the abuse he had taken in the 1960s.” Nevertheless, Porter (1996:608) went on to assert that, “from my knowledge of the Holocaust, Poppe is definitely a Nazi war criminal.” Ultimately, Porter (1996:609) suggests, Parsons “made one little mistake, by pushing too hard for one man, by getting involved too much in the *blutsh* (Yiddish for “mud”) of Cold War politics that distorted and corrupted even good men.”

Rutgers sociologist Martin Oppenheimer also joined the debate. In a letter to the editor of *Sociological Forum*, Oppenheimer revealed that he had told Jack Nussan Porter about Parsons’s 1948 trip and its sequel. Oppenheimer (1997b:339) characterized Parsons as “a paradigmatic Cold War liberal” who “was so intensely anti-Communist” that he “was prepared to align himself, his university, and his country with such unsavory forces that many good people ... wondered which empire was worse, theirs, or ours.” This position accorded with Oppenheimer’s earlier (1973) criticisms of what he called “the university-military complex.” Oppenheimer faulted Uta Gerhardt for not mentioning Parsons’s 1948 activities in her book on Parsons

and National Socialism, and he rejected the suggestion that his own position represented “left-wing McCarthyism.” Although he concluded (1997b:340) that Nicholas Poppe’s wartime role “was probably minimal,” he asserted that Parsons “was aware, at least in general terms, of the backgrounds of the Soviet emigres with whom he was directly or indirectly involved.”

Oppenheimer (1997a) developed some of these points at greater length in an article, “Footnote to the Cold War: The Harvard Russian Research Center,” published in *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine*. He began by characterizing Parsons in terms of the functional analysis of social systems, which he described (1997a:1) as “an essentially status-quo oriented sociology.” Oppenheimer was especially critical of the involvement of the Carnegie Corporation, which, he (1997a:5) asserted, pursued “a strategy in aid of corporate and financial interests” by “using its scholarly resources to advance the assumptions of cold war ideology.” In Oppenheimer’s view (1997a:6), the U.S.-U.S.S.R. cold war “provided an ideological framework for Harvard’s project in Germany which began with Parsons’s 1948 trip. Parsons’s anti-Communism ... allowed him to ignore the unsavory nature of his research sources as well as the Air Force’s research agenda targeting the Soviet Union’s civilian population.”

Such criticisms might have resonated with the significant number of sociologists—especially younger generations—who had come into the field with a New Left orientation, some of whom, like Oppenheimer, contributed to the neo-Marxist revival of the 1970s that led to the creation of a Marxist section of ASA. For such persons, sociology was a resistance movement on the political left, while Parsons, along with Harvard, was a staunch supporter of the conservative right. Their concern was not so much the possible association between Parsons and Nazi collaborators as it was his alleged association with the corporate and military sectors that they viewed as engaged in new forms of imperialism and oppression. Parsons was on “the wrong side of history.”

Meanwhile, with the rise of postmodernism, post-structuralism, critical race theory, queer theory, new waves of feminism and post-colonialism, the writings of Parsons began to seem to many not so much evil as merely irrelevant, relics of an earlier era. Even among those who retained interest in functional analysis, there was an attitude that one could get a better, and far more comprehensible, presentation of this perspective from the works of Merton.

There were, however, also continuing efforts to remember Parsons in a positive manner. Thus, in 1989, Charles Camic (1989) published an article in the top-tier *American Journal of Sociology*, “Structure After 50 Years: The Anatomy of a Charter,” that lauded Parsons’s first major work as “one of the classics of the sociological tradition.” Shortly thereafter, Camic (1991) brought out the edited collection, *Talcott Parsons: The Early Essays*, in the “Heritage of Sociology” series published by the University of Chicago. Meanwhile, Robertson and Turner (1991) produced *Talcott Parsons: Theorist of Modernity*. Several years later, Holmwood (1996) offered the friendly critique, *Founding Sociology? Talcott Parsons and the Idea of General Theory*. The following year, Renee Fox (1997) published an affectionate memoir, “Talcott Parsons, My Teacher.” In 1999 Bernard Barber and Uta Gerhardt (1999) published *Agenda for Sociology: Classic Sources and Current Uses of Talcott Parsons’s*

Work. Keen's 1999 book, *Stalking The Sociological Imagination: J. Edgar Hoover's Surveillance of American Sociology* (1999) bolstered Parsons's liberal credentials by revealing how Parsons had been suspected of harboring Communist sentiments. In 2001, Javier Trevino (2001) edited the collection *Talcott Parsons Today: His Theory and Legacy* that included chapters by sociologists in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and Germany, as well as the U.S. In 2002, Gerhardt (2002) published *Talcott Parsons: An Intellectual Biography*, which characterized many of Parsons's writings—even *The Structure of Social Action*—as defenses of pluralistic democracy. In the same year, the Russell Sage foundation sponsored a conference honoring Parsons on the centennial of his birth. Papers presented there were subsequently published in the volume, *After Parsons: A Theory of Social Action for the Twenty-First Century* (Fox et al., 2005).

This rough sketch captures some of the vicissitudes of intellectual and ethical evaluations of Parsons by relevant audiences. His moral career is thus a "definitional contest" (Nichols, 1991). The process, interestingly, is open-ended to such a degree that it continues now, more than four decades after Parsons's passing in 1979. Indeed, the individual articles presented here, and the issue as a whole, contribute to the interplay of constructions. Giuseppe Sciortino, for instance, commends Parsons as an advocate of ever-increasing equality in a "societal community," citing as evidence Parsons's publications criticizing anti-Semitism (1942) and calling for "full citizenship for the negro American" (1965), as well as the volume on "the Negro American" that Parsons co-edited with Black educator Kenneth B. Clark (1966). Anne Rawls and Jason Turowetz, however, criticize Parsons for failing to identify with marginal groups and for helping to reproduce social inequality.

The original presentation of the "moral career" concept by Erving Goffman seemed to characterize the process of evaluating identities as public, at least to some significant degree. Sociologists of deviance as well as criminologists working within the "labeling" or "social reaction" approach also emphasized this public dimension, with particular reference to such events as arrests, prosecutions, convictions, incarcerations, mental health hearings and excommunications. But it also seems to be the case that much evaluation takes place in private or semi-private settings. Regarding Parsons, this might mean unobserved decisions of sociology faculty teaching courses on theory or the history of theory about what textbooks and readings to assign. In some instances, the relative devaluation of Parsons, compared with his earlier period of eminence, might occur simply by omission. In others, instructors might comment in lecture that Parsons was a defender of the status quo, rather than an advocate of social justice in an egalitarian sense. There is no good way to measure the occurrence of such micro-events whose cumulative effect might be significant.

Moral careers can also be influenced indirectly. For instance, a recent article that I published on sociologist and social psychologist Louisa Pinkham Holt (Nichols, 2019) showed that Parsons, and the type of sociology he sought to develop, were cited in influential testimony in the landmark racial desegregation case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. The NAACP invited Pinkham Holt, who was living in Topeka, Kansas and had a child in the school system there, to serve as an expert witness in the lawsuit brought by Oliver Brown, whose daughter Linda was being bused to a distant, all-Black school. Pinkham Holt had done graduate work at

Harvard, and she had recently completed a doctoral thesis under Parsons's direction. She cited him as an authority on childhood socialization during testimony on the harmful effects of segregated education, portions of which were quoted nearly word for word by both the federal district court and the U.S. Supreme Court in its historic 1954 ruling. Learning of such information might have at least some small impact on readers' views of Parsons.

In conclusion, it seems clear that Parsons has had, and indeed continues to have, a complex moral career involving elevation, decline and at least a partial restoration to a place of honor. Very likely, favorable evaluations of Parsons as a broad-gauge thinker who did much to gain acceptance for sociology will appear in future books on theory and the history of the field. Meanwhile, however, the political climate in sociology, influenced by the discipline's "move to the left" (Burawoy, 2005), its "feminization," and the popularity of conflict perspectives, will virtually guarantee further criticisms of Parsons for having been insufficiently concerned about injustice and insufficiently committed to transformation. Meanwhile, Parsons might benefit from what seems to be a lessening of animosity toward Harvard, which came to be viewed during his time there as a bastion of white, male, upper-class privilege and an instrument of controversial U.S. foreign policy. Since Parsons's retirement, Harvard has merged with its female counterpart, Radcliffe College, and it has become more diverse in terms of the student body, faculty, staff and administration. Such associations, it seems, are important for moral careers, though this has perhaps not been systematically explored in the professional literature.

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