

Peter Tetley BA Sociology, 1984-85 Yr II, Lecture handout (amended)

### **Lecture 3. The development of twentieth century sociology: the social system**

Talcott Parsons' introduction of system into sociological thought (*Towards a General Theory of Action*, 1952) was preceded by a period of some twenty years of active theoretical work that was oriented in a different direction - towards the attempted development of a 'voluntaristic theory of action'. The contradiction between the idea of voluntarism and the constraints of the social system is a fundamental and significant feature of the work of Talcott Parsons. He began his intellectual work during the 1930's at Harvard and a significant influence upon him at this time was the seminar on Pareto that Henderson, a Harvard physiologist, was running. However, it was only in the 1940's that Parsons developed the ideas drawn from this seminar. Parsons, although much influenced by this seminar and by a year as a graduate student in Heidelberg, initially began by attempting to identify a convergence within social (rather sociological) theory itself.

In his first book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Parsons began by identifying elements within the work of Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, Marshall, etc. as representing theoretical convergence towards a relationship between human beings and society, which could be described as voluntaristic. That is, the individuals in society accept, voluntarily, the constraints upon their social lives. However, whilst the book represents an ingenious attempt to bring together disparate and quite contradictory theoretical arguments, Parsons fails to achieve his principal objective, which was the demonstration of a clear and unambiguous voluntarism.

The reason is as follows: Kant's initial attempt (1781-88) to identify the conditions whereby human beings could live a life that was free and human failed because of Kant's inability to find an adequate foundation for the moral will—which would itself guarantee free, equal and human life—other than as an expressed obligation to God or to some earthly authority. This failure leads, almost directly, to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their experience of moral catastrophe. Kant's failure to ground the moral will was due to his inability to find some criteria of autonomous reason equivalent to the principle of pure reason that grounds knowledge.

In this sense, Parson's project is always likely to fail for it presupposes a resolution of the Kantian project. But it was also likely to fail as a result of Parson's inability to satisfactorily resolve his own dilemma regarding social order. This problem runs all the way through *The Structure of Social Action*, which begins by suggesting that the proper question is: 'How is society possible?'

What Parsons had to do in the book was to show how a voluntaristic adherence to a normative order enables society to be possible. His reason for attempting to demonstrate the convergence hypothesis was that he could show that all the theorists he was concerned with were also concerned with the problem of the normative social order. But adherence to the normative order (the value system) in a voluntaristic sense, is conditional upon the resolution of the Kantian problem. As no philosopher has come close to an adequate resolution of that problem since the end of the 18th century, and Parsons does not use philosophical argument, other than a naïve version of German idealism, the whole enterprise of *The Structure of Social Action* is problematic.

Parsons returned, following the second world war, with a commitment to the idea of systematic social equilibrium, which presupposed that individuals had limited opportunities to express their wishes. This idea is developed in several books including: *The Social System*, *Towards a General Theory of Social Action*, and many papers.

This development of a theoretical analysis of the social system is significant both the theoretical analysis and the importance for American sociology. For a period of about ten or fifteen years Parsonian sociology became the dominant theoretical 'paradigm' in American sociology whereby all theoretical contributions were judged by the extent to which they conformed, or did not conform, to the dominant 'paradigm'.

The concept of the social system owes much to Pareto, Cannon and Henderson and not a little to the notion of Durkheim that societies are so organised that a primary requirement of the individual members of them is their obligation to act in accordance with the values that the society is organised around.

Thus, Durkheim's concept of the conscience collective becomes the concept of the social system within which 'the basic alternatives of selective orientation' are organised. Without this system 'of stable expectations' social action would not exist. 'Consensus' with respect to selections of action 'is vital' to a stable social system. In effect, Parsons having failed to provide an adequate conceptualisation of freedom (voluntaristic action) moves back to a set of constraints on individual liberty.

Before moving on to the detail of the system it is worth noting that the principal problem Parsons has is that of understanding and using rationality. His difficulty is that, as Hawthorn points out, he uses rationality as a similar concept whereas the individuals he chooses, in the *Structure of Social Action*, to base his concept of voluntarism on, use rationality in very different ways.

Parsons uses two separate concepts, or sets of concepts, to articulate his understanding of the social system. The first is the concept of system imperatives: adaptation, goal-attainment, integration, latency, commonly referred to as A-G-I-L. These four system imperatives are common to all social systems—the social system, for Parsons, is a concept which refers universally to human social interaction. In other words, all social interaction, irrespective of numbers involved, can be represented as a social system together with the necessary imperatives of adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency.

However, whilst the social system remains the social order that all members must acknowledge, Parsons requires some specification of the 'orientations of the individual' towards the social system. These he provides in his concept of pattern variables. There are four pattern variables: self-collectivity; universal-particular; affectivity-neutrality; performance (specificity)—quality (diffuseness). It is probably better to read the last one as instrumental-evaluative. These four pattern variables represent the *complete* range of alternative 'orientations' to social action that an individual may choose in any social context. They represent 'cognitive' dispositions to action.

In this usage, the limitations of Parsons' handling of rationality are considerable. For example, Weber's categories of action include instrumental rationality (Parsons' cognitive orientation towards action) but also includes affectual and traditional action as well as value rationality, none of which are considered in the concept of pattern variable. The notion of affectivity, for example, is a cognitive concept of affectivity rather than an application of Weber's concept of affectual action. Similarly, the Durkheimian conception of altruistic, egoistic and anomic relationships towards the social order presupposes some understanding, other than cognitive, of the ways in which individuals may relate to a set of social values that are imposed upon them by the society and the social order.

Within the social system the use of the concepts of functional sub-systems and the pattern variables enables Parsons to develop a reasonably coherent, albeit cognitively rational, account of a social system within which social roles are functionally related to sub-system activity and representative of pattern variable choices by the individual in any social situation. What is absolutely clear is that the sub-system imperatives and the pattern variables form a framework within which the individual has some choice. However, the individual cannot move outside that framework and choose a course of action. It is this constraint that enables Parsons to produce a consensual model of society in which social deviance—in the sense of differences from prescribed role behaviour—can be identified as 'dysfunctional' and, therefore, to be proscribed and punished.

The critical process in this analysis is socialisation. In the process of socialisation, individuals establish:

- (i) their own identity;
- (ii) the motivation for successful role behaviour;
- (iii) successful social and cultural learning.

The understanding, and significance, Parsons gives to socialisation is based on his reading of Freud. According to that reading, pleasure is the greatest stimulus for social and cultural activity:

‘Successful socialisation requires that social and cultural learning be strongly motivated through the engagement of pleasure mechanisms of the organism. Hence, it depends on relatively stable intimate relations between young children and adults, whose own erotic motives and relations tend to be deeply engaged too. This complex of exigencies, which we have come to understand much more fully since Freud, is an essential aspect of the functioning of kinship relations in all human societies.’ (Parsons, T., 1966, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall).

References:

Parsons, T. *The Structure of Social Action* Parsons,

Parsons, T. *The Social System*

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