

Confrontations and Controversies in the Theory of Talcott Parsons

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Abstract: Since the turn of the 1960s, Talcott Parsons' social thought has met with criticism that his image of society is conservative inasmuch as he places consensus and systematic concept formation over and above conflict and 'sociological imagination'. The hidden agenda in this criticism is political: the charges are that Parsons supposedly disavows democracy in his implicit or explicit knowledge aim, and that his sociology presumably makes society function even at the expense of freedom of the individual. Here the author argues that these accusations cannot stand if archival materials such as lecture notes, correspondence, and unpublished memoranda are taken into account. She claims that Parsons in his sociology conceptualised society from the standpoint of the real world of the day, including the major historical confrontations from the 1930s to the end of the 1970s. The first such scenario and the earliest confrontation that his work faced was in the era of the New Deal and the Second World War as the Anglo-Saxon democracies fought the racist imperialism of Nazi Germany; his 'middle phase' from the 1950s to the mid-1960s coincides with the Cold War at its height, the standoff between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union; and his 'late oeuvre' has yet another agenda, namely the Watergate Affair, but also the struggle for racial equality and university reform in the United States. In his theoretical positions and in his opposition to his critics, Parsons defended liberal democracy against the powerful social and intellectual forces that put it to the test.

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On 22 July 1968, the *New York Times* published a one-page Peace Plan whose author was Andrei Sakharov, the Soviet nuclear scientist who made the audacious suggestion that universal détente cum disarmament was the only rational alternative to the destruction of mankind through nuclear warfare—a slap in the face of the government of Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow as the Soviet Union had

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recently doubled its nuclear arms potential.¹ The impetus was that Sakharov attended the 18th Pugwash Conference in Canada, the meeting of nuclear scientists from the West and the Eastern bloc, whose chair at the time was the President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Harvard sociologist and fierce defender of academic freedom through intellectual exchange in science, Talcott Parsons.² Most likely it was Parsons who brought Sakharov into contact with the *New York Times*, thereby enabling the Russian dissident, who was to return to the Soviet Union nevertheless, to voice his warnings in a newspaper that was reaching the entire world at the height of the Cold War, a spectacular move, during the last month of the Prague Spring, which would soon be crushed by Warsaw Pact tanks under Soviet leadership.

The story is noteworthy even today for a reason: that President of the AAAS had the courage, if not chutzpah, to help publicise the peace plan, whose author, a Soviet citizen, one of the world's leading nuclear scientists, and a courageous man, hoped to voice publicly his warnings against nuclear armament. Parsons made it possible for Sakharov to fulfil his precious mission: this sociologist could not have been the conservative American who was accused by the younger generation in the 1960s of condoning Western imperialism and dismissing individualism, the charges levelled against him from the late 1950s to the 1980s (on how young sociologists in the 1960s saw themselves as critics of Parsons, see Gouldner [1970], Habermas [1981], and Buxton [1985]; see also Sica and Turner [2005]). That his work lacked humanism was one frequent objection against systems theory [see Wrong 1961; Homans 1964], a criticism as equally unfounded as was the polemic that his conception of a social system emulated George Orwell's quasi-totalitarian *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (on this accusation, see Dahrendorf [1958]). That he had called himself an 'incurable theorist' on one occasion,³ would not make his theory abstract nor his analytical schemes lack empirical grounding, as has been common opinion in some secondary literature until today [see Mills 1959; Black 1961; Martindale 1961; Calhoun 2008].

Misconception of Parsons's politics even predates *The Social System*. In a book review commenting on the first collection of his essays published in 1949, Lewis Coser, who considered himself a Marxist, charged Parsons with the inability to take account the real world. The charge was that in a society as envisaged by Parsons, conflict was the sign of dysfunction, but conflict should be made

¹ Materials concerning the Pugwash conferences, organised by Parsons as President of the AAAS, have been preserved in the Harvard University Archives, in the Parsons papers under the call numbers of HUG(FP) 25.25, boxes 3–9, and also HUS(FP) 42.8.8, box 1. The Sakharov manuscript and an article from *Izvestia* reprinted in the *New York Times* on 19 August can be found in HUG(FP) 15.25, box 7.

² His term of office as President of AAAS was 1967–1971; he was re-elected in 1969.

³ The dedication of *The Social System* to Helen, his wife, in which he calls himself an 'incurable theorist' has been cited as if it were a true characterisation in Mitchell [1967].

the spur for democracy and social change instead [Coser 1950].⁴ The criticism resurfaced a decade later when C. Wright Mills, another theorist who considered himself a radical, accused *The Social System* of being 'grand theory' dubbed meaningless, a presumptive edifice of concepts that is empty historically [Mills 1959].⁵

My paper argues that these accusations need further rebuttal. My thesis is that Parsons in his sociology conceptualised society from the standpoint of the real world of the day, including the major historical confrontations from the 1930s to the end of the 1970s. I venture that he defended democracy as he stated his views and opposed his critics in the name of the sociology of Max Weber, his key intellectual inspiration [see Gerhardt 2005].

What were the confrontations and controversies in this intellectual biography? Part One deals with the early work and recollects how in the 1930s and early 1940s German National Socialism threatened liberal democracies when Parsons' first major opus, *The Structure of Social Action* [Parsons (1937a) 1968], was concerned with this conflict; in the following years, he pursued the issue further in, for one, 'Max Weber and the Contemporary Political Crisis', a sociological analysis of the Nazi regime [Parsons (1942) 1993]; see also below. His opponent at the time was his Harvard colleague Pitirim Sorokin, a follower of Social Darwinism and advocate of positivist utilitarianism in the tradition of Herbert Spencer, against whose theoretical approach Parsons held Weberian 'voluntarism'.

Part Two looks at the 'middle phase' whose main work was *The Social System* (1951), the book that together with other writings proposed comparative schemes to conceptualise process patterns in social action and social change.⁶ The Cold War dominated the world at the time, I argue, and Parsons used sociology to help understand modern industrial democracy, including what the difference was, at the time, between democratic and non-democratic regimes. His political themes in this phase of his oeuvre were McCarthyism but also the United Nations in their role as a forum for exchange, if not rapprochement, between the Communist East and the capitalist West. The controversies he was involved in concerned C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* and made him antagonise 'Critical Theory' on the occasion of the Heidelberg Sociology Conference in 1964. The basic scenario in the 'middle phase', I venture, was that Parsons understood that Marxism, the preferred worldview of many in the young(er) generation who thus hoped to embrace humanism and social justice, was an ideology that needed well-argued rejection.

⁴ The argument was elaborated further in Coser [1956], the monograph that invoked the sociology of Georg Simmel as an alternative to seemingly narrow-minded structural functionalism.

⁵ Mills ridiculed 'Grand Theory' but did not present well-founded criticism. On the debate between Mills and Parsons, see Gerhardt [2011: 190–235] and Scott [2016]; see also below.

⁶ The four pattern conceptions were the AGIL scheme, the LIGA scheme, and the four function scheme, in addition to the pattern variables explained in *The Social System*. See also below.

Part Three deals with the 'late oeuvre'. Between the middle 1960s and the end of the 1970s, his themes were the Civil Rights movement and legislation, the student revolt and university reform, and also the Watergate Affair, to name but a few. The main achievement in the 'late phase' was that his theory now focused on the societal community as the forum for integration where the interaction media were the agents for exchange in the exceedingly complex democratic society. There was one controversy that he took a stance on, protesting the return of utilitarianism in neo-liberalist economics but also sociology. Against such aberrations, he held the 'spirit' of capitalism as explained by Weber, whom he defended vigorously against simplistic interpretations. His knowledge interest was, as stated in *The American Societal Community* [Parsons 2007], an unfinished monograph, how modern society can be both individualistic and a structured social order.

'Voluntarism' vs Social Darwinism

The Structure of Social Action, written by the non-tenured Harvard professor whose only academic degree was a *Dr. phil.* from Heidelberg University, opposed the leading theory in America. Favouring the approaches of 'four European writers', including Max Weber, the latter a thinker hardly known in America at the time, Parsons stood against the tradition in American mainstream sociology. The sentence in the opening paragraph of the book, 'Spencer is dead' [Parsons (1937a) 1968: 3], was a wake-up call. The quote was taken from Harvard historian Crane Brinton's study of British political philosophy in the 19th century and the point was that American social theory had gone in the wrong direction since the 1880s.⁷

'Spencer is dead' meant that 'survival of the fittest' and the 'struggle for survival' were no longer good enough as principles of explanation for progress and culture in the modern world. The argument was that four 'recent European writers'—Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber—had elaborated theories that could convincingly explain the society of the 1930s, which they helped renounce and replace as they did the Social Darwinism that reigned supreme at the time in American social thought.

The original baseline, undoubtedly, had been Spencer's *Social Statics, or the Conditions Essential of Human Happiness* published in 1850 [see Spencer 1850, 1852], the approach that extended classical political economy into a theory of society whose *law of equity* invoked three propositions: first, that the liberty of every person be such that unlimited competition benefit 'survival of the fittest' in the universal 'struggle for survival'; second, that the poor law, the welfare state, public education, and modern medicine, inasmuch as they allowed for survival of the weak, endanger the fitness of the human race and thus threaten further

⁷ Brinton understood Spencer's sociology as an approach of political philosophy, a view that encompassed the world as such [see Brinton 1933].

evolution of humankind; third, that cultural progress is no automatic process but depends on the condition that premature death carry away those who are unfit before they can multiply—as Spencer chose to phrase it.⁸ One American social theorist who had dwelled on Spencer's idea of natural selection in his opposition to the welfare state but also universal education and modern medicine, was William Graham Sumner, who in *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* [Sumner 1883] and his eminently influential *Folkways* [Sumner 1906] had propagated the idea of survival of the fittest as the law of nature that should not be altered or interfered with through political institutions or social policy. In 1928, the comprehensive compendium *Contemporary Sociological Theories* by Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin had followed the Darwinist tradition when the work undertook to separate ten 'schools' of social thought in the United States and Europe.⁹ Sorokin's thesis was that 'a biological interpretation of social phenomena' is indispensable to social theory: 'It is useless and hopeless to try to shut the gates of sociology to an intrusion of biological interpretations, as urged by some 'formal sociologists' at the present time.' [Sorokin 1928: 355]

One such 'formal sociologist', and one who had extended, as he did, Georg Simmel's forms of sociation into types of social action, was Max Weber, whose work Sorokin judged to be 'psycho-sociological theory', which he deemed unsatisfactory. He called Weber unable to explain conditioning and causation in social life. Weber's sociology of religion, he felt, gave no usable answers regarding the workings of social factors: 'Weber's analysis does not show even tentatively what the share of the religious factor is in molding the *Wirtschaftsethik*, and correspondingly the effects of the *Wirtschaftsethik* in the field of economic phenomena. Thus, after M. Weber's work we are as ignorant about the degree of efficiency in the religious factor as we were before.'" [ibid.: 691]¹⁰

On the occasion of the First German Sociology Conference in Frankfurt in 1910, Weber opposed social biology when he commented on the paper 'The Concepts of Race and Society' by Alfred Ploetz, the vastly successful organiser of the popular social movement endorsing 'social biology' under the umbrella of 'societal hygiene'. Ploetz had opposed modern medicine and its humanism as he had made the betterment of the race conditional upon *Auslese and Ausjäte* (not only

⁸ Notably, the idea spurred Darwin in his ground-breaking *The Origin of Species* [Darwin 1859]; see also Gerhardt [2001].

⁹ Sorokin [1928] distinguished between the 'Bio-Organismic School', the 'Antropo-Racial, Selectionist, and Hereditary School', the 'Sociological Interpretation of the "Struggle for Existence" and the Sociology of War', and the 'Bio-Social Branch: Demographic School', in addition to three branches of the 'Sociological School', and one 'Psychological School'—plus 'Psycho-Sociological Theories of Religion, Mores, Law, Public Opinion, Arts, and Other Cultural Phenomena as Factors', the residual category that Max Weber supposedly belonged into.

¹⁰ On Sorokin's discussion of Weber's sociology of religion, including Weber's *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*, see Sorokin [1928: 673–696].

selection cum programmed multiplication of the fit but also planned destruction of the unfit) [see Plötz 1895]—Weber in his ad hoc rebuttal of the Ploetz lecture delivered from the floor during discussion time denounced racism as methodologically untenable and therefore scientifically useless [Weber (1910) 1924]. There was ‘not a single fact’ relevant for sociology, Weber exclaimed, that could prove any kind of systematic influence that hereditary factors had on social processes—without such proof, he insisted, the approach was worthless.¹¹

The Structure of Social Action made the ‘four European writers’ an antidote against positivism and utilitarianism (for Parsons’ anti-positivism in *Structure*, see Schlembach [2017]). That Spencer’s ‘survival of the fittest’ and ‘struggle for survival’ were the principles that modern sociology could not accept, was the message of the book’s first three chapters that denounced as faulty ‘the positivistic theory of action’ and recommended embracing methodology instead. The new baseline for concept formation was in the philosophy of science of Alfred N. Whitehead and Lawrence Henderson: ‘In this study a fact is understood to be an “empirically verifiable statement about phenomena in terms of a conceptual scheme”’ [Parsons (1937a) 1968: 41]. From this vantage point, ‘the emergence of a voluntaristic theory of action from the positivistic tradition’ was the theme to tackle in Parts II-III, Chapters IV-XVII. Parsons ploughed through the writings of the ‘four recent Europeans’ in his effort to find in their assumptions and observations methodologically adequate conceptualisations of social action. The four approaches helped depict what were the two types of systems of social action—both equally relevant for the 1930s. That was to say, social action as a subject of sociological theory explaining contemporary society had a two-pronged structure: at one pole were coercive regimes where force and fraud, anomie, and also charisma and ritual reigned; at the opposite pole were the democratic regimes whose features were in the social action that Weber had called a type of rational-legal authority.¹²

That force and fraud could dominate a society had been proved by Pareto when he analysed historical social systems; that anomie signalled a loss of normative principles and the disappearance of values where integration in the society was weak had been shown by Durkheim in his studies on the division of labour and suicide; and that the charisma of a leader could mean coercive rule based on irrational beliefs was highlighted by Weber, who made the hallmark of

¹¹ ‘[D]ass es heutzutage auch nur eine einzige Tatsache gibt, die für die Soziologie relevant wäre, auch nur eine exakte konkrete Tatsache, die eine bestimmte Gattung von soziologischen Vorgängen wirklich einleuchtend und endgültig, exakt und einwandfrei zurückführte auf angeborene und vererbliche Qualitäten, welche eine Rasse besitzt und eine andere definitiv – wohlgemerkt: definitiv! – nicht, das bestreite ich mit aller Bestimmtheit und werde ich so lange bestreiten, bis mir diese Tatsache genau bezeichnet ist.’ [Weber (1910) 1924: 459]

¹² The working title under which the book had been written in the three years between 1933 and 1936 was *Sociology and the Elements of Social Action*.

the charismatic one 'pure' type of legitimate regime¹³—the culmination was that Durkheim's idea of ritual fitted Weber's conception of charisma, and both together yielded the most striking explanation of the true nature of non-democratic contemporary regimes. Parsons found that this convergence proved his thesis of the two-pronged structure of social action, when social theory looked at the real world of the 1930s, as force and fraud, anomie and charisma cum ritual were the characteristics of an anomic-type society, whose prototype was Nazi Germany.

That he thus targeted fascism through his analysis of anomie and force but also values, as he had hinted at in *The Structure of Social Action*, he made plain in a series of lectures delivered in the winter and spring of 1938. Lecture notes designated for Yale University in March 1938 (no title, marked 'New Haven' and dated) contain the following themes he dealt with:¹⁴

Anomie: ... Nationalism Jews ... Rapid rise to national power. Defeat and humiliation. ... Force—Pareto—both internal and external applications. ... Value—ideological side of Nazi Movement: ... Paranoid tendency ... In Germany always more opposition to liberalism than elsewhere ... *Modern* dictatorship largely a product of social disintegration ... Führerprinzip Race ... danger of immobile traditionalism.¹⁵

Another lecture marked 'Gov 16', possibly a Harvard seminar, warned against 'anti-theoretical empiricists' but referred to the 'four recent European writers' as the authors 'most important for development of social science' in view of the '[p]roblem of order and integration of ends'. He noted: 'Systems of rational action—Pareto's theory of social utility. Weber & Marshall & Durkheim on ethical basis of capitalism. Distinction of the irrational and the non-logical. ... Ritual, [...] Gemeinschaft etc. Durkheim and Weber.'¹⁶ This lecture, to be sure, explained the democratic pole in the structure of social action: from the standpoint of voluntarism, pluralist society is envisaged with its opposite in mind, irrational fascism.

That freedom of the individual is an ethical principle that needs elucidation in the context of 'empirical problems involved in the interpretation of some of the main features of the modern economic order, of "capitalism", "free enterprise", "economic individualism", as it has been variously called', Parsons had stated in no uncertain terms in the Preface of *The Structure of Social Action* [Parsons (1937a) 1968: xxii]. The main purpose of the book was to concretise the coercive pole in the structure of social action through the four European theories, but the counter-

¹³ *The Structure of Social Action* condenses Weber's three types into the two opposites—the charismatic-traditional now stands against the rational-legal system of social action.

¹⁴ The spelling and use of capital letters in the quoted text are Parsons' own in the handwritten lecture notes.

¹⁵ Lecture notes 'New Haven, March 1938', pp. 1–5; Harvard University Archives, HUG(FP)—42.45.4, box 1.

¹⁶ Lecture notes 'Shop Club, Feb, 16th 1938', pp. 1–2, Parsons papers—42.45.4, box 1.

part also mattered, namely social integration as characteristic for modern liberal society—its main features were legality, security, and rationality.

Legality, as Parsons stated, was behind Marshall's idea that the economy ensure satisfaction of wants which also meant that it protected from fraud; the same idea was in Weber's type of the rational-legal regime, when regulation of social relations invoked 'spirit' as the normative orientation in modern capitalism, to mention one noteworthy issue.

Security, on this note, was 'security against aggression' [ibid.: 95]. That is, the 'motive of participation in civil society' [ibid.] was security, taking into account that Thomas Hobbes had warned against the 'War of All Against All' in the 17th century. Such danger, Parsons realised, was one strong deterrent against chaos when a society seeks security at the price of the liberty of its citizens.

Rationality, the third feature in the integrated society, could build community on reciprocity in social relations. The idea was that non-aggressive actors were to interact with each other in a non-coercive world. In the idealised case, Parsons came to feel, there should be full institutionalisation of voluntary commitment in the society. However, admittedly, the 'purely voluntary commitment is the limiting case where the element of legitimacy is reduced to a minimum' [ibid.: 660–661].

The societal scenario for such a conceptual clarification was the New Deal, the regime that Parsons deemed nearest to the society whose integration hinged on voluntary commitment [see Brick 1996]. The political ideal for him was liberalism, whose aims were equality of opportunities as well as social justice. *The Structure of Social Action* made liberalism the credo for voluntarism, the theoretical perspective envisaged in the works of the 'four European writers'. Democracy stood for the society in which voluntarism meant legality, security, and rationality (reciprocity of social relations)—the theory placed voluntarism in the centre of what the fourteen main chapters of the work clarified.

To note, 'voluntarism' was no invention of Parsons'. He had taken the term from Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the treatise on religious preconditions of modern capitalism. Weber had written of 'voluntaristic community formation' (*voluntaristische Gemeinschaftsbildung*) in the Puritan congregations of New England, whose members had vowed obedience to the strict regimen regulating their conduct of life, when their participation was strictly voluntary (*freiwillig*) [Weber (1904/1905) 1920: 162]. The issue was that no force was being applied in such innerworldly asceticism.¹⁷ Parsons, whose political credo was liberalism, made Weber's voluntarism the theoretical perspective whose

¹⁷ The entire sentence from Weber in translation into English of Parsons: 'That the Baptist movement everywhere and in principle founded sects and not Churches was certainly as favourable to their asceticism, as was the case, with differing degrees, with those Pietist, Methodist, and Calvinist communities which were driven by their situations into the formation of voluntary groups.' [Weber (1930) 1976: 152–153].

image of man made the actor a 'rational, creative, evaluating creature' [Parsons 1935: 282].

From this vantage point, Social Darwinism was an ideology that could not stand. That force and fraud, anomie and charisma cum ritual were the main features of dictatorship, was the political understanding that targeted Nazi Germany, whose official doctrine was Social Darwinism, the anti-Semitism based on the racist principles of 'heredity, struggle, and selection' (see Hawkins [1997: 282]; the book has a chapter on 'Nazism, Fascism and Social Darwinism', 272–291). In American social thought, intellectual historian Richard Hofstadter recalls, Social Darwinism had provided the justification for racism and imperialism until the First World War, but in the 1920s and 1930s the support for Social Darwinism had given way to the occasional doubt that it might 'weaken the cause of democracy and strengthen class pride and the power of wealth' [Hofstadter (1944) 1983: 200].

Parsons became an ardent opponent of National Socialism after Germany staged a pogrom against Jews in November of 1938. The crux was, as he wrote in a short essay later that month, that America, the land 'in the tradition of liberal individualism and democracy' [Parsons (1938) 1993: 81], faced a Germany that had become 'the most formidable threat to many institutional fundamentals of western civilization as a whole' [ibid.]. Germany's hostility to humanism and occidental culture, he declared, 'makes it necessarily a deadly enemy for us. We must oppose it with all our strength' [ibid.: 83].

In the next seven years until the end of the Second World War, he became a political activist engaged in anti-Nazi work: He joined local and national organizations and became highly active in the Harvard Defense Group, whose purpose was to strengthen American democracy against Nazi warfare and propaganda [Gerhardt (2002a) 2010: chapter 2]. In a fifty-page memorandum prepared for the Council for Democracy in the summer of 1940, he compared American liberalism with Nazi totalitarianism—the six elements of the former, he explained, were constitutionalism, civil liberties, equality of opportunity, commitment to the community of citizens, rational-critical spirit, and activism, but the latter had had five different elements, namely nationalism bound up with 'Aryan' race, socialism suggesting an ominous folk-community, anti-intellectualism, militarism, and the particularism of the *Führerprinzip* in a pyramid-like power structure 'culminating in the supreme leader' who 'has unlimited power with no legal definition, and each sub-leader has undefined authority, limited however, by his subordination to his superiors' [Parsons (1940) 1993: 119]. Early in 1942, the year in which he published six articles on the theme, he ventured a sociological explanation based on the theory of Weber: After careful reconstruction in Part I of the essay of Weber's distinction between rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic types of authority, he applied the typology to Hitler's Germany in Part II; he showed how strong the charismatic side of that regime was. The main point was that Nazi rule meant retrogressive social change leading backward from rational-legal to charismatic rule, the latter in this case a particularly atavistic traditionalism. 'When consid-

erations of the ideological content of National Socialism are combined with those of the dynamics of routinization of the charismatic movement', he wrote on the possible future of Nazi Germany, 'the evidence seems to be overwhelming. The consequence of [Nazi] political predominance for a considerable period would ... be the transformation ... into a system of institutional patterns of a strongly traditionalistic character.' [Parsons (1942) 1993: 179] This meant that racism might overrule all modern civilisation:

Elements of the social system which in the Western world have been relatively independent of the political organization as such, such as the dominant forms of private property and economic enterprise, market relationships, education and cultural activities, could hardly avoid being drawn into the same basic course of change. [ibid.]

The terror regime could eventually destroy humanism as such, unless it was halted by the victory of the Allies in the Second World War.

In January 1943, in a typewritten outline entitled 'Propaganda Recommendations', written under the impression of Germany's imminent defeat in the battle of Stalingrad, he recommended as a theme of propaganda addressing the Germans that they had been betrayed by their leaders. More might not be feasible, he cautioned his combatants on behalf of realistic policy: A revolt in Germany seemed unlikely, 'the machinery of suppression is too efficient'.¹⁸

System theory vs Marxism

In the immediate post-war years, Parsons' concern in the wake of the deployment of the atom bomb was the danger that irresponsible countries might be in possession of nuclear weapons [see Parsons 1947]. Between 1948 and 1950/1951, he wrote two book-length memoranda that discussed the contribution of social science to the preservation and efficiency of American democracy in the Second World War, thereby addressing the role that sociology could play in the post-war world.¹⁹ *The Social System*, his second masterpiece, was his third attempt at providing comprehensive sociological knowledge that could help forestall future crises in the advanced industrial society [see Gerhardt (2002a) 2010: chap. 3].

The key concept in *The Social System* appeared on page one, epitomising what social action had meant for Weber and should mean in system theory, based on the social relation whose principle was reciprocity: 'The fundamental starting point is the concept of social systems of action. The *interaction* of individual actors ... takes place under such conditions that it is possible to treat such a process

¹⁸ Parsons, 'Propaganda Recommendations', Parsons papers, HUG(FP) 15.2, box 9.

¹⁹ They were entitled 'Social Science—A National Resource' and 'Social Science—A Basic National Resource' (with John Riley).

of interaction as a system in the scientific sense' [Parsons (1951) 1964: 3]. The idea was that shared values are normative standards on which reciprocity hinges in the vast array of interactions in the society—normative orientation was to ensure that no coercion occur when actors more or less effectively and efficiently fulfilled their social roles in modern (Western) societies.

The main accomplishment of the work was a tableau of five pattern variables, i.e. dimensions of value orientation. These variables each had a democratic and a non-democratic pole. There is in this set-up, first, the variable of Universalism-Particularism, which encompasses universalistic standards for action that are applicable irrespective of the person concerned, on the one side, and particularistic standards that hinge on particulars such as gender, race, or power position, on the other. Second, there is the distinction between Achievement as a criterion for judging a person or action, and Ascription, which defines the social category that an actor must belong to. Third, social relations may require affectivity on the part of the actors, whereas others may call for or allow affective neutrality. Fourth, roles may encompass a whole range of functions bundled into one and the same (such a diffuse role, for instance, is that of mother), but others specify clearly between different realms when they regulate what the responsibility is in one position but not another (such specificity applies to the realms of education, occupational-economic life, or politics, etc.). Last but not least, a social role may permit or even demand self-interest in the pursuit of characteristic ends, but there are roles with orientations that Parsons calls disinterested, roles in which the actor may or must be geared to the well-being of another, such as a physician vis-à-vis their patient or a parent vis-à-vis their child. These five variables, *The Social System* explains, are elements that structure social action, and they help classify and compare empirical settings everywhere, including foreign lands and history. However, in sociological theory, Parsons goes on to say, two pattern variables have a special role to play: Universalism-Particularism cum Achievement-Ascription are juxtaposed in the explanation of democratic vs non-democratic regimes—the Universalism-Achievement combination stands for modern industrial society as it denotes an 'American ethos' [ibid.: 108], whereas a Universalism-Ascription structure dominated National Socialism (whose explanation requires further specifications). Regarding the former type, Parsons clarifies: The "'Universalistic Achievement Pattern" is best exemplified in the dominant American ethos. The combination of universalism and achievement-orientation puts the primary emphasis on universalistically defined goal-achievement and on the dynamic quality of continuing to achieve particular goals' [ibid.: 107–108]. Anglo-Saxon democracy, therefore, is different from all other regimes, including Nazi Germany, one notably conflict-ridden constellation of value-orientations [ibid.: 180–200, esp. 184–194].

In the five years that followed the publication of *The Social System*, Parsons introduced three more schemes with which sociology can compare and characterise not only social systems but also social action, not only as structures but also processes that denote social change as well as development. They were, for one, the AGIL scheme, which analyses social action as four-stage dynamics of

collective goal-fulfilment in small groups, the LIGA scheme, which depicts social change as an ordered process of phases in the advancement from one stage to another in all kinds of development [see Parsons, Bales and Shils 1953], and another scheme was introduced in the monograph *Economy and Society* [Parsons and Smelser 1956]. The latter work adopts Weber's social theory, adapting it to the facts of the world since the 1920s. Four subsystems are now pictured as co-existing in today's society. Their interaction explains how modern democratic pluralism works, when the four subsystems, marked each by their function, serve the social order as a whole. They are the economy, the political sphere, 'society' as a societal community, and education: these are special arenas in which occur material provision, or adaptation (A), collective decision-making, or goal attainment (G), internal cohesion, or integration (I), and, last but not least, the preservation of cultural tradition through pattern maintenance, or latency (L).

The four schemes, developed between 1951 and 1956, had to serve comparative analysis when they mapped out the goings-on in a given set-up at any point in time. In this way, Parsons hoped to make sociology take note systematically of the vast range of social facts. Methodologically, however, American democracy served as an ideal projection envisaging humanist pluralism in the modern world.

Undoubtedly, the conception of the four schemes was never entirely successful, if only because Parsons himself kept deviating from his own tenets, as he revised his system view again and again (though he kept the four-function, four-subsystem matrix more or less unchanged until the 1970s). As it happened, it was not Parsons himself who deemed this fourfold analytical approach static and descriptive, but his critics denounced *The Social System* as presumably presenting a mere taxonomy, when his knowledge aim had been that he wanted democracy to take centre stage in sociological theory.

The political writings of his 'middle phase' make it clear that he had the just society in mind. His lesser known works of this period include the essay on McCarthyism, but also his many writings on the relationship between the capitalist West and the Communist bloc. Here Parsons was right on the mark as he discussed the political problems that beset the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s.

His explanation of McCarthyism (published in 1954) took it as a problematic situation that the United States had become a world leader since the Second World War: Americans, he ventured, were not sufficiently prepared for that role yet, and under the conditions of a divided world and emerging Cold War, anti-Communism as mass hysteria had besieged the American mind – Communism became the culprit, when the fear of a lack of loyalty beset Americans who could not yet accept their nation's new responsibility as a super-power [Parsons 1954].²⁰

²⁰ The essay was republished in 1960 in Parsons' *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*, and again with a postscript in: Daniel Bell (ed.). 1963. *The Radical Right*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 209–238.

Six years later, in 1961, during the Kennedy era, a watershed in American history, he took another look at the East-West divide: Now he argued that there was no insurmountable ideological schism between socialism in the Soviet Union and capitalism in the United States. Both powers shared certain ideological symbols, he maintained, though they seemed to overestimate the achievements of their own regime and denigrate those of the opposing system. Common elements were, he assured, the 'Westernisation' of cultural values plus high regard for 'modernisation', including the primacy of health, education, and economic development, shared by both great powers in the Cold War and even China. In the same vein, he added, the United Nations had become the common platform for conflict resolution beyond the ideological differences between the West and the East. In other words, he saw a common social system evolve in the world despite the apparently utterly fragmented scenario of the ongoing Cold War [Parsons 1961a, 1961b].

In an unpublished working paper entitled 'Notes on the Problem of World Order', written perhaps in 1963, he discussed some conditions of peaceful co-existence between the Eastern bloc and the Western world: 'There is a basic solution of the bootstrap problem which has existed with varying degrees of effectiveness in many societies; it is the integration of the monopoly of force with the rule of law, a generalized, more or less universalistic system, to the control of which government itself is also subject, but at the same time responsible for enforcement. To some degree then responsibility for maintenance of the legal system must be institutionalized independently of the control of force.'²¹ In twenty-four numbered statements, he argued that power and force were not the same, that Western civilisation and 'Communist culture'²² had certain value orientations in common, though the latter might put different emphasis on issues of (quasi-)religious belief, and that the normative order in both Western society and the Communist world had its counterpart in an 'older, more partial order', one of alienation from a functioning normative order such as 'German nationalism [had] exhibited relative to the order between the wars'.²³ In other words, the solution of the problem of world order was no easy deal: The aim was that the great powers should not revert to force as means for system preservation, preferably through delegation of power when shared responsibility should be a 'bit-by-bit pluralistic process' rather than the 'all-or-none integration into a grand design' that might easily spell further conflict.²⁴ In a letter to Harvard political scientist Carl J. Friedrich,²⁵

²¹ Parsons, 'Notes on the Problem of World Order' (unpublished manuscript), p. 2; part of the sentence has been inserted by hand into the typed text. Parsons papers, HUG(FP)—15.4, box 11.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁵ Letter, Parsons to Carl J. Friedrich, dated 23 October 1962. Parsons papers, HUG(FP) 15.4, box 7.

Parsons praised Friedrich's distinction between 'coercion and power' because of the 'grounding of authority in something of the order of reason and the conception therefore that it must have a firm cultural basis'. It involved, he stated, 'the institutionalization of common value orientations and the cultural commitments associated with them'.

Both their views, Parsons wrote to Friedrich, 'stand in strong contrast to so much of the current pseudo-realistic theorizing in this whole area these days'. One such 'pseudo-realist theorist', no doubt, was Mills, against whose *The Power Elite* Parsons launched a scathing critique. The book diagnosed utter concentration of power in the military-industrial complex at the top of American society, but Parsons found three flaws in Mills' analysis: For one, Mills seemed to overestimate how closely knit the élite in the United States was; second, Mills conceptualised power as a 'zero-sum' phenomenon and seemed to overlook that power given to or assumed by one party need not be taken away from another, which meant that power was a 'non-zero-sum' phenomenon, including that rights and entitlements could increase or decrease in a society and even spread over a population more or less equally; third, charged Parsons, Mills overlooked the role of the Supreme Court, despite the fact that *Brown vs Board of Education*, a landmark case, had made jurisdiction a major agent for social change in the civil rights of Black Americans. Retaliating on his part to such harsh critique, Mills, who saw himself as an advocate for democratic socialism, heaped caustic criticism on systems theory in *The Sociological Imagination*, still a bestseller today.²⁶

The other controversy that Parsons engaged in during his 'middle phase', again arguing against sociologists who considered themselves Marxists, was the standoff during the Heidelberg Sociology Conference of 1964. His opponents, on the occasion of the conference organised by the German Sociological Society celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Max Weber, were the scholars of the 'Frankfurt School': Max Horkheimer had denounced Weberian ideal types as an inroad even for fascism when these social science concepts were said to be instruments serving any kind of political regime; Adorno had endorsed Horkheimer's warnings as he denounced Parsonian system theory as a blueprint for social control that might emulate even the hermetic social order of concentration camps; Herbert Marcuse, who accused Weber of understanding bureaucracy and industrial capitalism as a means of repression in modern society, had envisaged the world free from such repression when he proposed how the individual could be liberated from the psychological fetters of alienation; and Jürgen Habermas, then a young professor at Heidelberg, had criticised mainstream sociology, including Weber, because their knowledge interest was conservative, the enabling backdrop for the loss of the autonomy of the individual [see Horkheimer 1947;

²⁶ Main texts in the controversy: Mills [1956], Parsons [1957], and Mills [1959]; see also Gerhardt [2011: 191–236].

Adorno 1955; Marcuse 1955; Habermas 1962]. That the Heidelberg Conference would be a welcome venue for the 'Frankfurt School', as it hoped to voice its reservations against Weber, was clear to Parsons, but also to Reinhard Bendix, who wrote to him just before they travelled to Europe: Bendix feared that these other participants might 'make Weber a whipping-boy of the unresolved intellectual legacies of Germany for the last half century',²⁷ but Parsons was determined to defend Weber against his critics, not only in his paper—the keynote presentation on day one of the conference (for his paper in the original English version, see Parsons [1967a])—but also in his rebuttals against interventions by Horkheimer and Habermas. He left it to Bendix and the third American participant, Benjamin Nelson, to stand up courageously for Weber in their contributions to the discussion of the paper by Marcuse (for details of the discussion, see Gerhardt [2002b, 2002c] and Gerhardt [2011: 145-190]).

The issue in this debate was that Parsons felt that the 'Frankfurt School' misconceived Weber, whom they deemed a predecessor to the Nazi mind. Their charge was that Weber in his sociology had opposed socialism and Marxism, which as worldviews in turn seemed currently the only sensible answers to the horrors of the 20th century. But Parsons saw in Weber the democrat and theorist of the rule of law: 'He burnt the bridges of the social sciences to its past, he created a situation which forced us to attempt to progress', he clarified in his *Schlusswort* in Heidelberg. He saw Weber concerned with the problems of a humane social order 'as philosopher of science and as substantive analyst of social phenomena in the broadest historical and comparative perspective' [Parsons 1965a: 95].

It might have been during the discussions that arose in the aftermath of the Heidelberg conference or out of the controversy with Mills²⁸ that Parsons came to realise that his system theory had as its opponent the sociology in the 1960s that grounded its views in Marxism. That the sociology in his time and age should embrace an approach as untenable as Marxism, he found a sad fact, even though the young generation in the 1960s saw Marxism as the presumptive safeguard for humanism [Sica and Turner 2005]: He sketched the problem in a paper he presented at the ASA Conference in Chicago in 1965²⁹ and eventually decided to write a full-length essay on the topic [Parsons 1967b].

What were the accomplishments, what the misconceptions of Marx that counted? The essence of the argument: Marx built a bridge between the philosophical idealism of Hegel and the utilitarianism of the classical political econo-

²⁷ Letter, Reinhard Bendix to Parsons, dated 9 April 1964; Parsons papers, HUG(FP)—15.4, box 4.

²⁸ Mills' last book before he died at the age of 45 was devoted to Communism in Cuba [see Mills 1960 and 1961].

²⁹ The six pages of handwritten notes: 'Marx. Chicago, Aug 30, "65".' Parsons papers, HUG(FP)—15.4, box 3.

my, venturing that the proletariat in the emerging industrial society be the bearer of humanism in the process of the negation of class society meant to end all history of alienation. As further accomplishment, Parsons went on to say, Marx had given the impetus for “welfare state” policy, underpinning what T. H. Marshall has called the “social” component of citizenship’ [ibid.: 110]. However, Marx had been no sociologist, and since Durkheim and Weber had given social theory a methodological grounding, Marx had become a mere forerunner who mattered little today. His theme was the crude capitalism of the 19th century, the society left behind in the modernisation of the last hundred years. In all, therefore, Marx had become a historical figure: ‘Judged by the standards of the best contemporary social-science theory, Marxian theory is obsolete.’ [ibid.: 132]

Agenda for citizenship vs ‘economic ideology’

The ‘late oeuvre’ spanned from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s when it overlapped with or took up in somewhat revised form many themes and theses from the ‘middle phase’. Although the masterpiece that should have summarised the approach altogether, the unfinished *American Societal Community*, was never published,³⁰ the two main sociological themes that dominated this phase were discussed in a major book each: one the collection of essays entitled *Politics and Social Structure* [Parsons 1969a], the other the monograph (with Gerald Platt) *The American University* [Parsons and Platt 1973].³¹

For Parsons in the 1960s, American society appeared to enter into a new phase of history, one that ushered in or was intertwined with social change worldwide. Though this impression was more or less his personal feeling, he made it the baseline for a re-adaptation, if not reinvention, of his conceptual approach, which he revised thoroughly. He took it for a fact that dramatic societal innovation was under way in those turbulent times, and he wanted sociology to take note of such seminal development. As a harbinger of recognition of what the historical challenges were, he focused on the re-conceptualisation of democracy as the safeguard for universal human rights. In this vein, he analysed the struggle for civil rights of Blacks as an accomplishment of the ‘moral “re-energizing” of American society’ in the Kennedy era, in an essay entitled ‘Why “Freedom Now”, Not Yesterday?’ (written in 1966). The issue was that there were two axes for societal progress on which hinged the political movements of the 1960s:

³⁰ The book was published some thirty years after Parsons’ death as *American Society* [Parsons 2007], but the tentative tone of the original text has been somewhat lost due to the editor inserting sub-titles into the overlong chapters in an effort to make them more readable.

³¹ In all, the ‘late oeuvre’ comprises six books and nearly thirty substantive articles.

‘[T]he so-called “New Left” ... [is] centering on youth and the salience of civil rights ... as ... embodied first in CORE and then more radically in SNCC. The most important point here is that the same groups, by and large, have now taken up protest in two other important contexts, namely, higher education (most conspicuously in Berkeley) and the American involvement in the war in Viet-Nam.’ [Parsons 1966: xxvii]³²

One first step towards a refined systems theory was that social action needed another closer look: It dawned on Parsons—possibly in the wake of his defining power as a ‘non-zero-sum’ phenomenon—that *interaction* as subject matter needed further thought. The exchange of goods and services involved tangible as well as immaterial ‘things’ that were traded between actors for the mutual fulfilment of their wants and aims. He came to speak of these as media that facilitate exchange, and it became clear to him in the course of the 1960s that these were money, political power, influence, and value-commitments: such media had symbolic value when the actors dealt with each other in more or less mutual agreement. The next step in the argument was that there were arenas for institutionalised exchange in which the media function and these realms were the economy, polity, ‘societal community’, and education/culture. In each, one medium was the dominant force, the others were secondary. In this way, on the macro level of society, the four-function scheme helped envisage how the complicated scenario of societal goings-on works. The four realms were seen to intertwine when axes ran between them, in that complex scenario, combining, for one, the A- with the G- function, the A- with the I-function, and so on and so forth. In this way, a picture of institutional spheres and their relationships became visible in sociology—the pluralist differentiated society proved a truly intricate theme.³³

To explain why these media are exceedingly important for democratic society, he clarified: ‘It seems to me that these media are particularly crucial in our type of society because ours is a pluralistic and, relatively speaking, decentralized society. We could not tolerate the centralization of a Soviet Russia or a Communist China.’ [Parsons 1968b: 384] The major problem in the pluralistic set-up grounded in free decision-making of citizens, was how to safeguard the integration needed if society was to function as a social order, instead of being ripped apart from egotisms. The main sphere, noted Parsons, was the societal community, a realm in the social system that ensured voluntary commitment: ‘A society

³² The acronym CORE stood for *Congress of Racial Equality*, and SNCC for *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*. Both organisations were active in the struggle for racial equality and prominent in political campaigns until the 1970s.

³³ The double focus on action as well as structure was clear in the three main essays that introduced the media: Parsons [1963a] (on influence), [1963b] (on political power), [1968a] (on value commitments). There was no essay on money as a symbolic medium of exchange, however, although several unpublished manuscripts had discussed the subject matter from the late 1950s onward.

must constitute a societal *community* that has an adequate level of integration or solidarity and a distinctive membership status. ... This community must be the 'bearer' of a cultural system sufficiently generalized and integrated to legitimize normative order.' [Parsons 1969b: 19; italics original] In other words, the societal community gave the modernity of modern society a new definition—integration functioned through identification, which in turn encompassed civility, invoking a spirit of citizenship that spelled coexistence and cooperation. The obverse was anomie, the cleavage between groups, social classes, ethnicities or races, spurring conflict when no equality would be institutionalised in society, no full citizenship available for all its citizens.

Parsons made the latter issue the problem he discussed in his long essay 'Full Citizenship for the [Black] American?' [Parsons 1965b].³⁴ He started out by noting that Blacks, who had been Americans for some two hundred years, were second-class citizens nevertheless. Only in the recent past had their discrimination become an issue in politics, spurring the legislation originally launched by the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court. Equality of rights for all Americans meant that the three classes of civil rights elucidated by T. H. Marshall would include Blacks, these three classes being the legal (civil), political, and social rights that denoted full participation and equal status in regard to the law, political participation, and the economy (including income and work), to name but a few areas of equality.³⁵ What mattered was equality of opportunity, chances for achievement on universalistic grounds in the occupational world, supplemented through equality of access to education as an arena for individualisation. The social process that secured such integration was inclusion, Parsons suggested, and with regard to 'the [Black] movement and the problem of [Black] identity' [Parsons 1965b: 1044 ff.], he emphasised that the goal was not full assimilation into a society of Whites ('WASPs'), but rather that 'the [Black] community has the opportunity to define itself as the spearhead of one of the most important improvements in the quality of American society and its history—and to do so not only in pursuit of its own obvious self-interest, but in the fulfilment of a *moral initiative*' [ibid.: 1048; italics original]. As an afterthought to this path-breaking perspective, he launched the idea that ethnicity—i.e. race—had changed its character in the social fabric. Ethnicity, he surmised, had become 'de-socialised' (the term taken from David Schneider), that is, 'we may speak of a racial, as well as

³⁴ The essay was reprinted twice, first in *The [Black] American*, edited by Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark, with a foreword by President Lyndon Johnson and Parsons' introduction [Parsons 1966], and again in *Politics and Social Structure* [Parsons 1969a]. The work on poverty and race belonged into the series of conferences organised between 1964 and 1967 by Parsons on behalf of the AAAS, to investigate the degree and dimensions of the discrimination of Blacks in the mid-1960s in the United States.

³⁵ Parsons relied on Marshall [1963]. The approach had been introduced by British sociologist Thomas Humphrey Marshall in the early 1950s originally.

in more general terms an ethnic, pluralism of the American population consisting of black people, yellow people, red people, and white people' [Parsons 1975: 73]—all of them citizens who had roots in Europe, Africa, Asia or elsewhere, all equal politically as well as socially though different in their cultural heritage and how they understood their identity.

The second complex of problems that the 'late oeuvre' tackled, was education, a field of potentially revolutionary impact historically:

'The conception of the three revolutions—industrial, democratic, and educational—fit with the paradigm of progressive change because all three involved major processes of differentiation relative to the previous state of modern society. ... All three have also clearly posed major problems of integration for the societies in which they have appeared and have necessitated major shifts of what we call value-generalizations.' [Parsons (1970) 1977: 53]

General education had become commonplace since the 19th century, and universities since the middle ages had been the bearers and keepers of scientific research and knowledge. In this vein, education as a societal institution represented the occidental tradition of humanism and made its rationale the rationality that hinged on freedom of thought.³⁶ When unrest erupted first at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964, and subsequently at Columbia University, New York, in 1968, he felt that the issue deserved more attention sociologically. He saw as social sciences that fitted the three revolutions, three academic disciplines: '3 revolutions. Industrial—Economics was "king". Democratic—Political science. Educational—Sociology.'³⁷ He made it clear in an essay entitled 'The Academic System: A Sociologist's View' [Parsons 1968d]³⁸ that in the differentiated society there were bureaucratic as well as 'associational' organisations and the university belonged among the latter: This institution with a 'flat' (if any) hierarchy between professors, whose mission was cognitive rationality, served the aim of educating the next generation in the values and practices of democratic culture. However, students fitted into the scenario as beneficiaries of the 'functional and structural pluralism of the academic system' [ibid.: 187], not envoys for some anti-capitalist society or guardians of their own learning, he declared. In this vein, he assured, the academic system 'cannot, as a system, be "enlisted" in the "war" against what are regarded as the salient contemporary evils. Against such "demands", it must maintain the position of pluralism.' [ibid.: 197] 'Higher Education as a Theoretic-

³⁶ Parsons had already argued the decisive role of education and especially the universities in the emergence of the professions, one cornerstone in the edifice of the liberal society, in Parsons [1937b]. See also Parsons [1939, 1968c].

³⁷ Handwritten notes, 'Columbia affair'. Parsons papers, HUG(FP)—42.45.4, box 5.

³⁸ Reprinted in Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol (eds.) 1969. *Confrontations: The Student Rebellion and the Universities*. New York: Basic Books.

cal Focus', an autobiographical account published in 1971, argued that both the Communist and the capitalist societies in his day and age saw their mission realised in higher education, although there was a notable difference: 'It may be stated schematically that "capitalism" gave priority to what we now call equality of opportunity—aristocratic prerogatives by birth had already lost legitimacy—whereas socialism rested its case on equality of citizenship, that is, membership in a societal community' [Parsons 1971: 237]. The idea was that the societal community in the modern industrial society, partly in the educational revolution, had given 'the professional complex in higher education and research' the priority that rendered it central to the preservation and improvement of civil liberties [ibid.: 252].

As the culmination of twelve years of empirical research and theoretical thinking, *The American University* (with Gerald Platt) focused on American culture and the new importance of universities in the 1970s [Parsons and Platt 1973]. The book started out on a rather abstract analysis of 'The Cognitive Complex: Knowledge, Rationality, Learning, Competence, Intelligence', progressed to the functions of the university (graduate training and research), the increase of its general educational role ('studentry socialisation') and its heightened salience for society today ('applied professions', 'intellectuals'), but ended up with tackling, as an urgent problem, 'The Nature of the Crisis': The point was that citizenship had become intertwined in the most intricate way with education, and the universities were targeted by student protests whose unintended effect was that they negated the values that stood for equality of opportunities when the issue was that the latter was not the equality of membership in society as such.

It was university unrest together with the Watergate affair that shook the nation in 1973–1974, and Parsons turned to these two symptoms of the crisis of American democracy in *The American Societal Community*.³⁹ There were two problems, he realised, that had challenged the United States in the 1970s. Using empirical evidence and sociological knowledge, he analysed how the American societal community had weathered the threats to its agenda for citizenship. Against university unrest, as efficiency of this vital institution had been at stake, the remedy had been careful piecemeal reforms instead of revolutionary measures. Against the 'lust for power', when President Nixon seemed to prefer dictatorship over constitutionalism,⁴⁰ re-positioning of the *Rechtsstaat* was an exceedingly effective antidote in overcoming the miasma. In all, the question was how the American societal community had opposed anomie in the recent crisis; one answer in sociology was, through 'Individuality and Institutionalized Individualism'⁴¹—'spirit'

³⁹ See also above, fn. 30.

⁴⁰ Parsons tackled the issue in Parsons and Gerstein [1977] and also two memoranda, 'The Nixon Case: Memorandum. To: Dean Gerstein', HUG(FP) 42.41, box 4, and 'Watergate', memorandum and handwritten notes, HUG(FP)—42.45.4, box 9.

⁴¹ This is the title of chapter 10 in the manuscript and also in Parsons [2007].

as understood by Weber and sustained through internalisation as analysed by Freud and also Durkheim, made the individual the actor in the institutions that practiced humanism: 'Within the fourfold schema of general action this suggests the possibility that the autonomy of the social system relative to the cultural level has, in much recent discussion, been significantly underplayed and needs a reemphasis both with respect to the conceptualization of rationality and that of morality.' [Parsons 2007: 446]

The one major controversy that Parsons in his 'late oeuvre' got involved in, Howard Brick has observed, was that he opposed the return of utilitarianism:

An aging theorist such as Talcott Parsons strove to resist the tide, but the rise of economism was strong enough to swamp that confidence in the priority of the social in modern life, on which Parsons had staked his career. [Brick 2006: 239]

The opponent was, initially, Harvard colleague George C. Homans,⁴² who sided with Peter Blau and James Coleman among the young generation—Parsons remarked in a handwritten memo entitled 'Status + Problems of General Theory' how sad he felt:

Problem will not down – witness status of own work – now also Homans and partly Blau. ... At what level do [we place] general theory? T.P. vs. G. C. H. ... Categorization of comparative (incl. evolutionary) dimensions and technical analysis of processes – including generalized media. Beware of sense in which "elementary".⁴³

A decade later, he still opposed the theory that emulated micro-economics, defending as he did vigorously the idea of the spirit of capitalism taken from Weber. The opponents now were those who had extended the 'economic theory of politics' into the 'Rational Choice' approach—French intellectual historian Louis Dumont had labelled that tradition an 'economic ideology' that had taken root as neoliberalism but whose origins lay in the 19th century and earlier [see Parsons 1977, 1979a, 1979b].⁴⁴ Parsons criticised utilitarianism that declared cost-effectiveness universal and lost sight of the moral dimension of social action—the point was that Weber, in the idea of the spirit of capitalism, had taken note of the impact

⁴² See, for the approach derived from micro-economics that opposed Parsons' system theory explicitly and vigorously, Homans [1961 and 1964], but also Parsons' early rebuttal in Parsons [1964], and, as a comparative juxtaposition between the two theories, Turk and Simpson [1971].

⁴³ Handwritten notes, 'Status + Problems of General Theory', Parsons papers HUG(FP)—15.4, box 19.

⁴⁴ The reference was: Louis Dumont. 1977. *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of the Economic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; the book had originally been published in French as *Homo aequalis: Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique*.

of religion on the conduct of life, emphasising how important the maxim 'honesty is the best policy' had been for interpersonal relations.

In an article published shortly before his death, Parsons ventured that both (Christian) religion and the modern economy were symbolic systems that envisaged the world as just and reasonable—the one setting otherworldly standards for the good and thus determining how worldly goods were being judged and distributed, the other setting inner-worldly standards for how 'things economic' defined the world of plenty: The first major theory that fitted 'economic ideology' had been Marxism, explained Parsons. But, he complained, also the recent "economic approach"—for example, as Becker [1976] sets it forth—draws no theoretical boundaries within the whole field of what he [G. Becker—author's note] calls "social behaviour", which certainly includes the whole of what we call a "society". [Parsons 1979a: 22–23] Through such theory the 'utilitarian dilemma' resurfaced that had been exposed in *The Structure of Social Action*, he warned, and utilitarianism in its crudest form had become 'establishment economism' [ibid.: 31 ff.], which ruled supreme in the 1970s. The demon of dogmatic belief had surreptitiously taken hold of the burdensome attempt at rational theory, he found, though it was never too late to leave behind the wide alley of doctrine and find the small path of intellectual honesty: 'For too long, we have been awed by the apodictic certainty with which many Marxists have expounded what to them has been the "true" doctrine and, as it were, have dared us to disagree, in the face of our imputed guilt for the evils of capitalism. Yet some of us also seem to have been awed by the air of certainty displayed by some of the proponents of the economic approach and have tended all too easily to concede the intellectual contest.' [ibid.: 42]

Conclusion

Parsons' seventeen books and more than one hundred and fifty scholarly articles span three phases of his social thought, during which he 'reinvented' his approach several times. I have argued that there is a political agenda in this intellectual biography of five decades of the 20th century. Parsons takes note of world politics and makes it the context for the society cum history that his sociology tackles from the 1930s to the late 1970s. Embedded in the successive political confrontations of the time—between liberal democracy and National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s, between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, between the partisans and opponents of the civil rights movement and university reform in the 1960s and 1970s—are his contributions to ongoing controversies between approaches and 'schools' in sociology. Parsons' work remains consistent, nevertheless, inasmuch as he emulates the methodological circumspection and historical-political astuteness of his lifelong mentor, Max Weber.

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