



What's So American about Talcott Parsons's Sociology?

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Abstract

This contribution to consideration of “Talcott Parsons and Politics” explores the kind of optimism of sociology’s “incurable theorist” that is evident in his mature view of the USA as the world’s “New Lead” society. Statements related to optimism can be identified in his extensive writings and this article focuses upon its expression when as an “early career academic” in the late 1920s and 1930s he laid the foundations for his life-long work in sociology. Parsons’ sociology developed as the USA’s twentieth century contribution unfolded. His “moderate optimism” about the viability of the American experiment shares deeply and intimately in his claim that sociology had finally emerged as an analytical social science oriented by the theory of social action. His mature work considers the “societal community” to be the peculiar focus for sociology’s special scientific attention. The USA has taken on this “New Lead” role at the same time that the societal community itself has emerged from within American experience. The discussion here is as much a personal memoir of the author, revisiting efforts to understand how the earliest stages of Parsons’s sociology were maintained by him over a long career. Parsons sociological scholarship exhibited *American* characteristics. As sociology’s “incurable theorist” he sought understanding of his own (American) situation, and its context, past and present, seeking to promote a social science that contributed positively to global society.

Keywords Societal community · Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) · Public governance · Social science encyclopaedia · American sociology

Introduction

In May 2019, Victor Lidz and Helmut Staubmann called for contributions to a collection of essays to be published in a “Talcott Parsons and Politics” edition of *The*

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American Sociologist. They suggested that I might contribute an article with some historical reflections. I am happy to do so and have interpreted that request in the following way: Parsons navigated his life-time project in sociology from theoretical insights we can read about in his earliest published writings,¹ those composed before 1937 and the publication of *The Structure of Social Action*.² These writings tell us that a discipline's scientific progress is not the exclusive preserve of prominent professors at prestigious universities. They were penned by an "early career academic", and along with his translation of Max Weber's famous *Protestant Ethic* essay, made a significant scholarly contribution well before he gained a place in Harvard's sociology department. They are part of a considerable *oeuvre*, alongside many other articles as well as books and papers published during his lifetime and afterwards. Some of these writings, have been published and re-published posthumously, adding significant material for "Parsons studies."

When I was a PhD candidate (1982–1986), my supervisor, Alan Cubbon, encouraged me to think about the impact of high-school studies in physics, chemistry and mathematics upon my understanding of social science. He encouraged me to see the value of such retrospection for social theory, and it was a natural next step to develop a similar sympathetic attitude when examining Talcott Parsons's sociology. In contributing to "Parsons studies" I have emphasized the persistent retrospection that is evident in his writings. He gathered his insights together by revisiting previous formulations, correcting or expanding them. By doing so he ensured continuity with his latest theoretical formulations. Consider, for example, the conscious effort that is thereby implied in his 1949 "Preface to Second Edition" of *Structure*. He explained his motivation as an author in terms of personal exploration:

... "it is a good thing to know what you are doing," ... there may be resources and potentialities in the situation which in our absorption in daily work, we tend to overlook.³

This not only suggests self-conscious retrospection, asking the question, "What exactly have I been doing?", it also tells us that by 1949 a sympathetic, critical and reflexive turn was well established in his theoretical outlook. It was basic to how he entered into and reported upon the theoretical "struggles" encountered in his own texts as much as those authored by other theorists he had subjected to rigorous analysis. And that had also meant translating concepts and arguments originally formulated in a foreign language.⁴

Parsons negotiated textual complexity with great care and evidently gave much thought to how he, the aspiring sociological theorist, presented his work. Consider the by line of *Structure*. It is a quote from Max Weber and it is given there *in German*. The

¹ See the collection Parsons T (1991). (Hereafter: *Early Essays*)

² Parsons T (1937a) (Hereafter: *Structure*). The March 1949 "Preface to Second Edition" is on pages A-F. The 1968 "Introduction to the Paperback Edition" New York, The Free Press, is on pages v-xiv, making the Preface to Second Edition xv-xx and the original Preface xxi-xxiv.

³ *Structure* (1949), B

⁴ Parsons T (1981), with comment on translation: "Well, there is nothing like translating a complex and difficult work as a way of learning what it is about." 186-7

sentence has subsequently become a part of English-language discourse in sociology. The Shils-Finch translation reads:

All serious reflection about the ultimate elements of meaningful human conduct is oriented primarily in terms of the categories “end” and “means”.⁵

The German by-line stands as a testament to Parsons’s understanding of his sociological exploration of the various elements of meaningful human conduct. Max Weber had captured, as “in a nutshell”, the project he foreshadowed for himself as a young undergraduate at Amherst College as he concluded his Philosophy III paper for Clarence Ayres in 1923. He then looked forward to “a closer and more detailed study of the nature and function of this force ... of the moral order.”⁶

Structure, published fourteen years later, charted a “theoretical convergence”, a “theory of action” that Parsons had discerned within the writings of a group of recent European writers. *Structure* was his initial effort to set out on a systematic theoretical path upon which he would eventually become sociology’s “incurable theorist”.⁷ And now, almost a century later, we are still considering Parsons’s detailed analysis of human society.

Structure presupposes analytical effort, and the painstaking “revisiting” of former translations and interpretations, those of his own language, as well as German and French works. His own theoretical formulations would not be excluded from persistent “revisiting” since the written-down insights that accompany abstract formulations are inextricably interwoven with critical analysis, exegesis and interpretation. For Parsons, theory is not all in the mind; it is also there written on the page. *Structure* constituted an action that took a decade to come to fruition, to its “end”, which to quote Weber was,

... a means of achieving something else which is more highly desired.⁸

My contribution to “Parsons Studies” has been mainly concerned with the pre-1937 phase of his theoretical formation.⁹ And I am assuming that it was with *Structure* that Parsons believed he had achieved something he had desired very much, a theory of social action that would enable sociology to fulfill its potential as a genuine scientific endeavour.

⁵ Weber M (1949), 52. See *Structure* (1937, 1949), xiii (1968,xxix). I offer no translation of the quote. An alteration of this English translation by Shils and Finch can be found in Donald N Levine “The Continuing Challenge of Weber’s Theory of Rational Action” in Charles Camic, Philip S.Gorski, David M. Trubek (eds) Max Weber’s Economy and Society: A Critical Companion, Palo Alto, Stanford UP 2005, 101-126 at 125 fn. 59 as: “Every thoughtful reflection on the ultimate elements of meaningful human action is bound primarily to the categories of ‘means’ and ‘ends’.”

⁶ Parsons T (1923-1996), 37.

⁷ This self-definition is given in the dedication of his other *magnum opus* *The Social System* Parsons T (1951) (Hereafter: *Social System*). “To Helen - Whose healthy and practical empiricism has long been an indispensable balance wheel for an incurable theorist.” This amply demonstrates Parsons’s anticipation of how his work was being received.

⁸ Weber M (1949), 52. This comes directly after the sentence Parsons quoted in German as *Structure*’s by line.

⁹ See the works by this author as listed in the Further Reading after the List of References at the end of this article.

Back in 1996, I assisted with the publication in this journal of those two undergraduate essays written in 1922–23 for the above mentioned philosophy class.¹⁰ More recently, from 2016 to 2018, I have worked on the publication of a bi-lingual translation of Parsons’s “Der Kapitalismus bei Sombart und Max Weber.”¹¹ My Viennese colleague, Guenter Stummvoll, undertook the “heavy lifting” translation of the German Dr.Phil text, as we explored Parsons’s German language proficiency from a typescript, the original of which resides in the Harvard University Archives. We followed Parsons, line by line, as he set forth his interpretation of Werner Sombart and Max Weber. The result is a volume that augments the two English-language articles - “‘Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber” - received in 1929 by the University of Heidelberg as the definitive and published form of the young American student’s dissertation.¹²

So that is background to my taking up the challenge to contribute to this edition considering “Talcott Parsons and Politics”. An “historical” account of how Parsons’s theory of action emerged must also examine how Parsons configured the relationships between the social sciences, sociology, political science and economics. That also involves looking once more at Parsons’s “construction”¹³ of Weber’s theoretical orientation and the place he assigns to Weber’s methodology in his own theoretical work. Parsons set out on his path to a “general theory of social action” with a deepened awareness of late nineteenth century scholarship often described as the transition from history to sociology.¹⁴ In noting how the young American scholar structured his long-term project we will come to see how, later on, his mature scholarly theorising incorporated insights from a sociological historiography. This is discussed below.

An Analytic Rather than Concrete Division of Social Scientific Labour

The concluding chapter of *Structure* is titled: “Tentative Methodological Implications”. Its emphasis is decidedly *analytical*. When we reach the final section, “The Place of Sociology”, the culminating paragraph of a work expounding “the voluntaristic theory of action”, we read about the author’s sense of triumph.

It is not, therefore, possible to concur in the prevailing pessimistic judgment of the social sciences, particularly sociology. If attention is centered not on the average achievement but, as is fully justified in such a case, on the best, we certainly need not be ashamed of our science. Notable progress on both empirical

¹⁰ *The American Sociologist* Winter 1996 27:4. (“Talcott Parsons’s Undergraduate Exploration in Sociology”)

¹¹ Parsons T (2018). (Hereafter *Kapitalismus*).

¹² Parsons T (1928-1929). Both are found in *Early Essays*, 3-37 (Hereafter: *Capitalism*). Unlike the German language typescript specify that it is Max Weber who is to be contrasted with Werner Sombart the *JPE* refers merely to “Weber”.

¹³ *Capitalism II*, 34. *Early Essays*, 22.

¹⁴ *Structure*’s 1937, 1949 and 1968 Prefaces were part of my earliest efforts to understand “convergence” along with Antoni C (1959); Hughes H S (1977); Iggers G C (1983); Bershady H J (1973); Hawthorn G (1976).

and theoretical levels has been made within the short space of a generation. We have sound theoretical foundations on which to build.¹⁵

This conclusion of a study of “a group of recent European writers” announces with brimming confidence that sociology’s place among the analytical social sciences was assured. This theory of action, basic to social science, means that sociology can take its place alongside political science and economics which will thereby find their contributions reconfigured in order to benefit from the emergence of the voluntaristic theory of action.

The confident statement addresses the *quality* of scientific insight that has been documented in the foregoing study. That is the basis of his optimism, and it has emerged from his intense reading of, among others, Max Weber. The scientific character of the theory disclosed by “convergence” had been definitively documented. The conclusion of *Structure* looks forward and that is a vital aspect for our understanding of Parsons’s view of sociology’s place in academic programmes. Of course, any social science’s viability within any academy has to be concerned with the scientific validity of its basic theoretical framework. But this is not actually a statement about Parsons’s expectations concerning the *academic reform* of teaching and research in sociology. This documented “convergence” of the theory of action is *analytical* and provides sociology with a *theoretical* basis for its distinctive integrity as a scientific discipline and is therefore guaranteed whatever the academic setting.

In theoretical terms, it is not only economics that joins sociology in the “analytical social sciences”, but also politics as well. “The Place of Sociology” in *Structure*’s final section situates sociology in relation to both of these academically dominant social sciences and pinpoints the property of the action system that defines its special concern.

Sociology may then be defined as “the science which attempts to develop an analytical theory of social (*fn: Involving a plurality of actors mutually oriented to each other’s action.*) action systems in so far as these systems can be understood in terms of the property of common-value integration.”¹⁶

That provisional definition makes sense alongside the social sciences concerned with these other two analytical action systems with their own “factors”. And that definition suggests a normative task for any academic organisation to ensure that these three analytical social sciences can join together in a collaborative multi-sided effort to advance a truly scientific account of human action.

Let us briefly speculate: such an academic initiative would involve a mutually-oriented teaching and research programme that integrates the valuable ongoing research of these three disciplines, ascribing due respect to each other’s work and sharing intellectual resources in an efficient and effective intellectually-qualified economy.¹⁷ So would it not be logical and rational, for those who saw the value of *Structure* for sociology, to work at developing the academic expression of this

¹⁵ *Structure*, 775

¹⁶ *Structure*, 768

¹⁷ Note my metaphoric allusion to the political (due respect) and economic (sharing resources) factors in describing the “system” of academic action-science.

discipline in such ways? Isn't this integral to Parsons's sociology? Isn't sociology, in its analytical concern for common value integration, already oriented to keeping open the possibility of a concrete division of scientific labour, a society (or symbiosis) of social sciences as a "plurality of analytical social sciences mutually oriented to each other's scientific concerns"? It seems to me that this *vision* of an academic symbiosis is implicit in *Structure*. Talcott Parsons's contribution to sociology was initiated with such an optimistic outlook for the academy's social scientific contribution.

So sociology, as an academic enterprise may have had to concede that it had to adjust to academic situations with rigid divisions of labour it could not reform. But if the academic symbiosis was not to be part of a wider social scientific programme, shouldn't there have been a *sociological* explanation of why such an initiative could not be undertaken, or why it is so difficult to bring it about? On this matter, *Structure* can seem ambiguous. To theoretically construe these social sciences together in this analytical way seems to make little sense if it is not part of an academic project of learning, teaching and research envisaging such a disciplinary symbiosis. Was this not a profoundly enriching theoretical insight that should be imparted to aspiring social scientists *before* they go on to specialise in one or other of these sciences of action? Would not that envisioned symbiosis be the corollary of the optimistic announcement about sociology's future?

As we follow Parsons's career, we see that such social science symbiosis with economic and politics was not to be. We might wonder if it were snuffed out subsequently by the forces of academic *self-interest* or *realpolitik*, let alone of a reactionary response to Parsons's theoretical revolution. But when we look carefully at the essays of Parsons's "early career researcher", those predating *Structure*, the evidence can be found to suggest he had *already* anticipated the disciplinary resistance to such a scheme. In fact, it might be more in line with Parsons's scholarly ethic to reckon with the possibility that an unspoken theme of *Structure* is that "the voluntaristic theory of action" has emerged against the resistance of the institutionalization of the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." It was simply too entrenched in academic political science and economics. This would mean that *Structure* is Parsons's fully elaborated analytical diagnosis of the academic resistance within the social sciences to a theory of society based on the "analytical factor view". And the theory is already present *in nuce* in the second part of a 1935 contribution to the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, where he outlines the "analytical factor view" to explain the basis for his criticism of the prevailing economic theories.¹⁸

I am suggesting that the optimism Parsons had for the analytical social sciences in the academy has *already* been moderated by his understanding of their mutual

¹⁸ The phrase is found in Whitehead A.N (1947), 66ff, 74. It's first appearance in his published articles is when he notes Lionel Robbins's appeal to it. See "Some reflections on 'The Nature and Significance of Economics'" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 48 (1934): 511-45 at 519-520, 538-539. (see *Early Essays*, 159-60, 175). It is also found in the second of the two part series "Sociological Elements in Economic Thought" (*Quarterly Journal of Economics* 49 (1935): 414-53, 646-67 at 661 where Whitehead's book based upon his 1925 Lowell Lectures at Harvard is mentioned (fn.5, 661, *Early Essays* fn. 56, 224). Whitehead's "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" is mentioned in the "Introduction" to *Structure* 29 with a reference to page 75 of Whitehead's work. The Bibliography tells us Parsons worked from the MacMillan, New York 1925 edition.

disciplinary involvement in an institutionalised resistance the theoretical character of which is identified “in a nutshell” by appeal to Whitehead’s “fallacy”. The critique is directed at the assumption that concrete reality can be reduced to what one science can discover from its own special theoretical account. Parsons read Whitehead’s work as endorsement of his own reflections. We could almost suggest that his pre-*Structure* development was held on course by an implicit *sociological* expectation of resistance to scientific innovation. If theoretical development could be described in terms of logical forces acting at a point, then the resistance (a metaphoric μ -factor) of “the theory of action” to “misplaced concreteness”.

If we are right in this, it may also help us to better understand some perplexing questions about Parsons’s early Harvard career.

The Critique of Economics and the Division of Labour in the Social Sciences

In his 1935 articles published in the prestigious *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Parsons teased out the “Sociological Elements in Economic Thought”. In these he further developed his historical critique of the dominant empiricism of economics. His conclusion was that the potential for theoretical bankruptcy could be averted by a more robust, non-reductionist and empirically-oriented study of economic activities. Economic science stood in need of a basic methodological renovation to adequately study what was within its analytical purview. A disciplined analytical orientation was needed in economics if its theoretical limits *and contribution* were to be rightly understood. The contribution of economics was like other social sciences, limited to the analytical abstraction of *one* fundamental factor of human action. And so, economics needed to be prised free from a totality presumption that reduces reality to what its own science can discover.

So, Parsons critically observed that it was vitally important for the *health* of economics that those engaged in its research co-operate, in an analytically thorough way, with social scientific colleagues exploring the other fundamental factors of human action (presumably the “societal” and “power” factors, the concerns of sociology and politics). Parsons went on to say, ambiguously, that the systematic formulation of such a theory of fundamental factors is only to set up an “artificial” isolation between these factors. Parsons anticipates a misunderstanding about this concept of an “artificial isolation” in a footnote. It reads:

Not of the concrete division of labor of scientists.¹⁹

Now this does raise further questions. What are we to make of it? On the one hand, the “artificial” and presumably “abstract” isolation of one factor from the others should not be grounds for any compartmentalized “separation” between these (social) sciences within any one academy or research facility. Any one social science is limited by its own abstracted and isolated “factor” from dealing with the totality of concrete social facts as they present themselves. This was his attempt at explicating the principle that

¹⁹ Parsons T (1935), 647 fn. 2. In *Early Essays* 212-229 at 213 fn. 35.

would also avoid any “encyclopedic sociology”.²⁰ A debilitating tendency reduces concrete reality to what one science can discover from its own special theoretical account, focusing upon and giving preference to its specifically delimited factor in its view of reality. Parsons explicitly rules out a view of sociology that assumes its task is to define scientific interest per se. He continues:

As has already been noted this does not mean that the systematic theoretical division of labor of the social sciences should be translated directly into a concrete division of labor of scientists. The theoretical subject matter of his science should define a scientist’s central focus of interest, but the exigencies of concrete research are such that he inevitably ventures across the borderlines, probably in several directions. The important thing is not that he should stick to his own theoretical field, but that he should know what he is doing when he goes outside it. But there is no more reason why an economist should fail to know something about sociology than why a physiologist should ignore chemistry.²¹

But we detect here a confrontation with an unresolved *academic political* problem. It seems most certainly to be an internal *political* problem for any academy. But this “analytical factor view” throws out a serious challenge to any division of labour within established social science, where scientific pride decrees a *modus operandi* that protects an elitist academic engagement, that is independent and aloof.

There is no guidance here to explain to the reader why this shouldn’t be read as an implicit *endorsement* of a concrete separation of the teaching of economics from the teaching of political science (and so on for all social sciences) in differently located departments with their own isolated and isolating research agendas. It is left to the reader’s inference, and it is ambiguous. Upon reading this, we are prone to ask: Is each special social science to seek its own independence to seek its own encyclopaedic view of itself by which it then relates to all the other special sciences?

What might this tell us about Parsons’s view of his theory of action? Was he content to see it as a kind of yeast, working quietly against the grain of an academic situation normed by an inheritance of elite, prestigious and well-endowed, tightly compartmentalized academic self-interest? In *Structure*, a few years later, Parsons would claim that sociology had come into its own since the “analytical factor view” had become evident on the horizon of *all* social sciences. But this 1935 turn away from an open advocacy of a reformation of the division of labour for the social sciences would seem, at least at first glance, to be in conflict with Parsons’s later triumphant conclusion to *Structure*. Despite the announcement of the newly minted social theory for the science of sociology, there is not only no discussion of what such a “concrete academic division of labour among social scientists” might mean but, more to the point, no real account of why it is not to be part of the discussion. And as noted already, the non-viability, if that is what it was believed to be, was announced *en passant* in a footnote. At the very least this signals the need for a further account of what exactly was being denied, and to clarify whether this represents in some sense a pragmatic adjustment of the theory to its social context. It may well be to anticipate academic resistance to the emergent theory

²⁰ *ibid.* 662. *Early Essays* 225.

²¹ *ibid.* 600 fn 4. In *Early Essays* 224 fn. 55.

but why could not that resistance be spelled out in *sociological* terms? Would Parsons have viewed research that led on to advocating such an academic structure as idealistic or ideological? Might this indicate a pragmatic dimension of his scholarship?²²

The relevant issue under consideration here in this essay concerns the manner in which Talcott Parsons's theory project *over a long career* confronted the social, political and economic structuring of that institution we call "university". That final chapter of *Structure*, again and again, contains Parsons's suggestion that his scientific discovery of the "voluntaristic theory of social action" retained intense value for the classification of all "analytical social sciences of organized action systems" and therefore for *all* of these sciences as they impact each other in their distinctive ways.²³ But it also seems feasible that he was not wanting his theory, or more exactly his professional activity in theorizing, to be swamped by contentious academic "politics". The 1935 footnote indicates prudence, implying he wanted to avoid having his articulated theory read as a manifesto for academic reform. He wants readers to concentrate on the analytic argument about the theory of action. It is the theory that is the focus, suggesting: first, get the theory right, then later on we can begin to talk about the reform of the academy.

Confronting what seems at this point to be a serious discordance we recall the creative and adventurous character of Parsons's Amherst essays, his affirmation of the educational reforms of Alexander Meiklejohn, and his "conversion" to social science due to the pugnacious "institutional critique" of Hamilton and Ayres. Had Parsons forgotten how he had come to be on this path he was on at Harvard?

I cannot believe it. Why? Because, *as a student*, Parsons had been so *profoundly* encouraged in a trans-disciplinary²⁴ way "to venture across the borderlines."²⁵ But why shouldn't there be an attempt to translate this non-reductionist approach to the social sciences into an *academic* division of labour that does justice to the *student's* needs for an *integral* perspective? Why teach sociological theory as if its theory of action has to somehow remain neutral toward the concrete academic division of labour in which context students are introduced to the theoretical basis of the social sciences? Why should a student's study of sociology be sectioned off from the study of political science or economics? Why compromise one's theory of action by a pragmatic adjustment to an institutionalised concrete division of labour in the academy based upon a fallacy?

Should not the theorising of social action be nurtured so that a new generation of students can in a co-operative and healthy way form a critical historical view that is

²² see footnote 60 below. Perhaps, to use a term association with Antonio Gramsci, this might indicate that Parsons anticipated a "long march" for his "theory of action" through academic institutions.

²³ *Structure* 769 footnote refers to Carl J Friedrich. The relevance is that Friedrich had, in 1932, republished the 1614 edition of *Politiea* written by the early modern Calvinistic jurist Johannes Althusius. Friedrich had also contributed 'Johannes Althusius' to the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* II (1932). Friedrich had drawn attention to Althusius's emphasis upon the relevance of symbiosis for federal structures. There is at least a hint in Parsons's view of the analytical social sciences that they should be configured by developing a symbiotic federalism between them. Parsons noted that Whitehead's works "contain the most extensive analysis of the general concept of the "organic" which is known to the author." *Structure* 32 fn.1.

²⁴ Thank you to Guenter Stummvoll for pointing to this configuration of the problem. Could Parsons have become "stuck" due to a rigid inter-disciplinary academic ethos rather than one which was genuinely trans-disciplinary in the sense suggested by his social action theory?

²⁵ See Whitehead A N (1933).

professionally responsible and not reductionistic, and does not capitulate to the professional and elitist consequence of the dogmatic maintenance of the misplaced concreteness? If the goal is a healthy and co-operative nurturing, generation to generation, then professional service with integrity should not just be a noble dream but an ongoing public practise willing to continue to reform itself and its basic philosophical outlook.²⁶

Ambiguities, Theoretical Twists and Turns and Other Difficulties

This essay is a contribution to a discussion seeking clarity about the way Parsons's sociology relates to politics. It was always going to be written in an early twenty-first century context in which the USA's contribution to the international order has now come under intense scrutiny and about which many diagnose a profound "crisis", a possible historical turning point. How might Parsons's theory of action configure the crisis in international governance in which the USA is the key player? We have noted how, according to his theory of social action, sociology relates to political science. And meanwhile, as we consider these political questions about his work, our life continues as we adjust to the "lock-down" conditions required in response to the pandemic.²⁷

How did Parsons's theoretical momentum relate to his own country? We note that by 1970 he could ascribe New Lead status to the USA within the globe's modern project.²⁸ Did he not need a long career in order to develop his sociological outlook to provide an empirically-based *sociological* account of the New Lead role of the USA? His scientific outlook, clarified by his study of Weber's writings, could view social theory in *both* Western and American contexts. His theoretical development can be understood in toto in terms of a basic clarification he gained from his Heidelberg studies, and both the USA and Europe became enriching "resources and potentialities" for his project. It was confirmed by his close association with Max Weber's work, initially with his famous essay. That was the "situation" of his scientific "action", for a theoretical contribution he believed had "universal significance and value".²⁹

And so, we have related Parsons's 1949 statement about *Structure* to the major long-term and posthumously published project on the American societal community.³⁰ Clearly, he was aware of the "seedbed" of his own country with its "resources and

²⁶ Parsons's emergent *sociological* professionalism is on display in his other 1937 publication, Parsons T (1937b). In 1939 his essay "The Professions and Social Structure", Parsons T (1939), began the "next phase" of his efforts which would bring forth the "pattern variables".

²⁷ A future "Parsons studies" symposium might discuss his the medical sociology and how the "sick role" might be configured for evaluating public-health measures to counter a global pandemic.

²⁸ This denotation comes in the second of the Foundations in Modern Sociology Series: Parsons T (1966) and Parsons T (1971) (Hereafter *System*). The extensive work undertaken in response to a 1969 request from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for a monograph on the American University system also provides important material from this later phase of Parsons's scholarly contribution. See Parsons T and G M Platt (1973).

²⁹ *Structure* (1949), B. For the term "situation" see Talcott Parsons *Actor, Situation and Normative Pattern*, (eds Victor Lidz and Helmut Staubmann) Vienna, Lit Verlag 2010. The editors date the manuscript as 1939. The other quoted phrase is from Parsons's translation of the opening paragraph of Weber's "Vorbemerkung". See "Author's Introduction" in Weber M (1930), 13. (Hereafter: *Protestant Ethic*).

³⁰ Parsons T (2007). See also Parsons T and W White (2016).

potentialities” for his analytical reflections. And in this way he maintained *continuity* for his scientific and theoretical project. He cannot be detached from either his theory or his country.

Sooner or later his sociology would have to account for the global impact of the USA, and by 1970 he could explain the New Lead role in evolutionary and comparative terms. Anticipating queries, he emphatically asserted that his designation was consistent with the evolutionary scheme for research he had been employing all along.³¹ It does not arise from a quantum leap into a new historiographical discipline. But noting this we then realize the USA has been present, implicit, *in nuce* all along.

Of course, the recognition of American “leadership” in a global sense is not unique to Talcott Parsons. What is new is Parsons’s account of how the USA has moved on from being a part of the West that is Europe’s historical frontier, to its New Lead role. This coincides with the emergence of a societal community patterned by intense associational differentiation. The American experiment has been nurtured by a system of public governance that adheres to its 1776 Declaration of Independence, and to its Bill of Rights of 1789–1791, weathering a disastrous civil war and other crises at home and abroad. It has also involved a persistent twentieth century effort that continues in the twenty-first century to redress the violation of human rights wherever these may have occurred.

The USA has been in the thick of modernity’s perpetual revolutions (democratic politics; capitalist commerce, technology and industry; scientific and professional education) often at the forefront. It is this societal community, he says, that functions as a normative pattern, a global paradigm impacting the lives of all other peoples around the world. Following Seymour Martin Lipset, and with a characteristic bunch of qualifications, Parsons points to a comparable societal pattern that has emerged in Canada and Australia,³² and in time it will presumably, be found elsewhere in various localised derivations.

From Sociology to History?

So, what does his 1970 documentation of the fact of the New Lead role of the United States mean for his overall scholarly contribution? He claims that the documentation is of an empirical finding. But is it not also, at the same time, part of an inter- or trans-disciplinary move? Sociology, as the special scientific study of the “societal community”, finds itself associated with a sociologically informed historiography that seems to suggest that sociology *presupposes* “the American experiment”. He viewed the associational pattern of America’s social development as integral to its character,³³ and that suggests that the New Lead role anticipates the emergence of similar societal patterns elsewhere across the globe.

And as we have noted, in his pre-1937 journal articles, he attempted to keep his discussion to his *theoretical* contribution, avoiding an argument that could be construed

³¹ *System*, 122.

³² *System* *ibid.* He might have added New Zealand, for together they are members of the former British Empire cum Commonwealth. See also Lipset S M (1963).

³³ *System*, 96

as a manifesto of academic reform. We might wonder if this suggests an underlying pragmatism, but we should look again at his view of history.

In conclusion to *Structure*, he set out his view of how the study of history relates to other “sciences of action”. It may not be an analytical science - as with economics, politics and sociology - but it is still involved in giving an empirical account of action.

History may be regarded primarily as the general historical science concerned with human action... It should be noted that history is here treated *only* so far as it claims empirical scientific status; in other words in so far as it attempts to arrive at empirically verifiable judgments of fact and of causal relationships.³⁴

And this is essentially the same view Parsons sets forth in 1970 when concluding *System* with “New Counterpoints”. One can view the USA from an evolutionary and comparative perspective,³⁵ because a new and modernizing type of societal community has emerged.

To many readers, the attention to American society in the preceding chapter may seem parochial.... The United States was selected out of conviction that it has become - for how long remains to be seen - the leader of the modern system, *not* in the usual political sense but through structural innovations central to the main course of modern societal development. This choice was based upon the evolutionary scheme that we have been following in this book as a whole.³⁶

With this 1970 statement, Parsons retains the 1937 view of historical science delineated in *Structure*. Parsons’s two volumes in the Foundation of Modern Sociology Series, as well as the posthumously published *American Society* (Parsons 2007), constitute the emergence of Parsons’s own kind of sociological historiography with the qualification that it is set forth in evolutionary and comparative perspectives. One reader concludes his adulatory review by calling these two volumes the premier example of “analytical history.”

... analytical sociology and analytical history, like any rigorous science, are accessible only through abstraction, formalization, and generalization. It is the undisputed merit of Parsons to have energetically applied this method to history and thus to have made a substantial contribution to analytical history.³⁷

Müller’s analysis of this later “phase” in Parsons’s scientific development is consistent with a social action theory and sociology that has arisen especially from the intense and ongoing reception of Weber’s work in North America and the Anglosphere. And the question of sociology’s relation to history was present at the earlier stage of his theoretical development no matter how absorbed he may have been with an “analytical

³⁴ *Structure*, 771.

³⁵ Note the full title of the first of the two books he authored in the Foundations of Modern Sociology Series: *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall 1966.

³⁶ *System*, 122.

³⁷ Müller G (1969), 156

frame of reference.”³⁸ Parsons’s sociology is inextricably interwoven with his reception of Max Weber’s contribution.

Weber’s wide-ranging investigations exist with the extensive results of German historical research as his immediate scholarly context. That “turn of the 20th. century” scholarly development “from history to sociology”³⁹ is also about Max Weber’s contribution.

But Müller’s review therefore prompts the possibility that these two volumes, as Parsons’s application of his social action theory, constitute a distinct analytically oriented approach to American social history.⁴⁰ Parsons’s grasp of America’s New Lead role in the world certainly seems continuous with Weber’s reference to a “line of universal significance and value” for the West with which introduced his collected works on religion:

A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value.⁴¹

Parsons translated this as the opening paragraph of “Author’s Introduction” in the late 1920s. It seems to have then been part of his own deepened appreciation for how US was to be viewed within the West’s “line of development”. But the documentation of the New Lead in 1970 also suggests a significant historical development has occurred. The dominant pattern for the societal community “having universal significance and value” is now to be found in its fullest expression on the western sea-board of the North Atlantic. But Parsons’s sociological historiography contains the proviso, “for how long remains to be seen”⁴² and this is congruent with his rendition of Weber’s “as we like to think” (“*wie wenigstens wir uns gern vorstellen.*”⁴³) In this scholarly lineage, scientific and scholarly judgments come to us framed with such qualifications. Such scientific results do not escape science’s hypothetical character.

Parsons’s sociological affirmation of the USA’s place in the world is given within an evolutionary and comparative “analytical history”. But to repeat, from *Structure* we have learned that history does not have its own distinctive, abstract “factor”, as one element of a multi-dimensional understanding of human action.

³⁸ *Structure* (1949) B

³⁹ See the references listed under footnote 14 above.

⁴⁰ *Structure* has references to the German historical school. See reference to Leopold von Ranke, 477. Index reference is to “Otto”. Parsons’s Brown University Colver Lecture “History and the Evolution of Societies” (February 1974) gives Parsons’s interpretation of Ranke’s famous dictum “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” (Pre-edited transcript p.1 Harvard Archives Box 1&2 HUG(FP)15.80). How does this relate to what Georg G. Iggers says was the prevailing misinterpretation of Ranke by early 20th century American historical profession? Doubt is cast on the view, seemingly confirmed by Parsons in *Structure*, that Ranke ignored the importance of a selective and analytical working over of reports of “what had been happening”. Iggers G C (1962). This relates to Müller’s view of Parsons’s “analytical history” (see fn.35).

⁴¹ Weber M (1930) (*Author’s Introduction*), 13.

⁴² *System*, 122

⁴³ Weber M (1922) (“Vorbemerkung”), 1

The distinction between analytical and concrete conceptualisations becomes crucial.

The critical analysis of economic theory that we can find in his pre-1937 journal articles, that was then systematically replicated and expanded in *Structure*, explains why economic theory has failed and Parsons explains this failure by reference to Whitehead's "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." He puts forward the alternative view by which the "analytical sciences" divide the scientific exploration of action between themselves according to their respective "factors". But as Parsons reads Weber, the *analytical* social sciences are sharply distinguished from the *historical* sciences which are focused upon "concrete historical individuals."⁴⁴

In the conclusion of *Structure*, this distinction may be slightly modified but not so as to bring "history" into the fold of those *analytical* social sciences oriented by their own disciplinary factors. He construes history "primarily as the *general* historical science concerned with human action."⁴⁵ (emphasis added).

This suggests that the scientific distinctiveness of historical research is not to be found in defining its analytical "factor" but in reckoning with its role of providing a general summation, bringing together *all* relevant social scientific data from *all* the social sciences in its empirical description of historical reality. Müller may suggest that Parsons has contributed to "analytical history" but this does not explain the distinctiveness of the discipline, nor the criteria by which empirical data are chosen to present a fully empirical historical account of action.

Further biographical research may critically reconsider Parsons's earliest essays to discern how his homeland - the USA as a *concrete* (historical) entity - is an ever-present reality and resource for his sociological theorising.⁴⁶ As the USA developed along its twentieth century path, so also Parsons became confident about the New Lead role of his own country. He is confident that it is empirically verifiable that the pre-eminent New Nation represents or harbours the most potent example of the differentiated societal community in the system of modern societies.

The acknowledgement of the American societal community as the powerful exemplar for the patterning of social life beyond the USA, might seem to endorse an American view of its own normative responsibility for itself and for the entire system of modern societies. But the final chapter of this 1970 volume, "Conclusion: the Main Pattern", presents us with a scholar's concern to continue to present a scientific (value-free) view. Still the volume ends on a note of sober realism rather than moral uplift. Has not Parsons moderated his optimism by his social scientific realism? He concludes the treatise as one who is quite aware of what is going on in the world.

Finally, let us repeat ... the conviction that the present crisis - and there does seem to be one - centers in the societal community, not in the economy, the polity, or the value system.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Structure*, 598 The exposition there, and in fn 2 is of Parsons's construal of Weber's understanding of the scientific encyclopaedia.

⁴⁵ *Structure*, 771. Fine distinctions persist in the footnote: "As distinguished from what, reviving an old term, may be called natural history, on the one hand, history of ideas and other cultural systems, on the other."

⁴⁶ There is still room, of course for a further biographical accounts, building upon the excellent accomplishments of Uta Gerhardt. See Gerhardt U (2002) and Gerhardt U (2011).

⁴⁷ *System*, 143.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were times of significant upheaval. The assassination of Martin Luther King occurred in March 1968. 1970 saw the intensification of bombing of Vietnamese bunkers in Cambodia while across the USA anti-war demonstrations were intense. Integration in a shared value system has become a most urgent requirement, and in *Structure* “common value integration” had been identified as the specific focus of sociology.⁴⁸ The problems arising from the ramified impacts of industrial, democratic and educational revolutions will not be easily solved since

... anything like a “culminating” phase of modern development ...[is] a good way off - very likely a century or more. Talk of “postmodern” society is thus decidedly premature.(ftn) Taking into account the undeniable possibility of overwhelming destruction, our expectation is nevertheless that the main trend of the next century or more will be toward completion of the type of society that we have called “modern.”⁴⁹

This suggests that the role of the New Lead society is to point in the direction of the culmination of modernity which he says is yet a “good way off”. And in this sense Parsons maintains his moderate optimism with his scientific confidence that his sociological analysis has succeeded in identifying “main trends.” This is not so much an explicit statement of a normative principle as an analysis that tries to identify the problems to be overcome if the modern project is to be completed. Nevertheless the question of the character of the human and therefore normative contribution to this “culmination” is raised.

So Is it American Optimism Overcoming Western Decline?

But what about Parsons’s motivation, what I have called his “moderate optimism”? We can describe his persistence in what must have been a complex academic situation. We can note his underlying sense of “vocation”. But how are we to understand how he kept going? We’ve identified his resistance (the μ -factor) but what are we to make of his “moderate optimism”? Let us briefly explore this further noting some decisive statements that give us a glimpse of the young candidate’s view during the final days of his Dr.Phil studies. The 27 year-old “early career academic” was awarded his degree on the basis of the two articles published in *The Journal of Political Economy (JPE)*. In these articles, he was addressing his German mentors and examination panel - he had passed the oral examination some months before - but the intended readership would be much wider.

The facts of this publication are a significant stimulus to sociological research about the prevailing academic context of that time. Are there any other American scholars of these years whose degrees were conferred by German universities on the basis of such English-language journal articles fulfilling publishing requirements? And what are we to say about the condition of higher learning in America at this time? The Harvard Society of Fellows would be founded by a 1932 bequest of retiring President Lowell, after ongoing discussions between himself and Lawrence Henderson, Alfred North Whitehead and Henry Osborn

⁴⁸ *Structure*, 768.

⁴⁹ *System*, 143. The footnote in the text is to John Porter, “The Future of Upward Mobility” *American Sociological Review* 33:1 (Feb 1968), 5–19.

Taylor, addressing their disquiet about the quality of graduate research in their university.⁵⁰ We also recall Parsons's own Amherst College experience of institutional economics and the acerbic critique of higher learning by Thorstein Veblen.⁵¹ The Meiklejohn sacking caused changes to his final year of study and we also have Parsons's published comments on that sacking.⁵²

As we consider these facts, we recall that Parsons's translation of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* essay was published in 1930. We should not ignore the 7 articles he wrote - published above his name: "Talcott Parsons, Harvard University", for the prestigious *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*.⁵³ Here is a young instructor, very much on the fringe of Harvard's tenured faculty, who has already achieved scholarly standing in his own right, the kind of scholarly initiative promoted by Harvard's Society of Fellows.

And in this socio-cultural context we note that Parsons remained persistently "on track", hanging on for nearly a decade as a lower-rung "early career academic," during a global depression, wondering if his contract would be renewed, aware of the serious consequences of termination, not only for his own career but also for the well-being of his wife and young children. There is a remarkable story here of a scholar who was happy to become known as an "incurable theorist", who rose to the top of an academic field, and did so, it seems, while apparently refusing to be pessimistic in any wholesale sense about the academic resistance he seems not only to have anticipated but must have also experienced.⁵⁴

These two articles considered worthy by the *JPE* editors for its scholarly examination of capitalism broadcast a view of "recent German literature". The discussion was not only of Sombart and Weber, but also had to touch on Karl Marx. The Dr.Phil candidate's discussion of the major contours of Sombart's thought, shows a deft use of language:

Another salient characteristic of Sombart's thought, his emphasis on the unity of a culture, may well be thought of as a protest against the overoptimistic view that, in order to cure all social ills, it is only necessary to tinker here and there, and thus change some parts independently of others. Up to a certain point he is undoubtedly right. Our social fabric does hang together, but again - like Marx in the opposite sense - he overshoots the mark and attributes an undue rigidity to the system. *There seems to be little reason to believe that it is not possible on the basis which we now have to build by a continuous process something more nearly approaching an ideal society.* In any case the process of social change is certainly neither so radically discontinuous nor so radically determined by any "principles" as Sombart would have us believe. (emphasis added)⁵⁵

⁵⁰ George C Homans and Orville T Bailey "The Society of Fellows, Harvard University 1933-1947" in Brinton (ed) (1959), 1-37. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_Society_of_Fellows. We also note the 1925 date for Whitehead's delivery of the Lowell Lectures, *Science in the Modern World*.

⁵¹ Thorstein Veblen *The Higher Learning In America: A Memorandum On the Conduct of Universities By Business Men* (1918). (Available in many on-line forms).

⁵² See Talcott Parsons & Addison T Cutler "A Word from Amherst Students" in *Early Essays*, 287-292.

⁵³ *Early Essays* see items 3-6 and 11-13.

⁵⁴ *Structure*, 774. In conclusion Parsons explicitly addressed the endemic pessimism of sociology students.

⁵⁵ *Capitalism I*, 653. *Early Essays*, 13.

Here is the characteristic rhetoric of Parsons the young scholar on his way to a comprehensive overview. But notice his use of “our” and “we”, as well as the sentence I have highlighted. This is also a public declaration of moderate American optimism, albeit in the middle of a long paragraph. He had no qualms of writing as an American student for his examining panel in Heidelberg, while also addressing senior American academic editors of a prestigious journal. And there is also the readership across the social science “community”. The personal pronouns add nuance and remind us of his involvement in the very “social fabric” he is discussing.

Social transformation toward an ideal society is by no means ruled out, he says. But why this insertion of a mid-paragraph sentiment of civic optimism? Read in context of the entire argument of the two articles, it indicates Parsons’s awareness of his critique of Weber’s pessimism, and hence provides him with the grounds he will appeal to in the second article as he advocates a critical retrieval of Max Weber’s sociological methodology. He has decided to appropriate as much of Weber’s insights as he can, but to do so he takes distance from his hero’s bleak pessimism. Weber is not dismissed as completely wrong. He is not criticised for any ideological or philosophical association with Nietzsche, Marx or Spengler.⁵⁶ There’s no critique of Weber’s post-Christian “demon who holds the fibers of his very life.”⁵⁷ There is instead much value placed on his work. It needs to be retrieved with a scholarship that affirms the positive scientific prospects of Weber’s social science methodology. For Parsons, Weber’s bleak historical outlook is woven too tightly into his analysis of capitalism. His pessimism will mitigate the reception of his insights among economists and social scientists in Europe’s Western frontier. But Parsons has also decided that they can benefit from Weber’s sociology of ideal types.

Parsons’s exposition of Weber is in critique of his exaggerated view that “all human activity is forced to follow the “system.”⁵⁸ Likewise, Weber’s account of the “iron-bound process of rationalization... over the whole social process falls to the ground”⁵⁹ when critical attention is given to Weber’s ambiguous application of his idealtypology methodology. Yet Weber’s ideal-type construal of “bureaucracy” can actually be harnessed to make organisations more humane and thereby avoid the failures, through the negligence of orthodox economics. Weber’s work, retrieved in this way, illumines a path to social scientific research that can help make a better scientific contribution.⁶⁰

Attention to what Weber has presented in the 1929 article tells us that the aspiring social scientist with a spring in his step was aware that he was addressing the American academy, even while the two articles, as published, fulfilled the DrPhil publishing requirements from Heidelberg. This appeal to a civic sentiment seeking reform is not totally absent in the German text of the Dr.Phil but it is not as explicit.⁶¹

It took 10 years from the completion of his Heidelberg residence for Parsons to gain full professorial status in Harvard’s sociology department. What we have outlined points us to his firm resolve, his supreme confidence in what he was doing as a social theorist. It is his confidence in his theory, as much as his disagnostic critique of the

⁵⁶ *Capitalism I*, 658. *Early Essays*, 17.

⁵⁷ Weber M (1958) “Science as a Vocation”, 156.

⁵⁸ *Capitalism II*, 47. *Early Essays*, 33.

⁵⁹ *Capitalism II*, 49. *Early Essays*, 35.

⁶⁰ *Capitalism II*, 51. *Early Essays*, 36–7.

⁶¹ See e.g. *Kapitalismus*, 218–219 fn 131. There is also mention of Weber’s “cultural pessimism” in the final endnote No.20 *Kapitalismus*, 330–331.

social sciences, that had him “sticking around” until his work gained the institutional respect with which it has since been ascribed. The story is a remarkable one and there are aspects of it that will need further elaboration.

Conclusion

And so to conclude this consideration of “Talcott Parsons and Politics”. We have sketched the American sociologist with a firm but scientifically moderated optimism. He has made his scientific contribution to sociology and he did not duck away from the distinctive American character of his contribution. He seems to have operated with a basic pragmatism close to the roots of his articulation of the theory of action. Once again we find ourselves coming across a vital point of criticism, but only to discover that the “incurable theorist” has identified it already, if we were sharp enough to see it.⁶²

So what *kind* of American are we confronting in this “incurable theorist”? Could it be that sociology is in some sense a scientific discipline that emerged concurrently with America’s arrival at a place of global and societal prominence in the modern world? So is sociology a social science that presupposes the emergence of the US New Lead?

This is no minor or side issue. To properly understand Parsons’s scholarly contribution is to appreciate how he dealt with this very same question. To contribute to “Parsons studies” - as with any of the several species of secondary study⁶³ - is to explore how the “incurable theorist” viewed his own sociological trajectory from his peculiar form of secondary study. There is a peculiar intensity to Parsons’s persistent analytical search to discover sociology’s scientific theory that then might bring us to note his own open recognition of this intensely personal and vocational dimension of social scientific work.

But this then simply brings us back to the question of what we are doing in our contribution to “Parsons studies”. What is it to consider “Talcott Parsons and Politics”? That is the pertinent question, with its inherent complexity, that has been raised by this 2020 project in this edition of *The American Sociologist*.

As an American with a Protestant Christian background, Parsons wanted to explain his radically this-worldly search for an explanation that comported with his emerging scientific vision and sensibilities. He knew very well that he was motivated to understand the society in which he had been reared. And he set about seeking to explain what it was in that society, the society into which he had been born, that so motivated him. And then when he, with the help of Max Weber’s writings, began to see the USA as a product of modern European civilization, he was set on course that would mean that as he matured he would realise he was a *product* of that society that had taken on the New Lead role. The USA would play out the cultural consequences of the onward march of modernity - which he would denominate as the three formative modern revolutions - democratic (political), industrial-technological

⁶² Uta Gerhardt has pointed to the key statement is in *Social System*, 108 “The combination of universalism with achievement values puts the primary universalistic accent on process, that is, on means-choice and particular goal choice, leaving the goal-system fluid. In some such sense the philosophy of Pragmatism epitomizes this orientation.” He did not usually capitalise such terms but he did on this occasion. It took the astute Uta Gerhardt to pinpoint its significance in Gerhardt U (2011), *passim*.

⁶³ *Structure* (1937) v, (1968) xxi.

(economic), and scientific (public educational) - and he grew in the conviction of a deeply personal bequest that he sensed as his own. And indeed being a citizen of that polity was only one dimension of that inheritance and not necessarily the most important. His entrepreneurial flair in his own professional academic sphere envisioned a uniquely American scientific opportunity with the emergence of the discipline of sociology. The term “society” within his theory of action refers to the many-sidedness he encountered in his sense of social responsibility. And explaining this became his own special vocation, his job. It was not merely because he grew up with an American trust in an exceptional inheritance, but that did have a lot to do with it. His optimism was that of a twentieth century American, moderate, measured and aware that, as much as his humanistic outlook was changing, so also was the American societal community in which he was located.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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