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# PARSONS' "STRUCTURE" IN AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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U.C.L.A.

At the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association in 1987, a session held to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the *The Structure of Social Action* drew a large and interested audience. Had the commemoration been held 20 years earlier, it is quite likely that it would have occurred entirely within the framework of *Structure* itself. Speakers would have treated the work as an exercise in general theory, as a hugely successful attempt to provide an explanatory framework for empirical sociology. They would have assessed the box score of empirical and theoretical "progress" since its publication in 1937; spoken about "recent developments" in the field; and probably would have concluded—with an important dissent registered here and there—that in the thirty years following its appearance significant accumulation and elaboration had occurred. The *Structure*, in other words, would at that time have been taken as a founding event in a relatively consensual, proto-scientific discipline. For even as late as the mid-1960s, *Structure* was still seen as Parsons had originally presented it: as a framework of accumulated theoretical knowledge, on the basis of which predictions could be made and compared (favorably) with what social scientists had subsequently discovered about empirical fact.

Ten years ago, by contrast, such a commemoration would not have taken place. The profession at that time was involved in a massive effort to overthrow *Structure* and, in doing so, to free itself from what was thought to be the pernicious influence of functionalist thought. *Structure* was still viewed as an exercise in general explanatory theory—though as an ideological document as well—but it was now widely felt by many that contemporary empirical reality no longer fit

the model, if ever it had. Those leading this struggle—theorists like Gouldner, Garfinkel, Blumer, Giddens, Collins—believed that the theory articulated by *Structure* was something social science should, and probably would, safely leave behind.

Yet here we are, another ten years later, still talking about *Structure* and, indeed, commemorating it. The announcement of *Structure*'s death turns out to have been premature, as was the announcement of Parsons'. In fact, it is possible that, with the exception of Habermas, no post-classical sociological theorist is more talked about today in Europe and the United States than Parsons himself, though this talk is certainly more reflective and selective than it was twenty years ago. And since I have brought up Habermas, let me make the obvious point: Who could possibly know what in the devil Habermas is talking about if they did not know Parsons work? In the last decade Habermas has decided that Parsons must not only be his Hegel but his Ricardo, that it is Parsons whose ideas he must internalize and dispute (Alexander 1985; cf. Sciulli 1985), if his new version of critical theory is going to fly.

Why now, why still? To honor the publication of *Structure*—Parsons' first and finest single work—we must answer these questions. The first answer is rather obvious: we find that sociologists are still talking about their empirical problems in explicit relation—both positive and negative—to the problems that *Structure* first posed. Jonathan Turner, one of my partners in the ASA symposium, has just published *The Structure of Social Interaction* (1988). His title is not fortuitous. It signals that Turner has written his new book to argue against what he claims to be a monistic bias in the Parsonian approach to action. Turner is confident, moreover, that Parsons' title of fifty years ago is still so well known that his play on words will be immediately recognized. The same evidence that *Structure* remains our contemporary can be found in the work of Harold Garfinkel, my other partner on the platform of the ASA commemoration, whose paper is being pub-

<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to Bernard Barber, on his retirement from Barnard College and Columbia University, in recognition of his theoretical achievements and with gratitude for his personal and intellectual collegiality. This paper was prepared, at Bernard Barber's suggestion and with his encouragement, for the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association in Chicago, Ill., August 1987.

lished alongside mine in this journal. As Garfinkel attests in this paper, it is impossible to understand the theoretical significance of ethnomethodology without understanding that it has developed in dialogue with Parsons' early work. Indeed, Garfinkel still insists that to properly understand the microfoundations of social order we must understand just why *Structure* explained it in the wrong way. As I will suggest later in this essay, there are numerous other contemporary works that continue to present and justify their findings in the same way.

But there are even more important reasons for the continuing contemporary relevance of Parsons' early work. It is not only that there continue to be important discussions about, and in relation to, *Structure*'s earlier concepts. It is also that we can now understand the influence of *Structure* in a more reflective and more accurate way. Armed with the post-empiricist philosophy, history, and sociology of science, we understand theorizing differently that we once did. We are less inclined to see theory as a pragmatic test shot at empirical targets, the reality of which are taken for granted. To the contrary, we now understand that theory has an important role in *creating* the objects as well as their explanation.

Twice-removed from the period in which the concepts of *Structure* were taken to be identical with society as such, we are beginning to appreciate that it was *Structure* that itself helped to invent—not simply discover—the empirical universe within which postwar sociology lived and within which, by and large, it continues to live today. Sociology, therefore, has not escaped from *Structure* by arguing against its propositions, concepts, or even its intellectual history. The reason is that it has done so largely within the frame of reference that *Structure* had such a huge part in establishing. If contemporary sociology is a language game, albeit one with rational and scientific aspirations, it was *Structure* that gave to this language some of its most important words.

By virtue of its intrinsic power and extrinsic intellectual influence, *Structure* played a key role, perhaps the key role, in establishing the base line vocabulary for modern sociology. It is in the post-world war II period that this contemporary, "modern" sociology may be said to have begun. Published in the no man's land between this

postwar era and the close of the classical age, *Structure* functioned both as dividing watershed and integrating bridge. It did so in two distinctive ways. First, it constructed—through selection and interpretation—the classical heritage from which subsequent theoretical and empirical sociology would draw. Second, it translated the "classics" into a particular conceptual vocabulary, one which is still largely in force today. It is for both of these reasons that *Structure* is still a living and vital theoretical work. It has, indeed, become a classic in its own right.<sup>2</sup>

I will take up each of these pathways to classical ascension in turn. I begin with the translation of earlier theorizing—what *Structure* taught us to call "classical" theorizing—into a new and eventually omnipresent theoretical vocabulary. Parsons' goal in *Structure* was not simply to recount, either historically or hermeneutically, the "real meaning" of Durkheim, Weber, Pareto, and Marshall. He wanted, rather, to demonstrate that they had established a new conceptual scheme. It is revealing that, before he ever got to these writers, Parsons spent more than one-hundred pages laying this scheme out. He made three points.

(1) Sociology is about the problem of order. What Parsons called the Hobbesian problem can be understood in the following way: What holds society together? Is it force and fraud—in which case the Hobbesian problem is avoided—some common commitment to values, or both?

(2) Any solution to the order problem involves an approach to action. To avoid Hobbes' Leviathan, the essential liberty of action, what Parsons' called "voluntarism," must be maintained. This can only be done if the interpretive (nonrational) character of action is accepted: actors strive for meaning.

(3) Parsons' third point ties together his first and second. If actors strive for meaning, they orient themselves toward norms that provide standards of evaluation. Insofar as these standards are shared, they can be called values. Insofar as values are internalized, they solve the problem of order in an anti-Hobbesian way.

Parsons went on to demonstrate inge

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of how social science disciplines are constructed via discourse about the writings and subsequent interpretations of figures who are given a classical status, see Alexander 1987b.

niously and brilliantly, if often quite mistakenly, that Durkheim, Weber, Pareto, and Marshall each discovered and promulgated these very points.

In the half century after *Structure*, Parsons' answers to these three central questions—order, action, and values—became three of the most central and contentious notions in empirical and theoretical sociology. That the relation of these concepts to classical sociology has become just as central and vexing to the emerging field that is called the history of sociology is a topic to which I will return. I want initially to take up the argument generated by these concepts in and of themselves.

According to an understanding of this conceptual scheme that become increasingly widespread, *Structure* had addressed these points in a manner that created two central dichotomies.

The first was conflict versus order. Before Parsons wrote *Structure*, there was no such beast as “conflict theory.” Certainly there were theorists who emphasized conflict, like Marx, and others who emphasized order and consensus, like Durkheim. But the problem had never been posed in terms of “theories of” either one. While this was not how Parsons himself had actually posed the problem, there is a powerful subtext in his argument that does allow this dichotomy between order and consensus to be drawn.

Between 1950 and 1960, Ralf Dahrendorf, David Lockwood, John Rex, Alvin Gouldner, and C. Wright Mills wrote that there were conflict theories and order theories and that the choice between them defined the future of macrosociology.<sup>3</sup> Order theories, in their view, talked exclusively about nonrational action, values and equilibrium; conflict theo-

ries, by contrast, emphasized instrumental action, power, and disorder. In the next generation, macrosociologists like Michael Mann, Randall Collins, Charles Tilly, and Theda Skocpol elaborated conflict and “structural” sociologies that sought to build exclusively upon this anti-voluntaristic, anti-cultural base. Their results are open to debate. In my own work (e.g., Alexander 1988a), I have argued that in dismissing culture and subjectivity these theorists have made serious mistakes. What is important in this context, however, is to see that the sources of the “structuralism” so hegemonic in contemporary macrosociology are directly if dialectically linked to Parsons' publication of fifty years ago.

The second dichotomy that *Structure* appeared to have established was between action and order. Through his notion of value internalization, Parsons tied individual effort to the ordering power of social structure. Was there, his critics wondered, any truly individual action left? In my view, once again, this is by no means an accurate rendition of what Parsons was up to. The theorist whose intention was to save subjectivity, and who called his work “the theory of action,” could hardly have intended to eliminate individual action as such. Still, it is quite possible to read *Structure* in this way and, again, an entire generation of microsociologists did just this.<sup>4</sup>

For Herbert Blumer, George Homans, the early Erving Goffman, the later Garfinkel, Ralph Turner, and Aaron Cicourel, the only way to emphasize the importance of individual, contingent action was to neutralize the influence of values and prior social structure as such. The result was a brilliant body of work that elaborated the interactive strategies, rational and interpretive intentions, and creative structuring capabilities of individual

<sup>3</sup> In his early essays, Gouldner (e.g., 1960) tried to draw the line in a more subtle way, developing a “left functionalism.” He (1970) later adopted the more conventional line. Lockwood's developing theory goes in the opposite direction, drawing back from the overly simple dichotomy between conflict and order he asserted so forcefully in his earliest work (Lockwood 1956) to the later distinction between system and social integration, which criticized Parsons' treatment of order in a more nuanced and sophisticated way and, indeed, actually stood on the shoulders of Parsons' earlier work (Lockwood 1964). While Coser (1956) accused Parson himself of being simply an order theorist, he argued that functionalism in a more generic form could successfully handle the problem of social conflict (see especially Coser 1967).

<sup>4</sup> See *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II* (Alexander 1987a) for an extensive analysis of the dialogue between Parsons' action theory and his micro critics, on the one side, and his macro-conflict critics, on the other. I argue that while critical problems in Parsons' work made these criticisms partially legitimate, and the counter-programs they offered partially progressive, these critics made Parsons into a straw man and offered one-dimensional theories in turn. Future progress in sociological theory, I suggest, must go beyond these critics and Parsons' himself. Efforts at developing a new synthesis is what the contemporary, “third phase” of postwar macrosociological theorizing is all about (see Alexander 1988b).

actors. This work decisively illuminated a whole range of empirical domains. It did so, however, by cutting sociology in half. Because they understood *Structure* in a distinctive way, these studies of individual interaction significantly deepened and reinforced the micro-macro divide. Still, in the present context whether they misunderstood Parsons is not the point; without the framework of *Structure*, they would not have formulated their revolutionary ideas in anything like the same way.<sup>4</sup>

I have suggested that contemporary theorizing and research in macro and micro sociology has been generated within the rubric of Parsons' founding work. The dichotomies around which this theorizing revolves continue to inspire, and to confuse, new theoretical efforts today. For example, a new subdiscipline of cultural sociology is in the course of being established. If sociologists working in this area want to emphasize contingent activity and social conflict, will they feel that they have to sacrifice a focus on values and cultural structure? Following the polemically constructed dichotomies of macro and micro sociology, many have argued (e.g., Swidler 1986) that this must, indeed, be the case.

If these false dichotomies in macro and micro theorizing rest upon partially flawed interpretations of Parsons' work, efforts to go beyond them will continue to draw upon, criticize, and revise Parsons' founding effort as well. It should not be surprising, therefore,

that in opposing arguments that deny the centrality of values, Archer's (forthcoming) effort to formulate a theoretical framework for cultural sociology returns to Parsons' fundamental distinction between culture and social system (cf., Eisenstadt 1986 and Alexander 1984).<sup>5</sup>

I argued earlier that the influence of Parsons' conceptual translation of earlier thought was not the only reason for *Structure*'s classical status. There is also the fact that, in the course of this great book, Parsons selected and interpreted what came to be sociology's classical pantheon. It is important to understand that Parsons did not present *Structure* as an interpretation but as an empirical discovery. In calling it an interpretation, I am making the contrary claim: Parsons' portraits of classical writers were constructed, not discovered. His theorizing about these writers, therefore, must be deconstructed in turn.

The theorists who were the subjects of *Structure* were not accorded classical status, in English-speaking sociology at least, before Parsons wrote. Parsons made them so and he read them in a creative, contingent, and highly variable way. Social science disciplines are hermeneutic, not only discovering enterprises. Their explanatory, discovering theories are embedded in earlier, conventionalized understandings of pivotal texts. To put it another way, social science discoveries are textually mediated by classics. It follows that debate about who the classics are and what their works mean is critical to the development of even the most empirical social science field.

*Structure* came to be seen as the most sophisticated history of sociology for several decades after its publication. This meant that any alternative version of sociological theory and research had to challenge its interpretive claims. This is precisely what has ensured over the last twenty odd years (Alexander 1987b). The battle has been waged not only, as Derrida would say, against the presences in Parsons' text, but also against the absences.

It was in part because Marx and Simmel

<sup>4</sup> Garfinkel continues the argument in his accompanying essay, arguing that in *Structure* Parsons ignored the "concrete" individual and that he recommended that sociology focus only on the analytically abstracted "unit act." In my view, what Parsons intended to argue was something very different. His point was that, when the "concrete"—living, breathing, irredeemable, etc.—individual is the topic of empirical analysis, it must be conceived in a manner that does not identify it with an atomized asocial individual. It was the latter that Parsons called the "analytical individual," and it was only this he wanted to avoid. Parsons used the notion of analytic individualism, in other words, to restore to the concrete individual—the real social actor—a fuller depth. Still, neither in *Structure* nor at any later point in his work did Parsons actually examine the manner in which this real social actor acts. I explore this paradox—which gives some credence to Garfinkel's critique while avoiding its damaging reductionism—in my introduction and substantive contribution to *The Micro-Macro Link* (Alexander 1987c, Alexander and Giessen 1987; cf. Alexander 1988c). For an extensive discussion of the slide toward reductionism in Garfinkel's work, see Alexander 1987a: 238–280.

<sup>5</sup> Wuthnow's effort to establish a theoretical framework for cultural sociology clearly falls within this second approach, for while Wuthnow emphasizes the significance of social structure he argues for the need to construct relatively autonomous cultural patterns which interact with it (see especially Wuthnow 1988: 66–96).



were notably absent from *Structure* that it became very difficult in the immediate post-war period to do Marxist and Simmelian sociology. The purpose of writers like Gouldner, Giddens, and Zeitlin, on the one side, and Levine, Wolff, and Coser, on the other, was to make it possible to engage in these sociologies by re-establishing the legitimacy of their classical exemplars. Thrust and counter-thrust can be followed in the long decades of interpretive argument about Marx's and Simmel's work. Suffice it to say that, eventually, it became impossible to keep Marx, at least, out of the pantheon's central core. My own book on Marx (Alexander 1982), for example, starts from just this "anti-Parsonian" premise, even while I criticize Marx's mature sociology in a manner that complements what I take to be *Structure's* central concerns.

More interesting than the efforts to overcome the absences in *Structure* are the attempts to redefine the presences. Despite the fact that Durkheim and Weber had lost their centrality in their own national traditions, Parsons succeeded in establishing them at the center of sociology in a disciplinary sense. Rather than seeking to dislodge these theorists, later challengers to Parsons worked at reinterpreting them. Every major theoretical tradition in postParsonian sociology has justified itself via some antiParsonian reinterpretation of Weber and Durkheim, even those positivist traditions that have entirely rejected the scientific validity of interpretation.

Typically, these new interpretations are presented as readings that have no axe to grind. They seek to establish their validity as "objectively better" interpretations rather than interpretations that have been inspired by different theoretical interests. They have done so by emphasizing their greater access to new texts, the accumulation of scholarly facts, the advancement of interpretive methodology. It is not very difficult, however, to deconstruct these interpretive discussions. When we do so, we can see that they are neither neutral nor objective, in the positivist sense of these terms. Indeed, they are as far from these ideals as Parsons' originating interpretation itself. These encounters with the classics never, in fact, confronted the "classics" in and of themselves. They are themselves textually mediated. The text is Parsons' *Structure*.

Parsons' (1937: 473–694) "Weber" was

constructed through a brilliantly selective reading. Weber is said to have been preoccupied with values: his *Economy and Society* received from Parsons only cursory treatment. Parsons argued, moreover, that Weber's concepts of "charisma" and "legitimation" were homologous with the concepts "sacred" and "moral authority" in Durkheim's work. Shils (1982) made these interesting but rather far-fetched claims central to his later theoretical program of macrosociology, despite the fact his Weber interpretation was no more textually substantiated than Parsons' own. Eisenstadt continues to theorize within this "Weberian" justification today, arguing (e.g., Eisenstadt 1968) that in Weber's work institution-building has a sacred and charismatic basis.

Bendix launched and organized the more strategic, conflict-oriented reading of Weber. It takes nothing away from the grandeur of his "intellectual biography" of Weber (Bendix 1962) to say that it was a brief for this anti-Parsonian position. Later, Roth (1968) took on the burden of this scholarly agenda, his introduction and translation of *Economy and Society* marking its exegetical apotheosis. Collins' (1968) early political sociology rested upon Bendix's and Roth's interpretation. When the Indiana group "deParsonized" Weber in the early 1970s (Cohen et al. 1975), they merely formalized the most widely consensual of these claims.

Parsons' (1937: 301–450) Durkheim interpretation was as important for establishing the normative, functional framework for postwar sociology as his reading of Weber. The interpretive challenge in this case took two forms. Scholars like Bendix (1971), Tilly (1981), and Collins, accepting the gist of Parsons' portrait, argued that the Durkheimian approach was pernicious to any effective macrosociology. Interpreters like Gouldner (1958), Giddens (1972), and Traugott (1978), on the other hand, argued that Parsons had ignored the real, institutional Durkheim, who had supposedly embraced a materialistic conflict approach hardly different from Marx's own. Once again, the Indiana group (Pope 1973) represented the apotheosis of this line of interpretation in the effort to "deParsonsize" Durkheim.

If I am right that that postwar interpretation of Weber and Durkheim has been a sotto voce, and not so sotto, dialogue with *Structure*, it should not be surprising that

recent efforts to re-establish the cultural dimension of macrosociology should have turned more positively to Parsons' original arguments. Insofar as structural conflict theory wanes, Weber takes on a different character. Thus, the recent German interpretations of Weber—by Schluchter, Münch, and Habermas—are heavily indebted to Parsons, not only to his framework in *Structure* but to his later, evolutionary history as well. The current revival of the "late Durkheim" as an exemplar for cultural sociology (e.g., Alexander 1988d) also takes off from Parsons' insight into the increasingly symbolic path of Durkheim's later work. Collins (1988), for example, takes a very positive line on this later writing of Durkheim, to the point of endorsing, with conditions, some key elements in Parson's Durkheim-inspired political sociology.

*The Structure of Social Action* is one of the truly exemplary works of twentieth century social theory. Like virtually all of this century's seminar social thinkers, Parsons began this work with an alarming sense of the crisis of his time. Disillusioned with the shallow progressivism of nineteenth century thought, he distrusted reason in its narrowly positivist sense. He was also suspicious of idealism in its naive, organicist form. His goal was to establish the possibility of reason on a more realistic base.<sup>6</sup> Keynes' goal was much the same, and his *General Theory*, published one year before *Structure*, resembles Parsons' own book in crucial ways. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, composed over roughly the same period, questions rationalistic theories from a remarkably similar point of view and proposes a conventionalized and interpretive alternative that exhibits distinctive parallels to Parsons' own. Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* presents another interwar approach to rationality that *Structure* resembles in critical ways, despite its equally clear departure in others. All these great works argued that freedom and rationality can be explained theoretically, and sustained socially, only if earlier frame-

works—materialistic, individualistic, idealistic—are abandoned. If the anxiety that surrounded the creation of these works has abated, it has by no means disappeared. Their call for a new kind of social theory remains as relevant today. That is why sociologists continue to read, to grapple with, and to celebrate Parsons' first great work.

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<sup>6</sup> Parsons (1937: 5) writes that "various kinds of individualism have been under increasingly heavy fire [and] the role of reason, and the status of scientific knowledge . . . have been attacked again and again." From the right, the threat was Nazism—"we have been overwhelmed by a flood of anti-intellectualist theories"; from the left, it was communism—"socialistic, collectivistic, organic theories of all sorts."

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