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Structure after 50 Years: The Anatomy of a Charter¹

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In the half century since its publication, *The Structure of Social Action* has emerged as one of the classics of the sociological tradition. At the present time, however, there is scarcely any agreement about the status of the book's argument among all those who still appeal to the volume. After 50 years, the vast scholarship generated by *Structure* is in disarray, with separate literatures existing for different aspects of the book and controversies present in all these literatures. This paper examines each major aspect of *Structure*: its (1) sociohistorical context, (2) writing style, (3) methodological argument, (4) account of the history of social theory, (5) analysis of action, (6) view of the social world, (7) perspective on the actor, (8) treatment of the problem of order, and (9) approach to voluntarism. The paper argues that, when *Structure* is embedded in the socio-intellectual context where it was produced, and is interpreted as a "charter" intended to defend the science of sociology against forces such as behaviorism and neoclassicism, the separate features of its argument come together to allow the resolution of many of the controversies that surround the book and to facilitate the integration of much of the previous scholarship. This interpretation locates the achievement and the critical limitations of *Structure* in Talcott Parsons's tendency to universalize the particular ideas that served to advance the immediate aims of his charter for sociology.

"817 arid pages" was Pitirim Sorokin's (1966, p. 495) short verdict on the undertaking, which has provoked similar responses from several generations of potential readers. But neither Sorokin nor the vast majority of

¹ I would like to thank Bernard Barber, Warren Hagstrom, Robert Alun Jones, Donald Levine, Steven Lybrand, and Erik Wright for their help and advice on this paper. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Alexander for making available to me the letter from Talcott Parsons cited in Section IV. Parsons's manuscript, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Social Institutions," is quoted by permission of the Harvard University Archives. Support for this research was provided by the Graduate School Research Committee of the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Requests for reprints should be sent to Charles Camic, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706.

others concerned with sociological theory over the past 50 years really dispensed so easily with the book. On the contrary, since its issue, in a small print run, late in 1937, *The Structure of Social Action* has established itself as one of the great "watershed[s] in the development of American sociology in general and sociological theory in particular" and as the virtual baseline for "the modern period in sociology" (Coser 1977, p. 562; Gouldner 1970, p. 61; see also Alexander 1987a, 1987b; Barber 1987; Gerstein 1979; Scott 1974; Shils 1961).² No sociological work from the period has been so widely discussed, and few theoretical developments in the discipline over the past half century have been launched without an engagement with Talcott Parsons's towering first book.

To date, however, this widespread discussion and engagement has produced surprisingly little in the way of a broader appreciation of where sociology stands with regard to the argument of *Structure*. The tendency, rather, has been for different theorists, scholars, and commentators (generally unaware of one another's work) to confront the book in piecemeal fashion and put forth discrepant interpretative conclusions, which then serve as the point of departure for sundry new theoretical projects, divergent analyses of the course of Parsons's intellectual career, and so on.³ It is the purpose of the present article to propose a *sociological* and *critical* interpretation that integrates the major features of *The Structure of Social Action* as well as the principal results of the large, fragmented scholarship spawned by the book.

As Lukes (1973, p. 1) has suggested, to attempt an analysis that is *sociological and critical* is to pursue divergent objectives that are nevertheless interdependent. A claim of the following research is that *Structure* cannot be adequately interpreted without a sociological understanding of the sociointellectual setting where the book was produced and of Parsons's social location and experiences in that setting. To achieve this understanding, the analysis takes into account not only the text of *Structure* but also Parsons's other writings before and more or less coincident with the book's appearance, his later autobiographical statements regarding his early career, and the work and situation of some of his earlier American contemporaries. In this sense, the study is an effort to apply to Parsons's thought the analytical strategy advocated by certain recent soci-

² In furnishing references, this paper adopts two conventions: (1) it supplies only original publication dates for cited materials, reserving fuller information for the References; (2) it designates *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons 1937a) simply as *S*.

³ This is true even in the recent papers on *Structure*'s fiftieth anniversary by Alexander (1987a), Garfinkel (1987), and Turner (1987), though, for the most part, these papers concentrate more on the book's eventual influence than on its argument per se (see also Holmwood 1983; Sciulli and Gerstein 1985).

ologists of ideas (for reviews of this work, see Jones 1983, 1986) and to argue, by means of an example, the case for extending that approach. Somewhat paradoxically, though, the better one's sociohistorical understanding of *Structure*, the better equipped one is to offer a critical assessment of its present value: to discern, for example, whether the book contains intellectual resources that might dissolve our own preconceptions, or whether, in contrast, it holds its greatest present-day utility only when its original meaning is benignly overlooked. *Structure* is not, in my opinion, a pure example of either of these extreme alternatives. For reasons that will emerge, however, I do think that the book on the whole veers more in the latter than the former direction, and that contemporary sociologists might do well finally to recognize this possibility.

I

For all the attention *Structure* has received from sociologists, relatively few have sought to understand the book sociologically. Among those who have, the preferred procedure has been to adopt the tactics of the sociology of knowledge and appeal either to conspicuous aspects of Parsons's social background or to the macrohistorical climate of the 1920s and 1930s. Creelan (1978), for example, regards Parsons's work as a coming to terms with his early Congregationalist upbringing (see also Wearne 1983), while Gouldner has interpreted *Structure* in part as an alarmed reaction to the "mass meetings, marches, [and] demonstrations" of the Depression years (1970, p. 146; see also Gouldner 1979, p. 299; Therborn 1976). Putting both factors together, Alexander has more recently proposed that Parsons can "justly be discussed as [representing] the Protestant, moralistic, and middle-class 'protectionist' response to the development of capitalist society" (1983b, p. 385; see also Alexander 1987b, pp. 22–28; Buxton 1985; DiTomaso 1982; Vidich and Lyman 1985).

This approach brings out certain bona fide features of the case. Writing to Vogelin in the 1940s, Parsons himself noted a link between his scientific stance in *Structure* and his Calvinist heritage (see Wearne 1983, p. 6; also Johnson 1975, p. 125), and his unpublished papers from the period of working on the book demonstrate concern not only with the "many symptoms of our present economic situation" but also with "liv[ing] through the era of the great war, of communist and fascist revolutions, of oil scandals and Kruger debacles" (quoted in Buxton 1985, pp. 21, 282). It was, he later recalled, the draw of such developments, and especially "enthousias[m] for the Russian Revolution and for the rise of the British Labour Party," that first diverted him "from [an] inclination to biology and/or medicine, into the social sciences" (1971, p. 233; 1976a, p. 176). And *Structure* itself is plainly attuned to religious nuances and world

events, advocating a method that “points beyond the realm of the empirical [to] vindicat[e] the partisans of religion” and glancing outward to the Depression, Mussolini, Nazi methods of opinion control, and so forth (*S*, pp. 237 n. 1, 283 n. 4, 324 n. 2, 395 n. 1, 427–28). The notion that *Structure* “turned resolutely from any concern with the contemporary economic and political crisis” (Bottomore 1969, p. 34) is hard to sustain. But it is equally difficult to attribute to the book a defined practical program. A staunch New Deal liberal (Parsons 1961, p. 350), Parsons decried no political philosophy so much as liberalism—faulting it for neglecting “aristocratic” reservations about “progress in th[e] liberal sense” and for overlooking prospects of “a collectivist state where the . . . process of production [would be] in the hands of a . . . centralized body working in the general interests” (*S*, pp. 152–53, 292–93).⁴

At all events, instructive though they have been, standard sociology-of-knowledge approaches to *Structure* exhibit a common limitation. They center on factors whose level of generality is far removed from that of the book itself. Protestant middle-class affiliations and awareness of the dramatic events of the era were characteristic of large portions of the population in general, and the academic ranks in particular, during the 1920s and 1930s and are, as such, too commonplace to render so comparatively uncommon a “response” as *Structure* sociologically intelligible. Such factors may work for carefully selected features of the book but tend to leave the project as a whole elusive. It is otherwise, however, when attention shifts to the specific sociointellectual setting where the young Parsons was situated. Parsons said as much himself toward the end of his life, observing that he “was a ‘child of [his] age’ and, in working on [*Structure*], thought in terms of the intellectual environment of the time” (1978, p. 1351; also 1976b, p. 364). Indeed, concerned though the early Parsons was with broader world affairs, the main focus of nearly all his writings lay in certain of the intense controversies that were then raging across the American academic scene. Here, note can be taken of only a few aspects of this complex scene.⁵

Of greatest importance is that *Structure* took shape during the seedtime of the modern academic landscape—the period, running from the last quarter of the 19th century to the Second World War, of the expansion of American higher education from its modest origins into a nationwide network of colleges and universities, which were internally divided into

⁴ For fuller treatments of Parsons’s political views, see Alexander (1983b), Apter (1987), Buxton (1985), Foss (1963), Gouldner (1970), Holton and Turner (1986, pp. 209–34), Lipset and Ladd (1972), and Mayhew (1982, esp. 1984).

⁵ In addition to primary source material, the account in the next four paragraphs draws heavily on Camfield (1973), Cravens (1978), Curti (1980), Hinkle (1963, 1980), Oberschall (1972), Parrish (1967), Ross (1979), and Samuelson (1981).

departments representing those fields that successfully established themselves amid fierce interdisciplinary struggles for the academy's finite material and ideal rewards. The most consequential of these struggles involved the distinguished biological sciences and the emerging social sciences and revolved around the claim (by the former) that recent experimental discoveries in biology—ramifying as they did to the foundations of life, both individual and collective—finally “unlocked the secrets” of the social world and thereby obviated the need for separate social sciences (see Cravens 1978, p. 11). In an age open to “the application of biological science to social problems” (Cravens 1978, p. 17), this was a compelling idea and one made still more convincing following the institutionalization, in the early decades of this century, of the discipline of psychology as one in the family of biophysiological sciences. For whether its emphasis fell (as in the pre-World War I period) on heredity and instinct or (as in the postwar era) on the role of the physical environment, the clear message of psychology was that its natural-scientific researches held unique promise of resolving everything from “the basic issues of the origin and development of mind [to] the social problems of a disorderly industrial society” (Cravens 1978, p. 57). And this was a message powerfully reinforced, from the mid-1920s onward, with the spread through psychology of the “behaviorism” of John Watson, which aggressively reduced the study of social institutions to the biophysiological study of human beings, deterministically conceived as “nothing [more than] reactive animal[s], without soul [and] consciousness,” without “‘choice’ and ‘purpose’” (Cravens and Burnham 1971, p. 646; Fearing 1930, p. 311; see also Allport 1927).

Social scientists reacted to this onslaught in different ways. Too factious to mount a unified counterattack, they took positions corresponding to how their own fields stood in the interdisciplinary competition. Anthropology, for example, possibly the most weakly established of the emerging disciplines, initiated the boldest response. It carved out the idea of “culture” (conceived as values, attitudes, and collective symbols) and insisted—most militantly perhaps in the Boasian tradition of Lowie, Kroeber, and others—that human thought and action “are determined by factors arising not from the [psychobiological] characteristics of the . . . actor but from the cultural conditions . . . of his group” (Lowie 1924, p. 277; see also Cravens 1978, pp. 89–120). At the opposite extreme, economics, which attained lofty academic status even earlier than some of the biophysiological sciences, long adhered to its orthodox neoclassical heritage, unruffled by the challenge of biology, with which it actually united in opposing the establishment of other social sciences. By the interwar period, however, even orthodox theorists like Taussig, reacting to institutionalist movement inside economics, encouraged accommoda-

tion not only to the traditional fields of “history, politics, [and] ethics” but also to the new sciences of “psychology [and] biology” (1924, p. 13).

Typical of the age, Taussig’s list makes no mention of sociology, a reflection of the reigning assumption that the less said about it, the better. Indeed, although courses labeled as sociology had (thanks to part-time instructors in nonsociology departments) long since appeared in American colleges in response to the demands of reformers and others for vocational training, acceptance of sociology as a worthwhile intellectual discipline—and independent department—was rare down to the 1930s (see Oberschall 1972; Ross 1979). The assault by behaviorist psychologists on the social-scientific domain, combined with the resistance of those like the neoclassical economists, hit many would-be sociologists with particular force and imbued them with “the need to define sociology in university culture, to differentiate it from other disciplines, to win recognition for it [by delineating] its methods, assumptions and body of data, [and] to establish [its] achievements in research and theory” (Cravens 1978, p. 140).

To meet this need, leading sociologists like Cooley, Ross, Thomas, Znaniecki, Ellwood, Park, Faris, and MacIver worked out, in the two decades before *Structure*, a position similar to that developed by the anthropologists and increasingly common, too, among antibiologistic social philosophers (Dewey, Mead) and gestalt psychologists (Koffka, Köhler). They affirmed that humans in society are cultural beings rather than reactive animals: “conscious agents” and “active subjects” (in Znaniecki’s terms [1934, p. 131]), affected by heredity and environment, but neither determined thereby nor understandable without “notion[s] of voluntaristic action [and] articulated purpose”—that is, without an appeal to human attitudes, values, and symbols and to such behavioristically suspect phenomena as “subjectivity, . . . ends, means, reflection and choice, [and] rules” (Janowitz 1975, p. 86; Hinkle 1963, p. 714; see also Cravens and Burnham 1971, pp. 649–54; Curti 1980, pp. 239–46; Kolb 1957, p. 106).⁶ The polemical climate of the period did not encourage precise specification of these concepts and their interconnections. More urgent to contemporary sociologists, inspired by the example of the established sciences, was to advance from their premises to concrete empirical research, and this is what they undertook in a great diversity of areas. Over the long run, such efforts markedly benefited the cause of sociology. In the short run, however, they left the field near the bottom of the academic hierarchy, so much so that as late as 1939 the *Saturday Review*

⁶ This point of view was not, to be sure, upheld unanimously. There was, at the time, a group of sociologists whose response to behaviorism was to propose a sociology that could be defended by the behaviorists’ objectivist criteria for science. For an analysis of the experiences that underlay this group’s distinctive response, see Bannister (1987).

of Literature could print as its lead “What’s the Matter with Sociology?” an article by Harvard historian Crane Brinton jeering the “would-be science”—“the poor thing [that] has been ailing [since] Comte”—as “the pariah subject,” whose “trivial content,” discrepant research findings, and lack of any “solid and established central core” placed it more on a par with “alchemy” than with either the natural sciences or economics (1939, pp. 3–4, 14).

The Structure of Social Action is a late and sweeping effort to defend the opposite position in the ongoing interdisciplinary controversies. Parsons was mortified that Brinton did not appreciate this (see his memo to Henderson in Buxton 1985, pp. 284–85). When he later characterized himself as a “child of his age,” one of the things Parsons especially emphasized was his deep involvement “in the ‘war of independence’ of the social sciences vis-à-vis the biological” and in the struggle against the era’s “rampant . . . behaviorism” (1959a, pp. 625–26; 1970, p. 830; see also Bourricaud 1977, p. 11). His “polemical foil” during this period, he often insisted, very much “lay in radical behavioristic theories . . . stemming from John B. Watson” (1974, p. 56; also S, pp. 77, 115–16, 190, 356; 1959b, p. 8). But the early Parsons was also convinced that a general victory for the social sciences in their war against the biological sciences would not suffice to elevate the discipline of sociology from its status as “a ‘poor relation’ . . . in the orbit of [the] social sciences” to a rightful place alongside the eminent field of neoclassical economics (1936a, p. 372; also S, p. 598; 1969b, p. xiv). For this reason, he felt it necessary to concentrate on “the problem of the relation between economic theory [and] sociological theory” and, within the context of his larger defense of the social sciences, to set this as “the focal problem” of *Structure* (1975b, pp. 666, 669; similar statements are to be found in many of Parsons’s works).

Considering his own social location and experiences, Parsons had ample cause to regard the biological sciences and economics with even more concern than did other sociologists of the age. For, however much Harvard University “insulated” him from the economic crisis of the 1930s (Gouldner 1970, pp. 169–78), it had the opposite effect with respect to the interdisciplinary struggles. A world leader in biology, physiological psychology, and neoclassical economics, the university lagged behind many peer institutions when it came to sociology, countenancing decades of opposition to the field’s independence—by some of the economists and thinkers of Brinton’s type—before establishing a tiny department of sociology in 1931 (see Church 1965; Sorokin 1963, pp. 240–43). Magnifying conditions on the American academic scene further was Parsons’s own career trajectory, which began with undergraduate training in the distinguished field of biology; moved from there to graduate work in

economics and an instructorship in Harvard's front-ranking department of economics, where promotion prospects were slim; and culminated, in the years when he was writing *Structure*, with a transfer to a tenuous position in the low-status sociology department. Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that, throughout *Structure* and the articles that preceded it, Parsons took challenges from the behaviorists, the economists, and others seriously and developed a deep interest in "firmly [establishing] sociology's credentials as a recognized form of social-scientific inquiry [and] clarifying its subject matter, method, and relations" with other disciplines (Buxton 1985, p. 76; also Levine 1980, pp. xxxviii–xli).

In approaching these issues, Parsons—understandably—tapped the available intellectual resources and, like many of his contemporaries, sought recourse in a perspective that, even as it conceded the role of heredity and environment, viewed human conduct as essentially voluntaristic and animated by common values, subjective purposes, ends, rules, and so on, that is, by the distinctively sociocultural phenomena that *Structure* terms "normative." The point is not that Parsons was particularly "influenced" by the writings of like-minded American sociologists, philosophers, and others—although he was impressed with the gestalt psychologists' argument for voluntarism, knew the work of Cooley and Znaniecki well, and had a good personal acquaintance with sociologists from Chicago and Columbia (see Parsons 1959b, p. 4; 1974, p. 56; Janowitz 1970, p. xi).⁷ If Parsons's themes echo with the ideas of others from the 1920s and 1930s, a more likely explanation is that he was struggling under conditions similar to theirs, against the same intellectual and institutional opponents, to accomplish the same disciplinary objectives. The early reviewers of *Structure*, who operated in the same universe of discourse, took clear note of this, recognizing the book as a contribution to the attack on behaviorism and economic theory and seeing in the emphasis on voluntaristic action, values, and the rest a means to justify "the independent existence of sociology" and "give it a more respectable position" (Bierstedt 1938b, p. 665; Kirkpatrick 1938, p. 588; also Catlin 1939, p. 265; Crawford 1938, p. 179; Huse, 1939, p. 129; Wirth 1939, pp. 403–4).⁸ Commentators since the 1950s, nonetheless,

⁷ The young Parsons also had general familiarity with trends in anthropology. He cites Lowie's writings, as well as those of Boas and Radcliffe-Brown, and studied at the London School of Economics with Malinowski, whose work he associated mainly with "one of the greatest accomplishments of anthropology [in] Malinowski's time: a clear distinction between man as a biological organism and man as the creator, bearer, and transmitter of culture" (Parsons 1957, p. 85).

⁸ Contrary to common opinion, *Structure* was (with the one exception noted below) prominently and generally favorably reviewed (see, in addition to the notices cited above, Bierstedt 1938a; Gettys 1939; House 1949; Pinney 1940; cf. Simpson 1938).

have generally lost sight of the book's intentions here—so completely that none of the most recent synoptic treatments of *Structure* so much as mentions its disciplinary aspirations (see Alexander 1987a; Garfinkel 1987; Turner 1987). In the past three decades, only a few scholars, focusing on particular aspects of the work, have observed the extent to which Parsons's views were shaped by his interdisciplinary travails (see Burger 1977, p. 326; Gouldner 1970, p. 18; Levine 1980, p. xxxviii–xli; 1985, pp. 119–22; Lockwood 1956, p. 134; Mayhew 1982, pp. 8–10; Mills 1959, p. 35). When this scholarship is brought together, however, it becomes clear that this shaping was not limited to particular aspects of *Structure*. It is evident in the whole enterprise.

Two qualifications are important here. First, the point of the preceding argument is to identify Parsons's disciplinary concerns and struggles as constitutive of the basic design and shape of *Structure*; it is not to suggest that everything woven into that design is reducible to this one foundational factor. Determined to succeed in a competition that was defeating those sociologists who put empirical research before the thorough treatment of "fundamentals" (Parsons 1937b, p. 13), Parsons was willing to embrace conceptual, interpretive, and historical problems with complex lives of their own—and to pursue them down long paths that attest more at times to the topics immediately at issue than to disciplinary considerations per se. Second, to understand *Structure* as a document in the interdisciplinary battles of the past is not to denigrate it as the product of the ulterior career interests of its author. An integral part of the reason Parsons and his contemporaries fought hard for autonomous positions for themselves and their prospective students in the universities was their desire to challenge the then powerful assumption that a science of the social world could be built with concepts like "reflexes, instincts, [and] economic interests" (Williams 1971, p. 124). Few would now deny that Parsons's labor here was on the side of the angels.

But there is a further dimension to this, one that serves, I would suggest, to draw together the fragmented scholarship on *Structure* and allow an integrated critical assessment of the current status of its argument. When one ranges over the extensive literature on the book while keeping its sociointellectual context in view, what emerges, on issue after major issue, is that Parsons adopted a position well suited to his objectives and circumstances but that he then represented that particular position as the natural gauge for sociological analysis in general, thereby converting his own reasonable historical choices into a universal touchstone for the present and future. It is thus that the concepts and categories, method, historical propositions, textual interpretations, theoretical framework, and empirical observations that sustain the important particular argument of *Structure* come to be projected by Parsons as the core of

the sociological enterprise as a whole, with other options (other observations, frames of reference, interpretations, etc.) either assimilated into these, marginalized, or occluded outright. This observation must be differentiated from Gerstein's remark that *Structure* "is admittedly . . . limited, [but] what finite analysis is not?" (1979, p. 38). For it is not that Parsons just so happened, like everyone else, to stop short of taking into account all relevant things. The point is that there is a definite pattern behind what the book did and did not encompass, that this pattern was in part keyed to the disciplinary struggles in which Parsons participated, and that Parsons represented the "finite analysis" that resulted as the exclusive foundation for sociology at large. It is for this last reason, I think, that the "normative" slant found in so much of *Structure* has occasioned such objection to the book—not the slant itself but its presentation as something more global.

In the lexicon of the social sciences, there is a well-known term for ideas that project the particular and local as the general and universal. In the tradition extending back to Marx and Engels, that term is, of course, "ideology"—but ideology in only one of its several meanings, most of which have little bearing on *Structure*. It is appropriate, therefore, to factor out of this complex of meanings "the tendency to present as a group's general condition and interest what defines and serves group members' particular goals under specific historical conditions" and to speak of a text exhibiting this tendency as a "charter." From this angle, instead of interpreting *Structure* (like those discussed above, such as Gouldner [1970] and Buxton [1985]) as the "ideology" of an already established socioeconomic or religious group, we may approach it as a charter, a charter for the still-emerging science that was the domain of the sociologist. To do this is not to deny that Parsons had political and quasi-religious reasons for finding a charter for sociology personally attractive and believing it would appeal to others as well.⁹

II

"It is unfortunate that it is so long and so abstruse in style," wrote Floyd House (1939, p. 130) in an early review of *Structure*, as he put forth a

⁹ Note should especially be taken of Parsons's conviction that developments like the rise of Nazism were "profoundly *moral* problems, demanding not just economic and political solutions," but treatment "at the level of general theory" by the sociologist (1969a, p. 60; 1971, p. 233). In a 1934 speech he stated: "My own preoccupation has been with some of the broadest and most general questions of sociological theory, not with the details of practical problems and programs. [But] the answers of general sociology to these questions, though far from being detailed and specific, are not without their concrete and even practical relevance" (quoted in Buxton 1985, p. 281).

view that has since become almost obligatory. Typically, however, commentators affirming this view have regarded the book's form more as an annoyance than as a revealing expression of its central purposes (cf. Gouldner 1970, pp. 199–209; see also Bierstedt 1981, pp. 389–442; Creelan 1978). The point requires brief elaboration.

Contrary to near-unanimous opinion, *Structure* is not, in fact, an unrelieved exercise in bad writing. That the text has its unwieldy and repetitive sections is obvious enough. Yet it also contains a good number of lean and vigorous passages and certain formulations so apt they are cited all over the field. To debate the literary character of *Structure* on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, however, is to miss the powerful effect that the entire work produces because of what is perhaps its most striking formal element: its programmatic sweep. Difficult passages notwithstanding, the book carries one relentlessly along on an inquiry that is at once a treatise on scientific method, a defense of human voluntarism, a historical account of trends in Western social theory over three centuries, a statement of the analytical foundations of social theory, a study of the causes and solutions for the problem of social order—and, through it all, an attempt to classify the various sciences and specify their interrelations. This side of the *Cours de philosophie positive*, there is probably nothing like it, and by the volume's end, with everything approximately tied together, the reader is almost too outflanked to fend off the climax: the proclamation of sociology as an autonomous science, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. This is the sense in which *Structure* resembles what Anglo-American law terms a "charter of incorporation": a public document designed to constitute a formal association or corporate group by delineating its distinct purposes, intended operating procedures, available resources, historical background, and future objectives and so claiming for it a fixed identity and the various rights and privileges attendant on separate corporate status (see standard legal dictionaries and, for a sociological treatment, Meyer [1970]). Blanket criticism of *Structure* on the grounds of form simply overlooks the degree to which the book is artfully constructed to bring together and arrange architectonically the various components of a Magna Carta for sociology—and to do so within a framework invitingly presented nonetheless, as Gouldner (1970, p. 177) pointed out, as still in need of further collaborative development.

To say this is not to deny, however, that *Structure* is, like many an important legal charter, forged with an opaque vocabulary. With ample justification, every major term in the book—positivism, utilitarianism, empiricism, idealism, voluntarism, rationality, subjective, cognitive, normative—has come under scholarly criticism for its idiosyncratic us-

age, loose definition, and shifting denotation.¹⁰ But such difficulties should not be attributed merely to Parsons's peculiarities as a writer. The problematic terminology is very much bound up with the book's mission as a charter. This is so in two ways.

First, as a result of its programmatic sweep, *Structure*'s terms are strained to accomplish considerable bridging. By employing the same concepts now on this front, now on that, now on another, Parsons imparts the appearance of unity to his multipronged campaign—though at a cost. "Positivism," to take a single example, is used simultaneously to designate an analytical theory focusing solely on the cognitive aspects of an actor's orientation, a methodological approach seeking to cast the social sciences in the model of the natural sciences, and a historical moment in post-Reformation European thought (*S*, pp. 61, 87, 180–81). These meanings are, in addition, freely projected onto one another, so that proponents of the positivist method are portrayed as supporters of the positivist analytical theory and heirs to the long positivist tradition, which is seen as representing both the theory and the method (see Alexander 1983b, pp. 16, 273, 439–40; Ford 1974; Lundberg 1956). This kind of playing on words entangles *Structure* in a thicket of artificial isomorphisms, dubious strawmen, and perplexing loose ends (see Barry 1970, p. 79; Scott 1963, p. 732; Sorokin 1966, pp. 406–7), thus requiring the reader to assent to associations that, however much they tie together the components of Parsons's charter, are unlike those customary in ordinary academic discourse, whether today or 50 years ago (cf. Pinney 1940, p. 184).

But the terminological opacity of *Structure* has a second, more basic source, one affecting present-day readers in contradistinction to Parsons's contemporaries. Contemporaries understood that the book was an intervention into ongoing interdisciplinary debates and that its concepts were often devices that, for all their internal murkiness, pointed outward to identifiable camps of polemical opinion. But, although Parsons frequently named these contemporary referents, modern interpreters still wrestle with *Structure*'s terms without first contextualizing them in now-forgotten strands of biologism, behaviorism, neoclassicism, and so on, and understanding that the code by which those terms are related to one another is itself firmly rooted in the dichotomy between the biological and

¹⁰ On "normative" and "voluntarism," see Sections V and IX; on "utilitarianism," Barry (1970, pp. 77–79), Scott (1962, p. 61); on "empiricism," Bierstedt (1981, p. 395), Giddens (1982, pp. 79–81), Savage (1981, p. 25); on "idealism," Clarke (1982, p. 3); on "rationality" and "subjective," Schutz (1940–41); on "cognitive," Warner (1978); and on "positivism," Adriaansens (1980, pp. 34–36), Menzies (1976, pp. 32–33), Rocher (1975, p. 26), and the sources cited in the following paragraph.

the cultural that defined the academic scene of the 1920s and 1930s. Parsons was forthright about this, writing of *Structure* that “the great dichotomy of this study” is that of “heredity and environment”—“in the . . . sense of biological theory”—on the one hand and the normative or “value factor,” anchored in “the element[s] of culture,” in “religious, metaphysical and ethical systems of ideas” and the like, on the other hand (*S*, pp. 64, 426, 449, 464; 1934a, p. 231).

As a participant in the disputes of that time, Parsons was never neutral about these two sets of elements. His tendency, rather, was to load whatever was useful for his charter onto the “value factor,” while associating what was objectionable with its opposite. And, indeed, some of the terminological mist over *Structure* dissolves when one appreciates that its “definitions” often work less to assign precise meanings than to associate key concepts with one *or* the other side of the book’s “great dichotomy.” It is this dichotomy that underlies, too, Parsons’s proclivity to “slip . . . into an either/or approach” on strategic questions (Alexander 1987b, p. 29), most conspicuously the “forced analytic choice” between “random, amoral, self-interested, disintegrative, individualistic chaos” and “normatively structured, value-oriented, integrative, social order” (paraphrase of Warner 1978, pp. 1324–26). It is true that, in the context of the time, this choice appeared more natural than “forced” and that, in embracing its simple logic, Parsons sharpened the claims on which his charter is based. But it is also the case, as will become clear, that a logic of this kind is severely constrained both in its own terms and with respect to elements neither encompassed in the dichotomy nor accommodated when its sides are seen—as *Structure* does sometimes see them—as the opposite poles of a single axis. The assumption that this particular logic is the logic of social theory in general runs, nonetheless, throughout Parsons’s book.

III

Parsons emphasizes in *Structure* that the value factor, or normative element, in his dichotomy is an “independent factor” not “derivative of [the] biological factor” (*S*, pp. 44, 168, 260 n. 3). To deny this independence is, in his view, to render value elements “epiphenomena,” thereby undermining the rationale for an autonomous sociology (1935a, p. 286). He seeks, consequently, to guarantee the independence of the normative factor, doing so by maintaining that the cultural elements that anchor this factor “point . . . beyond the realm of the empirical” to “nonempirical aspects of [the] universe”—“hanging in the air” (*S*, pp. 424–28; 1934b, p. 531). In upholding this position, however, Parsons does not, as commentators have sometimes suggested, accept a “metaphysical dualism” that would set matter and mind apart and require value elements to be ana-

lyzed in ways “methodologically independent of the sciences of nature” (Scott 1963, pp. 723–24; see also Friedrichs 1970, p. 13; Savage 1981, pp. 92, 109–15). His book expressly rejects this kind of “radical dualism,” asserting that normative factors “participate in empirical reality” (even as they point beyond it) and, while distinct from natural-scientific phenomena “on a substantive level,” remain open to treatment by the same “method”—that is, by the same analytical and explanatory procedures—as fields like biology, chemistry, and physics (*S*, pp. 448, 474, 595–98). The “independence” of the normative dimension does not mean, in short, that to study this element is to compromise the method that has established these other disciplines as full-fledged sciences.

Structure’s defense of the “unity of method” has been widely recognized in recent years. Scholars remain divided, however, on the character of this defense. To some, the book embodies a narrow kind of empiricist and positivist philosophy of science (see Hall 1984; Johnson, Dandeker, and Ashworth 1984; Keat and Urry 1975; Rossi 1981; Taylor 1979; Wilson 1983)—with “empiricist” here roughly meaning the claim that scientific knowledge originates chiefly from systematic observation or sensory experience, and “positivist” the claim that the natural and social sciences are predicated on a common method that seeks to discover constant, uniform laws (Giddens 1974, pp. 3–4).¹¹ To other interpreters, *Structure* represents a revolutionary shift away from America’s positivist-empiricist assumptions to the “postpositivist,” “antiempiricist” idea that scientific knowledge is inherently premised on theoretical or analytical abstraction (see Adriaansens 1980; Alexander 1983b; Barber 1986; Bershady 1973, 1974; Bourricaud 1977; Hamilton 1983, 1985; Heritage 1984; Johnson 1981; Lassman 1980; Lidz 1986; Martel 1971, 1979; Münch 1981, 1982, 1987; Procter 1978; Rocher 1975; Savage 1981; Schwanenberg 1971, 1976). When the method recommended in the book is viewed in connection with its larger objectives, however, it becomes clear that Parsons actually adopted a midposition between what these contrary readings suggest.

In formulating his method, Parsons did quickly dismiss what he called—speaking broadly, rather than in accord with a philosophy-of-science definition—the “empiricist” orientation of his contemporaries in sociology. As previously noted, his opinion was that the cause of sociology was endangered by prematurely rushing into diverse empirical research activities. What he engaged more fully, however, was the methodological position of a number of contemporary neoclassical economists whose

¹¹ As noted above, *Structure’s* own conception of positivism is a broader one; the same holds for its view of empiricism (see *S*, pp. 6–10, 59, 69–70). The definitions used here are for the analysis of methodological issues only.

work he had encountered while still an economics instructor; this engagement proved an extremely important one owing to the distinctive conception of science proposed by neoclassicists, and summarized perhaps best in the writings of Parsons's friend Frank Knight. Significantly, this conception had very traditional foundations: economics, wrote Knight, is a "true, and even exact science, which reaches laws as universal as those of mathematics and mechanics" and does so accepting the "empiricist [premise] that all general truths . . . are ultimately inductions from experience" (Knight 1921, p. 8 n.; 1924, pp. 234, 256–57). But, once laid down, these foundations were defended in up-to-date ways. According to Knight, "there is . . . little if any use for induction in the Baconian sense of an exhaustive collection and collation of facts"; "there [cannot] be facts apart from theories" and "observation [operates] relative to [an] interest" supplied by the scientist, whose "thought is saturated with purpose and concepts, emotion and metaphysical entities," and whose theories are necessarily "abstract," "select[ing] some generally important aspect of phenomena and deal[ing] with that to the exclusion of other aspects" or elements (Knight 1921, pp. 3, 7 n. 1; 1925, pp. 95, 97n.; 1928, p. 141; 1940, p. 462). Economic theory itself concentrates on "the *economic* aspect of human behavior" and constructs from the interplay of deduction and induction, of theoretical principles and "detailed factual study," an analytical "structure [of] ever-growing . . . intricacy," yet, in its selective way, "descriptive of reality" (Knight 1921, pp. 6–7; 1924, p. 258; 1928, p. 141; 1940, p. 462).

Parsons encountered similar views elsewhere: in the works of Pareto and Marshall; in the writings of Harvard economists like Young, Carver, Taussig, Taylor, and Schumpeter; and in the teachings of Harvard's reigning authorities on science, L. J. Henderson and Alfred North Whitehead—the last five often named by Parsons as particularly influential in his methodological thinking (e.g., *S*, pp. xxii–xxiii; 1959a, p. 625; 1959b, pp. 6–7; 1970, pp. 827–30, 873–74; see Barber 1970; Camic 1987; Devereux 1961; Lidz 1986; Münch 1981; Vidich and Lyman 1985; Wearne 1982, 1983). Why he opened himself to this line of influence is something he also disclosed. In his view, "the great . . . source of the preeminence of economics" directly derives from its method, which is "closest in theoretical form to the natural science model" of "generalized [analytical] theory." Were sociology in possession of an analogous approach, the field would then lie "on the same level as economic theory" and "find a place by its side" (1936a, p. 372; *S*, pp. 301, 598, 623, 772).

Given Parsons's programmatic mission, "it seemed," therefore, "to be the moment to search for an equivalent in sociology" of the economists' method (1959b, p. 620). This equivalent, modified to fit the normative element rather than the "economic aspect" that occupied the neoclassi-

cists, is what appears in *Structure*. At the center of its methodological argument is the then-familiar idea that “a given [scientific] field can never [grasp] ‘all the facts,’ ” its focus being not “the full totality of knowable facts, even about the concrete phenomena studied, but . . . certain selected elements of the latter,” that is, certain “analytical elements” (S, pp. 34, 582, 600). What the selected elements will be is contingent on “the direction of scientific interest,” especially as embodied in the theoretical framework of a discipline at a given time. Using the terminology of Henderson, Parsons held that “all empirical observation is ‘in terms of a conceptual scheme’ ” that directs scientists “to those aspects of concrete phenomena which are important to the theoretical system” in question (S, pp. 28, 597, 600). In light of this, he strongly affirmed “that the development of . . . scientific knowledge [is] a matter of the reciprocal interaction of new factual insights and knowledge, on the one hand, with changes in the theoretical system, on the other” (S, p. 11; see Barber 1986).

Parsons’s commitment to this position vitiates the claim that *Structure* defends a narrow type of positivist-empiricist methodology. But interpreters who recognize this point overshoot the mark in viewing the book as a revolutionary move to postpositivism and antiempiricism. Even as he emphasized the role of theoretical abstraction, Parsons affirmed the (positivist) idea that every analytical science—whether biology, economics, or sociology—aims to render “the facts of empirical experience” understandable in terms of “uniform laws” (S, pp. 69, 598, 622). These laws are, to be sure, “analytical laws” that pertain only to particular elements of reality, but they specify nevertheless “the constant mode of relationship” among the values of such elements and thus afford a realistic “grasp” of these features of the “external world”—hence the label “analytical realism” that Parsons applies to his approach (S, pp. 582, 622, 730). Furthermore, while insisting that scientific knowledge emerges on a day-to-day basis from the interaction of the theoretical and the factual, *Structure* endorses the (empiricist) thesis that theoretical frameworks themselves are ultimately “the product . . . of observation, reasoning, and verification, starting with the facts and continually returning to the facts”—and seeking a final point where “elements which do not lie in the facts themselves . . . are eliminated” (S, pp. xxii, 369). The charge, by those like Homans (1962, p. 46), Mills (1959, p. 33), and Turner (1987) that Parsons gave abstract categories precedence over factual observation in the development of theory runs completely counter to the position formally taken in *Structure*.¹²

¹² It is significant that, even as he worked on *Structure*, Parsons was involved in direct observational research on the medical profession and in classroom teaching that had a strong empirical component (see Barber 1985, 1986, 1987).

That Parsons embraced an “equivalent” of the method of the economists does not deny that his views signify an important break with those of his contemporaries in sociology (but see Turner 1986). Appreciation of this achievement should not obscure its limitations, however. Eager to endow sociology with the method that conferred high status to economics, Parsons adopts an approach in *Structure* that fails to accommodate adequately two long-standing sociological concerns. The first of these is subjectivity and meaning. Lidz makes the point well: “In building his . . . methodological foundations [to accord with the natural sciences, Parsons] seems not to have thought it necessary to examine the problems of *Verstehen*"; though action and meaning are his substantive focus, his method is not “carefully adjusted to the phenomena of action”—to the fact that “epistemological relations are changed where the phenomena consist of meanings, expectations, emotions, norms, and beliefs . . . and where the observer must gain knowledge by empathically reconstituting the situations and outlooks of other actors” (1986, pp. 154–55; see also Hall 1984; Heritage 1984; Schutz 1940–41; and the articles in Wolff 1980).

A second, related problem is that of historical variety. Throughout *Structure*, Parsons insists, following the neoclassicists, that explaining particular concrete phenomena is a task that falls *not* to his own science but to the discipline of history; with the neoclassicists and in opposition to those like Weber, he holds, further, that to explain a given historical configuration, the historian has simply to “analy[ze the] historical individual into elements, each of which [can] be subsumed under a general law,” as formulated by the analytical sciences (*S*, pp. 628, 760). In lieu of a historicist concern with the distinct differences among social configurations, Parsons therefore proposes—solely—the analysis of the variation of the values of the same, transhistorical analytical elements (*S*, pp. 618–24; see Camic 1987; Robertson 1969; Zaret 1980). In so doing, he elevates the specific method most useful for chartering sociology in the 1930s as *the* method of the field; alternative approaches are foreclosed.

IV

Despite his attraction to the method of economics, Parsons had serious substantive objections to the field, objections fueled by the economists’ opposition to the establishment of sociology. Realizing this opposition would not be overcome simply by setting his own opinions against the classical and neoclassical traditions, however, Parsons appeals in *Structure* to another heritage: the more modern legacy of certain distinguished European thinkers who provided “ancestral authority for his own [vision]

of sociology" (Cohen, Hazelrigg, and Pope 1975a, p. 229; also Clarke 1982, p. 2).

While Parsons was not alone in turning from orthodox economics to other currents in European thought, what is distinctive is the breadth of his intellectual-historical argument and the intricacy of its analytical apparatus. Veblen (1898, 1899–1900), Mitchell (1910a, 1910b), and other institutionalist economists, whose writings were well known to Parsons, consistently attacked neoclassicism for its atomistic individualism and assumptions about rationality and the givenness of wants, but Parsons melded such criticisms together in the form of the "utilitarian dilemma." He characterized utilitarian thought—a category embracing the neoclassicists of his time and their predecessors back to Spencer and to Locke and Hobbes—as committed, by its emphasis on rational efficiency at the expense of other criteria for selecting means to ends, to the position that "scientifically verifiable knowledge [is the actor's] only significant orienting medium in [an] action system" (*S*, pp. 60–61). According to Parsons, this position, combined with the utilitarians' treatment of actors as separate individuals pursuing given ends, entailed a conception of ends as "random in the statistical sense": a view unacceptable in its own terms and unable to explain adequately why social order, rather than "conflict," obtains in human societies (*S*, pp. 59–60, 89). The "dilemma" was, however, that so long as utilitarian thinkers adhered to "positivism" (i.e., so long as they focused solely on cognitive factors), their only option was either to accept these inadequacies or to patch them over by denying the randomness of ends or abandoning the efficiency standard with explanations stated "in terms of [the] nonsubjective conditions [of] heredity and environment," terms that eliminated what utilitarianism sought to recognize, "the active agency of the actor in the choice of ends" (*S*, pp. 64–67).

From this, Parsons concluded that the edifice of modern economic theory rested on a foundation marked, for nearly three centuries, by "an inherent instability" and "tendency [toward] breakdown" (*S*, pp. 69, 86). He maintained, however, that it was not required that this breakdown end in the biological categories of an extreme, radical positivism; in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, and Émile Durkheim all finally discovered that the lacunae of utilitarian thought (random ends and the problem of order) could be overcome, with no sacrifice of the actor's agency, if common values and other normative elements were incorporated into the analysis of human conduct. The three hereby advanced from the "positivistic theory" to the "voluntaristic theory of action," which emerged independently in the work of Max Weber and did so despite Weber's grounding in the "idealistic theory of action," which saw conduct as an "'emanation' of . . . normative factors"

and disregarded conditional obstacles and considerations of rationality and efficiency (*S*, pp. 82, 446).¹³ Parsons hailed this convergence of these “recent European writers” as a movement of thought unparalleled since the 16th century. Characteristically, however, he described the specifics of the “convergence thesis” differently at different places in *Structure*, with emphasis falling sometimes on the fact that Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber all analyzed action through a congruent scheme of “structural categories” (see Sec. VI); at other times, on the recognition by the four of the importance of both normative elements and utilitarian elements (i.e., efficiency, instrumental rationality, or scientific knowledge); and, at still other times, on their incorporation of normative factors in addition to the “conditional” factors of heredity and environment (*S*, pp. 5, 451–70, 683, 698–719, 775).

The historical argument of *Structure* is the most famous interpretation ever offered of the development of the sociological tradition and has long been accepted, in varying degrees, by scholars in and out of the discipline (e.g., Alexander 1982a, 1983b, 1987a; Annan 1959; Atkinson 1972; Burrow 1966; Clarke 1982; Eisenstadt with Curelaru 1976; Gerstein 1979, 1983; Habermas 1981b; Hughes 1958; Seidman 1983; Shils 1961; Turner 1987). The more closely it has been examined, however, the more it has become clear, as Levine has written, that *Structure*’s “reconstruction of the sociological tradition must be judged erroneous on every fundamental point” (1980, p. xxv).

Parsons’s very starting point, his account of utilitarianism, is questionable. The problem here is not that his criticisms of orthodox economics lacked applicability to the work of some economists of his own time, and of other times also, but that he seriously overextended these criticisms. Some had little relevance even in regard to the neoclassicists best known to Parsons, such as Knight, who emphasized wants rooted in “ideal values” and “norms having imperative quality” (1933, pp. xiii–xv), or

¹³ There is an asymmetry in the way *Structure* develops this argument. When treating the transition from positivism to voluntarism, Parsons’s analysis proceeds on the *substantive* front and centers on how the value factor came to penetrate the positivist-utilitarian framework. When considering the transition from idealism to voluntarism, however, Parsons is interested in the “breakdown of the idealistic *methodology*,” which denied “that the sociocultural sciences”—the sciences of the value factor—“make use of ‘general laws’ of the logical character [found] in the natural sciences” (*S*, pp. 580, 719 [emphasis added]; see also O’Neill 1976, p. 296). For reasons discussed in Sec. III, such a denial was unacceptable to Parsons, and his examination of Weber focuses accordingly on Weber’s criticism of this methodological position, *not* on the process by which a theorist concerned with value factors came to encompass positivist-utilitarian considerations. As Parsons writes: “The justification for dealing with Weber in connection with the ‘idealistic’ tradition lies in the fact that *though his own [starting] position does not fall there*, [he] oppos[es] the commonest methodological doctrines of that school” (*S*, p. 580 [emphasis added]).

Taylor, who held that “it is *only within* a strong framework . . . of socially enforced rules limiting the ‘rational’ pursuit of private action, [that the latter] can go on in the ways . . . economic theory describes” (1936, p. 390). Nor were such statements isolated qualifications; they formed recurrent themes. But Parsons’s analysis emerges as still more deficient for many of the earlier utilitarians. Research on Hobbes, Locke, and Spencer, for example, has absolved each of them of reasoning within the confines of the utilitarian dilemma (Barry 1970, p. 77–78; Giddens 1977, p. 210; Peel 1971, p. 238; Perrin 1976, p. 1351; Scott 1962, p. 54; Warner 1978, p. 1322), and it has been shown, too, that these thinkers were “atypical exemplars” of the larger utilitarian tradition, the writings of which belie charges of randomness on ends, a latent problem of order, and so on (Mayhew 1984, p. 1288; Camic 1979).

These are not minor historical corrections. The weak fit between Parsons’s conception of utilitarianism and the ideas of many of its representatives undermines his portrait of three centuries of European thought as a struggle with the utilitarian dilemma that led thinkers finally to turn to value factors and to sociology. Seriously undermined as well is the often-asserted usefulness of the dilemma as an analytical heuristic. The reason many actual utilitarians avoided the utilitarian dilemma is that, besides incorporating many of the elements Parsons claims they neglected, they took account of factors—notably, motives, communicative social interaction, and political processes—that he himself slighted when framing the dilemma (see Sec. VI and VII). The dilemma is not, in other words, a statement of the options available to utilitarian theory in general but a projection onto the history of European thought of the predicament posed for Parsons by the contemporary intellectual scene. Having embraced the dichotomy of the normative and the biological, Parsons has no conceptual place in *Structure* to situate economic theory except on the uncertain middle ground between the dichotomy’s two poles, with the result that limitations in the theory are interpreted as reflecting its “unstable” location. So positioned, economic thought, to the extent that it does not move in the desired normative direction, can only remain unstable or pull toward the factors of heredity and environment; no other possibility is recognized as other than a temporary way station on the line to the biological domain.

But set aside Parsons’s analysis of utilitarianism, and his historical argument grows no more cogent. Concerned though he is with charting a great transformation in European social theory, Parsons prefers an in-depth analysis of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber to the pretense of “encyclopedic completeness,” reasoning that “omissions are not relevant unless [it is shown that their inclusion] would significantly alter the conclusions” reached (S, pp. 15, 20). For many of Parsons’s omissions,

however, this is what has been shown. It has been established, for instance, that the theoretical position that he posits as the epochal achievement of thinkers after 1890 appears to be such only because he treats no earlier period in equivalent detail. Yet an appreciation of the interplay between value factors and “utilitarian” or conditional elements has been found to characterize “nearly all the philosophic and religious thinkers of Western civilization” since Aristotle and to be clearly present—a century before *Structure* dates it—among “the British utilitarians, the French positivists, and the German idealists,”¹⁴ as well as those at the crossroads, like Marx (Levine 1980, pp. xxii, xix, xxiii; see also Alexander 1983b, p. 155; Ford 1974; Giddens 1976a, p. 727; Gould 1981; O’Neill 1976, p. 299). While Parsons’s pre-*Structure* writings actually evince some awareness of this (see 1934a, p. 230; 1935b, p. 427), his book does not. Programmatically committed to showing that recent decades were witnessing a move away from theories concerned, like economics, with a single set of factors, *Structure* proceeds as if the whole pre-1890 era consisted of little else but so many variants of economics.

But even if attention is restricted to the post-1890 period, significant omissions remain in Parsons’s argument, spawning its most serious shortcoming: its denial that the sociological tradition was rooted in a variety of theoretical approaches, which developed diverging perspectives *despite* agreement on the importance of normative and non-normative elements. This denial is accomplished by a corollary of the “convergence thesis” that portrays ostensible differences between Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber as giving way to a more basic consensus that also represents “a movement of major proportions extending far beyond the works of the[se] few men” (*S*, pp. 14, 774–75). Parsons does not feel called upon to justify the assumption that those he disclaims treating are, in fact, in accord with those he does examine. He carries the point rhetorically by reporting that his four subjects were selected not to corroborate the convergence thesis, but because they were concerned with “the modern economic order”—that they happened to uphold “a common conceptual scheme . . . only very gradually . . . became evident” while he was studying their writings (*S*, p. xxii). The years before *Structure* reveal, however, the more complex story of Parsons’s careful construction of the convergence argument, formulated in the early 1930s as a “Marshall-Pareto-Weber ‘convergence’ ” (Parsons 1970, p. 828; Wearne 1981, pp.

¹⁴ *Structure*’s treatment of positivist thought says almost nothing about what is ordinarily called the positivist tradition in social theory. For Parsons, the exemplars of positivism are Godwin, Malthus, the Darwinists, and the behaviorists, not Saint-Simon, Comte, and their followers—though Parsons is, as usual, willing to suggest that the latter were in essential accord with those he does examine (see *S*, pp. 110–21, 307). For refutation of this suggestion, see Ford (1974) and Levine (1980, pp. xiv–xvi).

821–22); altered in lectures a few years later with the addition of Durkheim, Simmel, Tönnies, and Znaniecki and the substitution of Hobhouse for Marshall;¹⁵ stated in 1935 without reference to Hobhouse and Znaniecki (Parsons 1935a, p. 283 n. 1); and finally recast in the book, with Marshall reinstated, Tönnies relegated to a short note, and Simmel eliminated—among other reasons because, as Parsons subsequently explained, the Simmelian “program did not fit [the] convergence thesis” (1979 letter to J. C. Alexander).

Parsons did not mean by this remark that Simmel was unaware of the role of normative and non-normative factors. His point was that, despite this awareness, Simmel’s sociology was not very useful for backing up the historical case his charter was making against economic theory, the ability to do so being the *de facto* criterion for settling on Marshall, Pareto, Weber, and Durkheim (1979 letter to J. C. Alexander; *S*, p. 13), each of whom might be described as moving beyond economics into the sociological domain of norms and values. That important contemporaries of the four fell short by this criterion and were thus, like Simmel, set aside was a tacit admission by Parsons himself of the inadequacy of assuming that a consensus on the part of his quartet represented a general historical movement toward the same consensus. That no such movement ever occurred has elsewhere been documented more directly, with scholars demonstrating that “far from providing a compellingly unified framework, [the theorists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries] produced a gallery of sociologies based on radically different conceptions of principles, methods, aims, and subject-matters for the field” (Levine 1980, pp. ix–x, xx). Especially excluded from Parsons’s account,¹⁶ commentators have shown, are thinkers concerned with social-psychological processes, particularly interpersonal interaction and communication (Freud, Dewey, Mead, Thomas), those concerned with political structures (Tocqueville, Michels, the later utilitarians), and those theorizing social structure in terms of a relational conception of the social, whether in Simmelian transactional form or in the Marxist form of class relations of production (Alexander 1983b, pp. 215–17; Atkinson 1972; Bottomore 1969; Clarke 1982; Faris 1953; Giddens 1976b, p. 19; 1982, p. 77; Gould 1981; Hinkle 1963; Levine 1971, 1980; O’Neill 1976; Turner 1987; Wearne 1982, 1983; Zaret 1980).¹⁷ These exclusions, which express what will emerge below as

¹⁵ Lengthy notes of these lectures, taken in the 1934–35 academic year by Stillman P. Williams, are available in the Harvard University Archives.

¹⁶ Also excluded are phenomenological and historicist thinkers out of step with Parsons for the methodological reasons discussed in Sec. III.

¹⁷ *Structure* did not, to be sure, completely neglect Marx himself (see *S*, pp. 108–11, 488–95). It views Marx’s thinking, however, as “fundamentally a version of utilitarian individualism,” albeit a version sensitive to the “power relationship between the

Structure's overall view of the social-psychological, the political, and the relational, make clear that “the validity of [the Parsonian] approach . . . cannot rest upon its historical triumph” (Alexander 1983b, p. 215).

The conclusion is reinforced if one turns from the figures Parsons excluded directly to Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber. The treatment *Structure* offers of the four has justifiably received wide praise for bringing to the task of textual interpretation far more analytical rigor than had any earlier American sociologist, for affording insights into the works discussed that even specialist commentators have continued to find fruitful,¹⁸ and for opening a dialogue among thinkers previously cordoned off in separate “schools” that has proved—especially with Durkheim and Weber, whose writings were little appreciated before the book—to be an enduring wellspring for the sociological imagination (see, e.g., Giddens 1982, p. 76; Martel 1979, p. 616; Shils 1970, pp. 785, 789).

What has also emerged, however, is that in striving to make his four subjects exponents of the voluntaristic theory of action, Parsons reached conclusions that their works do not sustain. His analyses of Marshall and Pareto have thus been found to misrepresent the structure of their thought by imputing to them concerns (with normative orientations and social order) that are not salient while overlooking themes (value cleavages and conflicts, structured economic and political inequalities) that are central (Bierstedt 1938a, 1981, pp. 406–8; Lopreato 1971, pp. 319–20; 1980, p. xxiv; Mulkay 1971, p. 90; Pinney 1940, p. 117; Whitaker 1977, pp. 464–72). *Structure* has been similarly criticized for forcing Durkheim too much into the mold of its larger argument, wrongly rendering his early work as a critique of utilitarianism that collapsed into biologicistic positivism, and then so uniformly portraying his mature writings as concerned with action theory and the value factor that the “institutional component of Durkheim’s analysis becomes almost entirely lost to view,” taking with it his treatment of economic and political structures and of the genesis of normative elements in collective patterns of interaction and integration (Giddens 1977, p. 211; see also Alexander 1982b, pp. 427–29;

classes” (*S*, pp. 110, 489). To Parsons, Marx “shares [the classical economists’] preoccupation with the means and conditions of action, hence the . . . assumption of the randomness of ultimate ends”; “a common value element” is generally lacking in his work (*S*, pp. 493–94). In Parsons’s eyes, this is a fatal flaw and classes Marx as a “politico-economic” theorist, not part of his sociological mainstream (1934b, p. 543 n. 8). For discussion of Parsons’s attitude toward Marx, see Buxton (1985, pp. 54–60), Gould (1981), Holton and Turner (1986, pp. 37–40), and Wearne (1981).

¹⁸ That this is so among Durkheim and Weber scholars is too evident to require documentation. But the point also applies to students of Marshall and Pareto (in the former case, see Blaug 1962, p. 401; Collini, Winch, and Burrow 1983, pp. 320–21; Pursell 1958, p. 295; Wood 1982, p. xvii; in the latter, Finer 1966, pp. 43, 49).

Bierstedt 1981, pp. 408–9; Cohen 1975; Giddens 1972, pp. 39–43; 1976a, pp. 706–9; Pope 1973, 1976, pp. 34–42; Rex 1961, pp. 99–101; Traugott 1978, pp. 21–36).

Structure's interpretation of Weber has fared no better. Here the recurrent objection has been that Parsons's “overweening emphasis on the category of the normative . . . led him to expand what is but a part of Weber's sociology [into] very nearly the whole,” particularly by reducing his qualitatively different types of social action, legitimate order, and so on all to variations of the normative factors, converting his analysis of cultural beliefs and their intrasocietal diversity into an account of social integration through shared values, and concentrating on his religious writings to the neglect of his economic and political sociology (Cohen et al. 1975a, p. 240; see also Alexander 1983a, pp. 183–85; Camic 1986, pp. 1074–75; Cohen et al. 1975b; Collins 1968, pp. 47–51; Horowitz 1964; Zaret 1980). Parsons has been faulted likewise not only for imputing to Weber, and to Durkheim, an overly normative solution to the problem of order but also for portraying the two as occupied with the general issue of how order is possible among interest-seeking actors (see Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1980, pp. 45–46; Burger 1977, p. 323; Collins 1968, p. 57; Giddens 1972, pp. 41–42; 1976a, p. 709; Levine 1980, pp. x–xi; O'Neill 1976, p. 299).

When the effects of these emendations are summed up, the conclusion that emerges is that, far from demonstrating deep theoretical consensus, the works of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber document the great diversity that constituted the history of sociological thought. Research on Durkheim and Weber, in particular, has emphasized their “almost complete divergence [with respect to] method and substance” (Bendix 1971, p. 297; see also Collins 1968, 1985; Pope, Cohen, and Hazelrigg 1975, 1977), while related scholarship has indicated that, even where the two theorists shared complementary concerns, they pursued these in ways that exhibit little theoretical convergence (see esp. Giddens 1971, 1976a, 1987). The task of sorting out the differences and similarities between Weber and Durkheim (and their contemporaries and predecessors) has, in any event, been shown to entail an analysis that takes account of the specific issues engaged by these thinkers as each came to terms with his particular sociohistorical, intellectual, and institutional context (see Burger 1976; Jones 1977; Lukes 1973; Peel 1971, p. 240).

Structure deliberately eschews this kind of analysis—and does so for reasons that lead finally to the question of why the book is so insistent that all sociological traditions converge on a common conceptual scheme. At the time that he wrote, Parsons saw himself engulfed by a “strong current” of belief “that there are as many systems of sociological theory as there are sociologists, that there is no common basis, that all is arbitrary

and subjective.” To him, this belief was an assault on his whole enterprise, for it implied that “sociology is an art,” not a discipline to be chartered as a science (S, p. 774). The belief needed, therefore, to be extirpated, and toward this end *Structure* poses as a study of “the process by which scientific thought develops”: a study seeking to establish that social theories develop the same way that (according to Whitehead, Henderson, and the neoclassicists) genuine science advances, that is, from the interaction of theory and facts, the product of which is a progressive approach to the “finite totality” of possible knowledge about a given aspect of reality (S, pp. 11, 601, 697, 725–26). For Parsons, the convergence thesis was decisive proof of this, a way of allowing that his subjects were embedded in different contexts and had different “centers of attention” and “emphases,” but then annulling these allowances with the assurance that, “if we but take the trouble to dig deep enough,” what appear in place of “arbitrary subjective judgments” are shared theoretical concerns and a common theoretical framework (S, pp. 5, 27, 490, 717, 720, 774–75). Even utilitarianism, positivism, and idealism, one-sided though they were, had marched in step; each left a “permanently valid precipitate” that the voluntaristic theory of action integrated to form a more encompassing conceptual scheme (S, pp. 125, 775, 781). This process of development, Parsons maintains, is analogous to the way theoretical physics itself advanced; “it is scientific progress” (S, pp. 470, 775).

This was a powerful brief on behalf of sociology, the perfect Whig history: generations of thinkers engaged in an “immanent” theoretical development that overrode the effects of time and place and culminated in the very position Parsons required in his campaign to make way for a science of the value factor. The empirical limitations of this contention have been outlined above. But even more telling is the simple methodological point—which bears not only on Parsons but also on those who counter his interpretation with other convergence arguments—that with flexible enough interpretive standards, it is relatively easy, as Mulkay has observed, to prove assorted convergences “among virtually any group of theorists” (1971, p. 69; see also Jones 1977, pp. 284–87). That turn-of-the-century European thought revealed to Parsons the trend that it did had, as should now be clear, chiefly to do with his own situation in the American debates of the interwar years. His struggle, to go beyond economics in the normative rather than biological direction, so occupied him that “he retroactively interpreted the [whole] sociological tradition in terms of that struggle” (Levine 1980, p. xxvi; see also Abercrombie et al. 1980, p. 54; Gouldner 1970, p. 17; Hawthorn 1976, pp. 214–15; Vidich and Lyman 1985, p. 301)—generalizing the particular once again. More than three decades after *Structure*, Parsons said as much. Pressed by critics, he conceded that other convergence theses might readily have been estab-

lished; that the conceptual scheme at the heart of his own convergence thesis was “in considerable part [his] contribution, not [an] induction” from the works of his subjects; and that he did neglect a broad array of theorists, overbiologize the early Durkheim, slight Weber’s political sociology, and more. All of this could be explained, however: “I had special reasons in the design” of *Structure*, wrote Parsons, “to emphasize the importance of the normative,” reasons involving the “clarif[ication of] the relation between economic theory and sociological theory,” and this “particular problem complex” must be borne in mind to “specify the limits” of the book’s historical argument (1968, pp. viii, xiv n. 10; 1975a, pp. 109; 1975b, pp. 666–68; 1976b, pp. 363–64; 1978, p. 1351). In the nature of the case, that argument appears in the charter itself without this specification.

V

Anchoring Parsons’s intellectual-historical discussion is his concept of action. *Structure*’s “empirical subject matter [is] human action in society,” writes Parsons, because “it is a fact that men assign subjective motives to their actions, . . . express philosophical . . . ‘ideas,’ [and] associate these ideas [with their] motives. It is a fact [also that men] manifest [their] subjective feelings, ideas, motives [through] symbols to which meaning is attached. This subjective aspect involves the reasons we . . . assign for acting as we do” (*S*, p. 26). This point of view was in explicit opposition to the “objectivist trend [within] behaviorism.” Everything that the behaviorist movement denied, Parsons’s charter affirmed with a swoop of its dichotomous logic that now shunted “behavior” and cognate terms aside, while agglomerating all the counterforces—action, subjectivity, ideal motives, symbols, meanings, reasons, and (as other passages add) purposes, means-end relationships, and free rational and moral choices—with little effort to disentangle or define the multivalent expressions (see 1935a, pp. 282–83, 289, 294; *S*, pp. 44–46, 77–88). In this, Parsons was conforming, again, to the practices of the debates of the time and taking sides against a very real enemy; he did not have call for the distinctions a European thinker like Schutz (1932) was then making (in work familiar to him) between subjective meanings, reasons, causal motives, and so on.

Early in his analysis, however, Parsons does bring out one of two far-reaching decisions underlying his conceptualization of action. From all the terms that he counterposed to objectivism, he focuses on one concept in particular: “the means-end relationship seems,” he declares, “to be fundamental to all consideration of action from the subjective point of view” (*S*, pp. 422–23). *Structure* does not question this assimilation of the

subjective to the means-end relationship; it is thus vulnerable to the objection, of Schutz and others, that it “never asks what really does happen [from a] subjective point of view, [since it uses not] truly subjective categories, but . . . only objective categories for the interpretation of [the] subjective” (Schutz 1940–41, p. 36; see also Hall 1984; Heritage 1984; Wagner 1979; Zaret 1980). Before *Structure*, Parsons had raised a similar issue and warned against the “arbitrary assumption that [the means-end] schema can exhaust the subjective aspect” (1935a, p. 284). But this reservation falls to the side amid *Structure’s* campaign to prove that sociology, like the established sciences, possesses an encompassing analytical framework. In the book, Parsons insists that, just as “it is impossible to talk about physical processes [without] the space-time framework of physics,” so “it is impossible even to talk about action in terms that do not involve a means-end relationship” (S, p. 733).

In placing the emphasis here, Parsons joined forces with critics of Watsonian behaviorism like Edward Tolman, who, in research that Parsons recalled “particularly impressed [him] at the time” (1974, p. 56), had identified “means-end strands” everywhere, even defining “right and left, [and] good and bad [as] but *means-end* affairs” (Tolman 1932, p. 779). The idea obviously resonated, too, with the approach to action that Parsons had encountered in neoclassical economics and that had been well systematized by this point, for instance, in work he knew by the Harvard economist Allyn Young, who proposed treating human conduct in a “scheme of abstraction” consisting of four elements, besides certain “givens” from the “physical environment”: (1) agents; (2) ends; (3) instruments, or means for attaining ends; and (4) “a mechanism,” or “a set of social processes,” connecting means to ends in accord with “communal interests,” which may “impose conditions upon [an agent], prevent him from doing certain things, [or] encourage him to do others” (Young 1927, pp. 3–4).

Structure takes off along similar lines with its widely cited discussion of the “unit act.” Parsons states: “An ‘act’ involves logically the following: [1] An agent, an ‘actor.’ [2] An ‘end,’ a future state of affairs to which the process of action is oriented. [3] A ‘situation’ [differing] in one or more respects from the state of affairs to which the action is oriented, the end. The situation is analyzable into two elements: [i] those over which the actor has no control, [that is,] the ‘conditions’ of action; [ii] those over which he has such control, [that is,] the ‘means.’ [4] Finally . . . there is . . . a certain mode of relationship between these elements. That is, in the choice of alternative means to the end . . . there is a ‘normative orientation’ ” (S, p. 44). In considering this definition, one must beware of anachronistic projections, especially regarding the term “conditions.” Alexander, for instance, equates the concept with material social conditions

in a sense similar to material conditions in Marxism (see 1978, p. 1979; 1983b, p. 12–37; 1987b, p. 24). But *Structure* expressly rejects this view, dissociating Marxist materialism from “the prevailing Western sense of the same term,” which refers to “the nonhuman environment, as natural resources, or [to] biological heredity” (*S*, pp. 490–91). According to Parsons, the conditions of action are not “the concrete conditions of a particular concrete act” or the actor’s actual “social environment,” but the “ultimate analytical conditions of action in general,” that is, the nonsubjective categories of “heredity and environment in the biological sense”—the sense uppermost in the controversies of the period (*S*, pp. 71, 82, 252, 267, 364, 700; see also Gerstein 1979, p. 28; Procter 1978, 1980).

When this is realized, it becomes clear how Parsons’s conceptualization of the unit act weaves into the framework of theorists like Young the normative/biological = conditional axis of his own study. The desired emphasis on means and ends is thus maintained and brought into line with *Structure*’s “great dichotomy.” This accomplished, Parsons proceeds to a more general characterization: considered analytically, “action must always,” he writes, “be thought of as involving a state of tension between . . . the normative and conditional [elements]. As a process, action is, in fact, [an] alteration of the conditional elements in direction of conformity with norms” (*S*, p. 732), or, less technically, the “eternal struggle to achieve ideals in the face of a stubborn and resistant natural world” (to quote Procter’s useful formulation [1978, p. 47]). It is not apparent how this conception would accommodate the idea—uncommon, to be sure, in particular cultures familiar to Parsons, but known elsewhere—that “tension” and “struggle” are *not* the basic forms with which to posit the relation between natural conditions and human agency. What is evident, however, is the close fit between the polemical project of *Structure* and its underlying vision of action. Setting out to vindicate a science of the normative factor from the onslaught of behaviorist theories that gave primacy to conditional elements, Parsons conceives human action itself as ultimately a normatively charged effort to triumph over the obduracy of the conditional.

This conception brings to the fore Parsons’s second decision about action: his belief that all action has a normative dimension: “Just as there is no such thing as motion except as change of location in space, . . . there is no such thing as action except as effort to conform with norms” (*S*, pp. 76–77). Historically speaking, the case *Structure* builds on behalf of this proposition is the achievement of the book. For reasons suggested below, it is an achievement we now do well to view with caution, though this does not diminish the accomplishment. Like other major social thinkers, Parsons (as Berger once remarked [1962, p. 512]) manages to “corrupt the innocence with which we view [what his] theory touches”: after reading

Structure, one has difficulty looking upon human conduct as one did before, for normative elements suddenly seem to be at work everywhere. In this respect, Parsons outdid many other American sociologists of the 1920s and 1930s, bringing an array of observations—each in itself fairly commonplace in critiques of behaviorism and neoclassicism—within the orbit of a single theoretical scheme that highlighted the normative component in everything from rational daily activities to nonrational religious rituals (see esp. *S*, pp. 210–11, 430–31).

This feat of integration is facilitated by *Structure's* elastic, and programmatically useful, employment of “normative” to mean (i) any “determinate selective factor” applied by an actor when choosing among alternative means; (ii) “a sentiment attributable to one or more actors that something is an end in itself”;¹⁹ (iii) “a verbal description of [a] course of action . . . regarded as desirable, combined with an injunction”—or “obligatory” rule—“to make [action] conform to this course”; and (iv) any “embodiment” of the value factor, that is, of society’s ultimate common values and more diffuse value attitudes (*S*, pp. 44–45, 75, 259–60, 387, 404, 446, 464; see also Schutz 1940–41, pp. 30–32; Sorokin 1966, p. 412). There are passages in *Structure* that recognize that these meanings may not coincide; the book describes the economists’ “rational norm of efficiency,” for example, as consistent with usage i yet remote from usage iv (*S*, pp. 56–59, 77–80). But this is unusual. More typically, Parsons confounds the different senses of the term and, on top of this, reduces them all to the fourth of the listed meanings, thereby downplaying the slippage between a factor involved in the choice of means and sentiments about what is an end in itself, *and* between such sentiments and the stated rules regulating courses of conduct, *and* between these rules and shared ultimate values.

Given these reductions, it is not surprising that *Structure's* argument for the normative dimension of action has frequently been interpreted as the claim that all concrete action is governed by common values and attitudes. Parsons’s analysis has then been faulted for neglecting that “people may share [values], while remaining profoundly different in . . . their overall pattern of behavior” (Swidler 1986, p. 275); that actors “construct [their] action, instead of merely releasing it” (Blumer 1969, p. 64); that they are less occupied with “following” prescribed rules than with “develop[ing] what a rule means” (Zimmerman and Wieder 1970, p. 292); that there is a “negotiated character [to] norms, [which] are open

¹⁹ This second definition, the most formal provided in *Structure*, reproduces a definition offered to Parsons in an October 1936 letter (now in the Harvard Archives) from L. J. Henderson, who in reading a draft of the book had been troubled by its imprecise use of “normative.” Interestingly, although Parsons adopted Henderson’s formulation, he seems not to have reworked his text in light of it.

to divergent and conflicting ‘interpretations’ in relation to divergent and conflicting *interests*” (Giddens 1976b, p. 21); and that a great deal of human conduct is impelled by full-blooded self-interest itself (Homans 1964, p. 814).

Not all of this was lost on Parsons. He recognizes that an “element of embellishment” often accompanies normative compliance, that such compliance frequently derives from a “morally neutral” concern with avoiding punishment, and that “the ends of the great majority of practical activities are . . . far removed from ultimate values” and closely tied to mundane “interests” (S, pp. 401–4, 465, 679). But the only one of these points that he pursues is the significance of “interests”—and here one must bear in mind, against the trend of recent scholarship (see, e.g., Münch 1981, 1987), that Parsons uses this term in a highly unusual way. The burden of his whole discussion of the utilitarian dilemma is that concepts like interests are not freestanding but unstable; when rigorously analyzed, they give way to two, more elemental sets of factors—heredity and environment on the one hand, normative value elements on the other. Building on claims developed in an unpublished paper from the mid-1930s (see 1935c, pp. 12–14), Parsons in fact maintains that, to the extent that “interests” are not “ideal interests” based on common value attitudes, they are to be understood as rooted in “desires,” “appetites,” and “passions,” which originate in instinct and other aspects of individual “human nature” as studied within the biological sciences (S, pp. 47, 402, 436, 465, 572, 685).

Full-blooded interests, in the bluntest sense, are not, then, a problem for the book’s analysis of action. Its real difficulty is its inability to make room theoretically for socially constituted interests that are not resolvable into common normative factors, or, indeed, for any aspect of the means-end relationship that is not to be fitted into the polemical categories of heredity-environment versus common norms. Convinced by the polarized situation in which he perceives himself that the “normative aspect characterizes the concepts of all [viewpoints] on human conduct in so far as they transcend behaviorism” (1935c, p. 3), Parsons simply has nothing beyond normative factors to appeal to once he calls into question the sovereignty of conditional factors. It is through the same dichotomous reasoning, moreover, that he is led to lump together the different meanings of the term “normative” and to merge them all with the factor that guarantees the independence of the normative from the conditional: common cultural values. In this sense, there is justice in the critics’ charges—though irony as well, for Parsons’s move to theorize action only in terms of common normative values (and conditional elements) has been met with counterclaims that take the same blanket form in dismissing the normative or conceptualizing it as something else altogether. The global argu-

ment of *Structure* has tended, in short, to encourage those concerned with means-end affairs to wax global themselves, not to examine the *variable* role of normative elements, *and* normative elements of various sorts, under different social circumstances.

These observations pertain to Parsons's decision to view means-end relationships as having a normative dimension, but related issues arise regarding his prior decision to cast all action in terms of the means-end relationship. It is no exaggeration to say that *Structure* has been among the principal sources of the tendency of sociologists in the past three decades—even sociologists most critical of Parsons's normative emphasis—to take this decision for granted, to see it not as a decision at all but as the natural baseline for the analysis of action. But it remains true that, in identifying the means-end schema as the space-time framework of the social sciences, Parsons was giving foundational significance to the specific perspective that he had acquired from the neoclassicists and that had become a strategic weapon in the war on behaviorism.²⁰ As Taylor points out, Parsons “abstracted the [means-end notion from] neo-classical economics [and] then elevated it to the status of a concept with universal application, . . . discarding the limits placed on its application by neo-classical economic theory” (1979, p. 9; cf. Coser 1977, p. 562; Lidz 1986, p. 157). This had two far-reaching consequences for the approach to action laid down in *Structure*.

The first of these is its homogenization of those actions that may be fitted into the means-end framework. As Garfinkel (1987) has observed, in seeking to subsume a myriad of human activities, from speaking, driving, and learning to proving theorems and taking medicines, all as instances of the means-end relationship, Parsons divests each activity of many of its characteristic sociological properties, leaving each as faceless as the utilitarians allegedly left ends (see also Whalen 1987). It is true that there are grounds on which to defend this divestment; by claiming that actions uniformly exhibit a “common structure” and vary only in the content of their norms, means, and ends (*S*, p. 734), Parsons directs attention to similarities useful to appreciate in some theoretical contexts. For the purpose of understanding particular social situations, or historical variations therein, however, it is necessary to recognize that there are limits to this kind of leveling approach. Until we do, we will continue to lose sight of the “organic character” of human activities: of the fact that actions are not simply homologous means-end pairings but also diverse

²⁰ Cf. Levine's observation: “Parsons . . . restricts the meaning of action to that of a single tradition, one that builds on the means-end schema of utility-seeking individuals, ignoring important alternative ways of construing action such as those of Herder and Dilthey or Dewey and Mead” (1986b, p. 1238).

“larger assemblages,” or complex modes of involvement in bounded arenas of social and material objects—that is, historically changing *practices*, economic, political, scientific, legal, artistic, moral, familial, and so on (Hall 1984, p. 268; Swidler 1986, p. 276; see also Giddens 1982, pp. 108–15).

A second consequence of Parsons’s universalizing of the means-end schema is his virtual occlusion of those actions that cannot be fitted into the schema. The point here is not simply that the schema suppresses the specificity of particular actions, but that “there are many for [which a means-end] description is quite inapplicable” (Taylor 1979, p. 10; see also Black 1961, p. 281; Menzies 1976, pp. 31–46; Sorokin 1947, pp. 44–47; 1966, pp. 413–14; Znaniecki 1952, pp. 193–96). This has been shown especially for actions that are predominately emotional and habitual, cases *Structure* glosses over by merging emotion with the value factor and habit with the biological factor of the behaviorists (*S*, pp. 116, 646–47, 671–72; see Becker 1950, pp. 13–14; Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 53–67; Camic 1986; Kemper 1981). In addition, neither actions that assume a means-end form, nor those that do not, occur under all circumstances. Criticizing Parsons for projecting an “action schema [that] is a culture-bound approximation to behavior in Western societies” onto more traditional cultures, Gouldner (1955, p. 177) once demanded a specification of the schema’s “reference period”—and in light of Braudel’s (1979, pp. 28, 561) estimate that 80%–90% of the world’s population has generally acted otherwise, such a demand is no quibble. Even when the reference period is our own, Smith has argued, the means-end model of *Structure* is of uneven relevance, working well for men in certain organizational settings but breaking down for those outside these settings, such as the housewife who is locked in to an action mode of “episodic discontinuit[y],” as she “coordinat[es] the threads and shreds of several lines of action, the projects of more than one individual, while herself pursuing none” (1979, pp. 150–53). This possibility, too, was something that Parsons’s pre-*Structure* writings partially acknowledged in speaking of actions “very difficult, if not impossible, to fit into the . . . analytical straitjacket [of the] means-end schema” (1935a, pp. 309–11). But there are no comparable qualifications in *Structure*. In accord with its goal of chartering sociology by the scientific standards of the time, the book becomes a manifesto for a generalized *theory* of action—which was duly opposed, in later decades, by competing *theories* of action—not a *sociology* of action that would take action modes as variable and seek to understand the sociohistorical circumstances in which means-end forms (seen as diverse ensembles or practices whose normative component is variable) and various non-means-end forms (normative and otherwise) prevail, and why.

VI

Because it takes the unit act as a point of departure, *Structure* has often been misunderstood. In the past few years alone, for example, Coleman (1986, pp. 1309–11) has portrayed the study as a tract for “methodological individualism,” while Turner (1987) has faulted it for its neglect of the “social system” and “social structure” and Habermas (1981a, pp. 179–81) for its lack of “a mechanism to explain the emergence of a system of action out of unit acts.” This line of interpretation originated several decades ago,²¹ though it has yet to confront the counterevidence identified by other scholars,²² whose research, when linked to a contextualized understanding of *Structure*, prepares one for what Parsons saw as his book’s central theoretical argument.

Aside from a few passing illustrations, *Structure* exhibits little interest in applying the unit-act scheme to the “concrete, actual act[s]” of individual actors (*S*, pp. 44, 48) or in using it to address the questions theorists with this interest have sometimes raised about the unintended consequences of purposeful actions and the like. The scheme had been used in these ways, Parsons believed, by the utilitarians and positivists, but this had fostered “atomism,” the idea that “the properties of systems of action” can be inferred by “direct generalization from . . . isolated unit acts,” and “individualism,” the idea that system properties are “predicated on [facts concerning] isolated ‘individuals’ combined with a process of direct generalization from these facts” (*S*, pp. 52, 72). Both tendencies had long impeded the emergence of sociology, and it therefore was Parsons’s intention to counteract them, *not* to abet them. To this end, he advocated an “analytical,” rather than “concrete,” use of the unit-act framework (*S*, pp. 48–51). In a pivotal section of *Structure*, widely overlooked because of its location in his chapters on Pareto, Parsons insists that, viewed analytically, a unit act is only an “abstraction” from a “total system of action” (*S*, pp. 204, 230): “Actions do not take place separately . . . but in long, complicated ‘chains’ so arranged that what is from one point of view an end . . . is from another a means to some further end and vice versa . . . through a great many links in both directions. . . . Any concrete act may constitute a point of intersection of a number of such chains. . . . Or, to change the figure, the total complex of means-end relationships is . . . to be thought of . . . as a complicated web (if not

²¹ See also Martindale (1959, pp. 40–41), Menzies (1976), Mullins (1973, p. 53), and Tiryakian (1980, p. 18).

²² Namely, Adriaansens (1980, pp. 60–61), Alexander (1983b, pp. 19–21; 1987b, p. 34), Alexander and Giesen (1987, pp. 21–25), Atkinson (1972, p. 12), Devereux (1961, pp. 14–20), Hamilton (1983, pp. 78–80), Holmwood (1983, pp. 315–18), Luhmann (1982, p. 55), Münch (1981, pp. 718, 730; 1982, p. 780), Procter (1978, p. 47; 1980), Savage (1981, pp. 101–5).

tangle). . . . The isolation of any particular chain involves abstracting from these criss-crossings of many different chains" (*S*, pp. 229–30).

Continuing in this vein, Parsons averred: "In following through the chain . . . in one direction—from means to an end, which is . . . a means to a further end . . . necessity leads sooner or later to an *ultimate end* [that] cannot be regarded as the means to any further end. . . . Followed in the reverse direction, . . . sooner or later elements are encountered which must be regarded as *ultimate means or conditions*" (*S*, pp. 230–31 [emphasis added]). The area between these two extremes is "*the intermediate sector* of the means-end chain," which is in turn divisible into "three well-defined" subsectors or categories, the technological, the economic, and the political (1934b, p. 525; *S*, p. 239). These terms are defined succinctly in one of Parsons's early articles: "The technological element exists, in so far as action is concerned, with the choice and application of means for a single end in abstraction from others. The economic element enters when the question of the alternative uses of scarce means for different ends arises. . . . The political element . . . concern[s] the relation of individuals to each other as potential means to each other's ends [and] is present in so far as [control] over others . . . is secured by means of coercive power" (1935a, pp. 293–94; see *S*, pp. 238–41, 265–68).

For Parsons, this schema of ultimate conditions, an intermediate technological, economic, and political sector, and ultimate ends constitutes the central core of the theory of action in *Structure*, as well as the rationale for the book's misunderstood title. According to Parsons, the categories "ultimate ends," "economic subsector," "ultimate conditions," and so on refer not to "concrete phenomena," but to the "analytically separable aspects" or elements of "any system of action"; no element is "even conceivable as independently existing." Taken together, therefore, they may be seen as defining the "anatomy" or, less figuratively, "the *structural aspect* of systems of action. . . . Hence the title 'The Structure of Social Action'" (*S*, pp. 39, 173–74, 230 n. 1, 619 [emphasis added]; also 1940–41, p. 73).

Contrasting this interest in "the structure of social systems of action" with the concerns of "atomistic theories," Parsons expressly embraces an "organic" model of society and then undertakes to identify the "emergent properties of [action] systems" (*S*, pp. 238, 353–54, 734, 739–40). Using the terminology just introduced, he argues that only when attention is confined to the "technological" subsector and the problem of efficiently "choosing the means 'best adapted' to a single given end" is it reasonable to discount emergent phenomena; various "technologies" for mastering nature are sufficient at this instrumental level (*S*, pp. 233, 770). As soon, however, as one turns to the "economic" subsector and the problem of

apportioning finite means to “a plurality of alternative ends,” it becomes necessary to take account of the emergent property of “economic rationality,” that is, of “rational process[es] for] the acquisition and allocation of scarce resources [among] alternative uses”; the science of economics is needed to investigate this property (*S*, pp. 239, 266, 743, 767). When attention is broadened to the “political” subsector composed of “a plurality of individuals,” another emergent property, “coercive rationality,” which proves to be the domain of the science of politics, makes its appearance as actors seek “coercive power” over each other to achieve their individual ends and “mechanism[s] arise to mitigate this problem through] a relatively stable settlement of . . . power relationships” (*S*, pp. 236–37, 767–68). “But,” Parsons continues, “this coercive rationality . . . opens up a new set of problems, the problems of social order” latent whenever ends are left as individual and given. Such problems can be treated adequately only when one looks outside the intermediate sector of the means-end chain, not however to the conditional elements of the biophysical sciences, but to the “ultimate ends” element lying, at the opposite theoretical pole, in the domain of common cultural values (see Sec. VIII). In Parsons’s view, “common-value integration” must thus be regarded as a final emergent property—and the clinching justification for the science of sociology (*S*, pp. 238–39, 767–69). The argument may be summarized as follows:²³

Structural Aspect of an Action System	Corresponding Emergent Property	Corresponding Academic Field
Ultimate conditions	(None identified)	Biophysical sciences
Intermediate means-end sector:		
Technical element	(None)	Technologies
Economic element	Economic rationality	Economics
Political element	Coercive rationality	Politics
Ultimate ends	Common-value inte- gration	Sociology

This explicitly *structural* schema shows clearly *Structure*’s distance from the asystemic, “monadic” (Habermas 1981a, p. 179) individualism often ascribed to the book. The schema’s underlying idea of crisscrossing means-end chains actually represents a thinking through of the relation

²³ This diagram draws on Levine (1980, p. 1; 1985, p. 122) and Loubser (1976, p. 6).

between “action” and “system” more supple and original than that proposed by certain recent students of the topic (see the collection by Alexander et al. 1987). In addition, the conspicuous place the schema assigns to economic and political elements acquits Parsons of the familiar charge of overlooking them. Value elements receive fuller treatment in *Structure* only because, Parsons (1977, p. 336) later explained, the sociologist selects the specifically sociological factor, leaving the other elements for other disciplines.

There is another side to the story, however. In recognizing that *Structure* affords a more encompassing vision of the social world than it has been credited with, one must also recognize that Parsons’s whole understanding of “structural elements,” “organic” or “emergent properties,” “social systems,” and the like, is bound to his practical situation and charter-building efforts. This is evident in two ways, both of which may be seen as pointing to more defensible reasons than critics have generally offered for demurring at *Structure*’s approach to social phenomena. The first of these is that the structural economic and political elements in Parsons’s schema have highly circumscribed referents. In no sense can these elements be seen as making theoretical way for factors such as modes of production, class structures, state apparatuses, and military force. Structures of *these* types, it has been shown, simply cannot be yielded up by focusing on the emergent properties associated with the functional problems of allocating scarce resources and moderating coercive rationality (see Gould 1981, pp. 211–14; 1987, p. 14; Johnson et al. 1984, pp. 52–53). Significantly, though, Parsons’s early functionalist arguments coexist with a genuine awareness of the brute nature of economic and political life. In work written concurrently with *Structure*, he dwelt at length on the place of “force, fraud, and inequality” in modern society, as exhibited in monopolies, the subversion of democratic state policies by “special interests,” the advantages of “capital and connection” in the upper class, the “inherent bargaining disadvantage” of workers in labor contracts, and “the vicious circle . . . of poverty, low wages, large numbers, and low standard of living” (1936a, pp. 365–69; also S, pp. 104, 109, 288–93, 658).

Yet these are *not* the phenomena that are the focus of attention when *Structure* conceptualizes economic and political factors on the theoretical plane. In the case of the economic factor, Parsons’s desire to make way for a science beyond economics inclines him to preserve, even as he talks of structure and emergence, highly traditional boundaries around the “economic.” For him, as for the neoclassicists, to speak of the economic element is to speak (with analytical abstraction) of conduct in the marketplace of actors who rationally utilize scarce resources to increase their “wealth,” or quantity of satisfactions (see 1936a, pp. 372–79; S, pp. 131,

239, 262; see also Camic 1987). With this conception in place, “force, fraud, and inequality” necessarily become “noneconomic factors,” which impinge upon the economic arena, but are actually manifestations of the political element of coercive power (1936a, p. 372; *S*, pp. 109–10, 489–90, 657–58). But *Structure* neither examines power in its own terms nor justifies subsuming within it such disparate items as inequality and force, not to mention monopolies, poverty, and so forth. Perhaps because the discipline of political science was still too weakly established to reckon with seriously,²⁴ Parsons treated the political factor far less fully than the economic, presenting power—so as to articulate with his concept of wealth getting—as merely an additional kind of “means” or “interest” (*S*, pp. 101–2, 262, 298). So understood, it is an element that falls within the broader category of interests (see Sec. V) and, as such, ultimately dissolves into either normative or conditional factors (*S*, pp. 263, 291, 401). It is, then, in terms of these two sets of factors only, and the normative elements especially, that Parsons treats the state, “the focus of the political element” (1934a, p. 231; 1935a, pp. 293–95). And this example can stand for many others, for he was very willing to carry his polemical dichotomy straight into the social structure. Properties of “social structure, . . . in so far as they are not due to differences of heredity and environment,” he declared when drafting the argument of *Structure*, “derive [from] ultimate values” (1935c, p. 19; also 1934a, p. 231, *S*, p. 464). It is this belief that turns a schema that is formally multidimensional in its inclusion of economic and political “structures,” in addition to value factors, into a theory centered more exclusively on the latter elements (cf. Alexander 1983b, pp. 213–18; 1987b, pp. 31–32)—and, by so doing, allows Parsons to hold that sociology does more than focus on one among several emergent properties. As it happens, the field’s province is the element that occupies first position in the “hierarchical relation” that exists between common values, power, and economic rationality (*S*, pp. 240, 249).

Beyond this restrictive view of the economic and political, there is a second way in which Parsons’s conception of the social world is circumscribed by his charter-making efforts. The foregoing discussion will have made clear that Parsons’s concept of an “action system” is neatly

²⁴ At the time, political science occupied a fairly unthreatening academic position, still struggling for autonomy from departments of history in many colleges and universities, though well enough along at Harvard itself for Parsons to address it at least in general terms (see Hart 1930; Somit and Tanenhaus 1967; Waldo 1975). In making power the province of the discipline of politics, Parsons followed contemporary practice. Carl Friedrich, his colleague from the Harvard government department, had, e.g., observed that it is the opinion of “a large group of political scientists in this country [that] the problem of power [is] the focal point of political science” (1937, p. 504).

tailored to the interdisciplinary situation of his time. It proposes that the web of means-end chains is made up of exactly those subsectors, or elements, that stand in direct correspondence to the disciplines that defined the American academic scene to aspiring sociologists of the inter-war period. From a programmatic standpoint, such a conception was a useful one. The point to appreciate here, however, is that Parsons takes it as more than this. So long as he adheres to his analytical orientation, his position is that the action system, so conceived, is the social world in its entirety. In Parsons's view, in other words, the schema that suits the hour—that rescues action and welds it to an organic model that both mandates sociology and grants modest concessions to the competition—is what exhaustively defines the domain of social-scientific theory in general, "not only for now but for all time," as Bierstedt (1981, p. 398) has written (see also Levine 1980, p. ix). Parsons's absolute insistence on this comes out particularly well in his neglected but telling critique of Znaniecki's *Method of Sociology* (1934). What attracted Parsons's attention was Znaniecki's argument that sociology occupies a "domain [separate] from those of other sciences" and that this domain is the "social system," consisting of "social actions," "social persons" or "social roles," "social relations," and "social groups" in the sense of organizations and institutions (1934, pp. 105–36 [quoting pp. 130–31]). Znaniecki made the case that while the sociologist could profitably study *any* of these roughly equal "subdivisions," it was not (yet) justifiable to encompass all these phenomena in "a general theory of actions" (1934, pp. 135–36).

This viewpoint was one that Parsons could not accept, primarily because it conceded too much to those who ridiculed sociology for offering almost as many perspectives as there were sociologists. *Structure* seeks, therefore, to defend the proposition that, of Znaniecki's "four schemata, . . . that of 'action' [is not only] the most elementary," but alone has the theoretical capacity to subsume *all* the others, which must "be regarded as secondary to the action schema" (S, pp. 39, 744–47). According to Parsons, concepts like "social relations" and "social groups" are valuable to the sociologist as "shorthands": devices for "describing" a concrete action system without the "laborious work" of breaking it down into means-end chains and their emergent, structural properties (S, pp. 743–44). Such concepts play no real analytical role, however. Indeed, so lightly does Parsons take the "social" part of the "social action" phrase in his title that not until a footnote 768 pages into his book does he explain that "social action" refers to "a plurality of actors mutually oriented to each other's action." But neither this idea nor any of his other nods to the relational alter his belief that the "social relationship schema" contributes nothing at the "analytical" level and is only "another way of looking at the same facts involved in the schema of action" (S, pp. 649, 693–94). The

same holds for a group or institutional schema: “There are no group properties that are not reducible to properties of systems of action and there is no analytical theory of groups which is not translatable into terms of the theory of action” (*S*, p. 747). The theory’s categories actually are so powerful, in Parsons’s estimate, that they can grasp, too, “all change and process” in the “action field” and apply to societies primitive and advanced, static and dynamic (*S*, pp. 367, 411, 733). This line of thinking has an important implication.

In the course of intellectual history, the concept of the social has been used to mean different things, among them relations, groups, institutions, patterns of change, and more. By absorbing all these things into schemata held to be reducible to the properties of the theory of action and by arguing, further, that, when theoretically dissected, such properties break down into either normative or conditional factors, *Structure* supplants these meanings with a conception of the social (and the social world) better suited to its practical intentions. For Parsons, the social is, when considered analytically, ultimately nothing other than the normative or common value factor (*S*, pp. 420, 424, 427, 446, 448, 460), which is the lynchpin of his charter for sociology. So completely, in fact, does Parsons take the controversies of his age as the measure of social theory in general that, in conceptualizing the social, the central issue is to establish how “the whole ‘social’ factor swings over from the category of . . . ‘conditions’ to the normative side.” And his view is unequivocal: “In terms of the great dichotomy of this study the social factor becomes a normative, more specifically, a value factor, not one of heredity and environment” (*S*, p. 464)—these being, again, the sole alternatives he sees.²⁵

But even if we bracket this particular view of the social, Parsons’s more basic assertion that the categories of action theory subsume all other perspectives on the social world must still be understood, as Bendix and Berger have pointed out, as a move to generalize “yet another selectively perceived ‘reality’ ” (1959, p. 94; also Lockwood 1956, p. 138). However well such a claim may have fitted Parsons’s campaign for sociology, and however often it has been seconded by later action theorists, it is a conten-

²⁵ At the start of this paragraph, as elsewhere in this paper, the term “institution” appears, used in the standard dictionary sense of “established social organization.” But this usage must not be confounded with Parsons’s own, which is of a piece with his conception of the social factor. For Parsons, a “social institution” is a “body of [obligatory] rules . . . derivable from a common value system” (*S*, pp. 297–98, 407–8; 1934a, p. 231; 1935c; for critical discussion, see Mayhew 1984, p. 1294; Rex 1961, p. 112; Sorokin 1947, p. 87).

tion that is no more than asserted in *Structure* and has yet to be established empirically (see Lassman 1980, p. 106; Lidz 1986, p. 164). To the contrary, in the few cases where the action schema has been carefully compared with others, what has emerged is that there are fundamental aspects of social phenomena that elude reduction to the schema's terms. Concerning social relations, for example, the schema has been found to fall short whether "relations" are conceived, in accordance with Simmel, in terms of such transactions as exchange, conflict, and super- and subordination (Levine 1971, p. lvi; 1980, p. lv; 1985 p. 124; Warner 1978, pp. 1346–47); or, in accordance with Marx, as relations of production, particularly class relations (Bhaskar 1979); or, in accordance with Mead, as interpersonal dialogue and interactive communication (Habermas 1981b, pp. 86, 95, 279; also Gouldner 1955, p. 182; Turner 1987). Likewise with regard to social groups and institutions: the analysis of structural variables like size, positional composition, network arrangements, distribution of resources, extent of heterogeneity and differentiation, and patterns of interunit contact has been shown to require more than the "translation" of these phenomena into action terms (see esp. Blau 1977; Levine 1971, pp. lx–lxii; 1985, p. 124). The same is true when the topic is that of social change (Friedrichs 1970, p. 145; Martel 1971, pp. 207–8; Moore 1958, p. 122; Nisbet 1969, pp. 228–34).

But it would be wrong to conclude from this that *Structure* should simply have elevated a schema other than the action frame of reference as the encompassing foundation of sociology. Critics of the book, armed with their alternatives, have sometimes suggested this. But in so doing they capitulate to Parsons's own programmatic logic, to the idea of one unifying framework that can be inserted all over the social map. Such an idea is at variance with the "theoretical pluralism" that is, as Merton has observed, "integral to the socially patterned cognitive processes" of science (1981, p. v; also Bryant 1983; Eckberg and Hill 1979; Levine 1986a; Ritzer 1983, pp. 432–35). Approaches that attempt, following the example of *Structure*, to embrace not only action modes but also institutions, social relations, and the rest with a single theoretical vocabulary impair, as Blau (1987) suggests, the analysis of each domain at an appropriate level and in the terms suited to that level—terms that may take different forms and work for some societies but not all. It is this latter type of analysis, moreover, that makes it possible to consider the interconnection of these phenomena and to do so with reference to different sociohistorical circumstances: to examine, for instance, the conditions under which particular action modes affect, and are affected by, particular kinds of interactional patterns and institutional structures. The protean connection of other social phenomena with the realm of human

action is scarcely at issue, however, when the social world is, as in Parsons's charter, arrogated to action categories from the start.

VII

In defining the unit act, *Structure* makes mention of an agent or actor, a figure about whom the preceding discussion has said little. The omission is not unintentional. According to the book's basic theoretical argument, systems of action are forged (analytically) out of means-end chains rather than out of actors; throughout this argument—and Parsons's striking equational summary of his theory (*S*, pp. 77–84)—the actor all but disappears from view. That this is the case is symptomatic of *Structure's* position regarding the actor.

At one level, the concept of the actor is centrally important to Parsons's project. During the period when he wrote, the concept stood as a significant weapon in the antibehaviorist arsenal. The gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka expressed this when he observed that a move from "the animal side of man [to] his cultural side" entailed conceptualizing the human "agent" in terms of "the Ego or the Self" (1935, pp. 306–422 [quoting pp. 19, 319]). Parsons, who was impressed with Koffka's work, affirms this view: "The unit of reference which we are considering as the actor is not [the human] organism but an 'ego' or 'self'" (*S*, pp. 47, 745). Unlike Koffka and others, however, Parsons offers no further definition of the actor-ego-self concept and does not even suggest that herein lies a domain of structures and processes of their own "enormous complexity." Determined, rather, to bring as much as possible within the ambit of his social-structural schema and to safeguard this from contemporary psychologism, Parsons tends to treat the actor in the same way he treats social relations and groups, that is, to regard the analysis of the actor, or of the "personality," as requiring simply "another secondary descriptive schema of action" (*S*, p. 741). In the same vein, he reasons that to construct an adequate *explanation* of the actor, one must appeal to the categories of sociology, politics, and economics, supplementing these with psychology only to the extent that there remains a "residuum [in personality] referable to heredity" (*S*, pp. 769–70).

It is as an outgrowth of this orientation that so much of *Structure* "leaves the actor an extremely nebulous, . . . ephemeral abstraction" (Pinney 1940, pp. 185–89; also Sorokin 1966, pp. 413, 417; Turner 1987; Williams 1961, p. 65). The underlying assumptions that served to flesh this abstraction out in Parsons's own thinking surface only in isolated comments, and these pull in two directions. On the one hand, there are passages that advert to the "great importance [of] the biological aspect of

man,” which is rooted in the conditional elements of “heredity and environment” and exhibited in the individual organism’s powers of body and mind, as well as its instincts, drives, and appetitive desires (*S*, pp. 47, 50 n. 3, 296, 402). With no supporting argument, Parsons supposes that these items all bespeak the “unlimited egoism” of the unregulated personality and the fact that “the ‘individual’ element” of the actor is “unmoral chaos” (*S*, pp. 291 n. 1, 385, 402, 436, 692; see also Atkinson 1972, p. 14; Gouldner 1970, pp. 430–32). There are, on the other hand, passages that postulate “that men not only respond to [conditional factors but] try to conform their action to patterns which are, by the actor and other[s], deemed desirable” (*S*, p. 76). In an earlier article, Parsons associated this with “the fact that man is essentially an . . . evaluating creature, [oriented to] ends, purposes, ideals,” and in the book he asserts—without argumentation again—that “man is an entity [inclined] to develop metaphysical interpretations of his world” and that “the feeling of obligation to pursue the good [is] one of the ultimate characteristics of human beings” (*1935a*, p. 282; *S*, pp. 391 n. 1, 668).

At first glance, these two sets of passages look almost contradictory, but here again the dichotomizing logic of Parsons’s charter must be recalled. During the 1920s and 1930s, it was quite common for proponents of the sociocultural sciences to operate with a bipolar image of personality that represented the actor, to quote Znaniecki (1934, p. 120), as suspended between “psycho-biological characteristics” and a culturally based “system of rights and obligations.” Given his own position in the ongoing debates, Parsons adopts the same bipolar image; his seemingly contrary assumptions about personality are nothing more than corollaries of this. Or, in other words, just as his conceptualizations of action and of social structure prove to be translations of the programmatic dichotomy of his book, so too with his concept of the actor. Despite the availability of alternative conceptions, Parsons casts the actor, directly in terms of the contemporary scene, as an agent inherently pulled between the conditional biological element of egoistic desire and the force of moral obligation that emanates from the normative sociological factor. Happily for students of the latter, moreover, the balance is in their favor. All told, says Parsons, “the normal concrete individual is a morally disciplined personality, [in whom] the normative elements have become internal” (*S*, pp. 385–86).

The emphasis that *Structure* places on this last point has frequently led commentators to charge Parsons with holding an “oversocialized conception of man,” which not only overlooks biological forces and the conflicts produced as these “buck against” societal rules (Wrong 1961, pp. 187–91) but so “blot[s] out the active subject” that the actor becomes merely the

“unthinking dupe of his culture” (Giddens 1976b, pp. 22, 113; also Garfinkel 1967, pp. 66–75; Giddens 1977, p. 167; 1979, pp. 52, 254; Gouldner 1970, p. 206; Heritage 1984, p. 27; Hollis 1977, p. 85). It should now be clear, however, that Parsons’s bipolar conception makes way for normative *and* biological personality factors; the former are certainly seen to prevail, but only as an outcome of struggle against “the centrifugal bombardment of . . . appetites” and the “tendency [of] impulses [to escape] normative limitations” (*S*, p. 685; also Williams 1980, p. 65). The idea that actors are unthinking dupes is, moreover, precisely what Parsons seeks to deny when he conceives actors to be evaluating, metaphysically reflective subjects striving toward the good. On the attack against “anti-intellectualistic theories,” he took seriously the research of Wolfgang Köhler that claimed to show that even simple forms of behavior are not “blind” but involve “insight” and “intelligence” (*S*, p. 5; 1974, p. 56; Köhler 1926, pp. 775–76). In Parsons’s view, “passive” conceptions of the actor are the product of the objectionable theories of the biologists, psychologists, and economists, who either limit rationality to successful “adaptation” to conditions or give it up in favor of unreflecting organismic factors; the ultimate safeguard of the “active” conception lies in the place accorded, in his own theory, to value elements and, thereby, to morally obligated, goal-directed, ethically rational conduct (*S*, pp. 63–64, 115–17, 396–97, 438–39, 685; see also Sec. IX).

These observations suggest that when it is realized that *Structure* adheres to a bipolar model of the actor, its perspective on personality emerges as broader than the literature typically alleges. There remain, however, two intrinsic features of the model that markedly circumscribe its range. The first is that the model knows only the antithesis of the normative and conditional elements; it nowhere allows for personality attributes not resolvable into this highly particular dichotomy. Parsons’s analysis marginalizes, for this reason, even the actor’s motivation, as both Schutz (1940–41, pp. 32–35) and, later, Parsons himself (1940–41, p. 81; 1951, pp. 8–9, n. 4) have observed. The term “motive” appears in *Structure* only in passing remarks that confound motives either with normatively constituted ends or with egoistic impulses (*S*, pp. 161–62, 533–34, 636; 1940–41, p. 82; Bierstedt 1938a, 1938b). No space is allotted to the broad array of socially formed motives that underlies conduct in pursuit of normative ends as well as other forms of action and, arguably, militates against the very supposition of egoism (see Camic 1979). The book tends, likewise, to divest actors of their emotions and habits (see Sec. V) and of their social relational and positional properties, that is, of gender, race, age, class, occupation, and the differential possession of cultural capital. Even the cognitive traits that Parsons seeks to preserve fail to

hold their own. In *Structure*, as Warner has demonstrated, the “cognitive factor” is alternately reduced to a “group of elements in the value complex” or equated with verifiable knowledge of “conditions,” a denial in either event of the “analytical independence” of “socially structured cognitive elements” and thus an eclipse of “the cognitive activity and interpretative competence of the actor” (Warner 1978, pp. 1327–33; also S, pp. 83, 537; Heritage 1984, pp. 21, 26). These features of Parsons’s analysis, in conjunction with his treatment of motives, emotions, and so forth, vividly attest to how thoroughly the binary terms of his project engulf, and deplete, the concept of personality. In this one respect then, the critics are not entirely wrong when they fault *Structure* for its inactive conception of the actor; for while it is an active conception that Parsons seeks to defend, the impoverishment of the actor that his argument effects leaves the human subject with no real resources—aside, of course, from value factors—with which to bring his or her activity to life.

The second restrictive feature of Parsons’s model is its assumption that the actor is to be viewed chiefly as an agglomerate of elements or factors. Caught up in the campaign to demonstrate that actors respond to normative factors as well as biological forces, Parsons slips over into the view that a collection of diverse elements is what the human personality is. Missing from *Structure* is any appreciation for the alternative idea—available to Parsons in Marshall’s writings on “character” and in Durkheim’s and Weber’s on “habitus”—that personality is less an agglomeration of various elements than the enduring, generalized form, or mold, through which those elements are organized and integrated (though not necessarily in harmonious ways) (see Camic 1986; Heran 1987). Lacking this alternative, the book succumbs to what Sewell (1987, p. 168) describes as the “ahistorical conception of actors.” To Parsons, the characterization of personality as a collection of opposing normative and biological elements is more than a programmatically useful way of speaking of actors amid the controversies of the interwar period: the bipolar image is the general model of personality in all times and places. The only sociohistorical changes that *Structure* can therefore acknowledge with respect to the actor are changes in the content of normative elements or increases in knowledge about the conditions of action (S, pp. 144–45, 333, 751–52). Not acknowledged is sociological variation in the underlying form of the human personality itself—and thus in the very manner in which actors emote, cognize and interpret, relate to normative patterns (or biological forces), and so on (see O’Neill 1976, p. 296; Rosaldo 1983). And, as such variation disappears, what necessarily disappears as well is the historical question of the covariation of personality forms with changing social practices, relations, institutions, and the like.

VIII

Abbreviated though it is, Parsons's analysis of the actor enters consequentially into his book's central empirical argument. The fact that the unregulated actor is all egoistic desire immediately raises the prospect of a plurality of such actors coming together to create a momentous "problem of social order." The reasoning here runs along two lines. Focusing on *ends*, Parsons holds—through a logic that critics have rightly found less than airtight (see Barry 1970, pp. 79–80; Camic 1979, pp. 521–22; Warner 1978, pp. 1322–23)—that where there are untamed desires, human ends are "random" and therefore (?) so "diverse [that] there is nothing to prevent their pursuit resulting in conflict" (*S*, p. 89). Turning to *means*, Parsons claims that, given the "scarc[ity] of nonhuman resources" for satisfying desire and that "the services of others [afford further] potential means to . . . ends," egoistic actors will "necessarily . . . seek power over one another" and "endeavor . . . to destroy or subdue [each other] by force or fraud or both," thereby causing a "chaotic and unstable . . . state of war" (*S*, pp. 89–93, 235; also Buxton 1985, pp. 20–23; Warner 1978, pp. 1321–26). The task Parsons sets is the explanation of how "actual society" resolves this problem (*S*, p. 109).

This aspect of his analysis is sometimes regarded as the great achievement of *Structure* (Mitchell 1967, p. 9; Münch 1981, p. 726). It is important to realize, however, that it is an achievement that evidences Parsons's involvement in the contemporary scene. The specific way he presents the problem of order—that is, with the terminology of the action frame of reference and an appeal to the work of Hobbes—was his own, and *Structure* may give aspects of the problem their "most forceful and authoritative formulation" (Giddens 1977, p. 209). The problem itself, though, was a recurrent one among social scientists in the United States of the period who were seeking to identify—through an issue that commanded broad popular interest—the dark spots in behaviorist and orthodox economic theorizing and to establish that their own discipline furnished the explanation of how the problem is solved (see, e.g., Friedrich 1937; MacIver 1931; Znaniecki 1934; also Shils 1963; Wiebe 1967; Wilson 1968).

Parsons's own treatment of the problem of order is similarly infused with interdisciplinary considerations. The problem first becomes prominent in his writing in an early article (1934b, pp. 517–19, 526–27), which seeks to expose the deficiencies in the work of the neoclassicist Lionel Robbins, and the polemical association is retained. In *Structure*, there is scarcely a passage on the problem of order that is not an assertion of the need to move beyond economics, since even a proper analysis of "the economic element" leaves out the mechanism that curtails "force and

fraud" in the marketplace (*S*, p. 236). Nor is this issue resolvable through biology and psychology; for Parsons, these are fields where "random variations" and "random movements" necessarily prevail—with implications of "anarchy" rather than order (*S*, pp. 110–17; cf. Köhler 1926). The discipline of politics is only slightly more relevant. Parsons judges political institutions to have no more than a "secondary importance" in the production of social order, on the one hand because there are ordered societies "entirely without . . . state machinery," on the other hand because state processes may intensify the "struggle of interests" (1934a, p. 230; 1936a, pp. 356–65; *S*, pp. 97 n. 1., 239, 770). This leaves, then, only the common-value elements, upon whose significance the science of sociology is predicated, and it is here that Parsons finds the answer he seeks. Again, his analysis proceeds along two lines. Regarding ends, Parsons maintains that normative factors find "expression" as the ultimate ends of the action process; as such, they (*a*) displace the actor's random, egoistic impulses with those stable, internalized ideals that he or she desires to pursue "for their own sake" and (*b*) supply—since they *are* ends "common to the members of a society," not separate wants that create conflict—the "element of unity [that holds] the whole structure together" (*S*, pp. 167, 247, 249, 260, 385–86, 399). Regarding means, Parsons argues that common values also achieve "embodiment" in stable "system[s] of regulatory rules," which proscribe the use of force and fraud as means to actors' ends; given their basis in ultimate values, such rules exert "moral authority" over actors, who adhere to them out of "obligation" and "respect" (*S*, pp. 313–15, 381–404). *Structure* concludes, therefore, that it is as a result of normative sociological factors that "actual [society is] not a state of war [but] a relatively spontaneous order" (*S*, pp. 92, 362, 386, 392).

The conclusion has been widely challenged. Although some commentators interpret Parsons's concern with the problem of order as evidence that he saw society as a dynamic "powder keg of conflicting forces" (Devereux 1961, p. 33; also Mitchell 1967; Rocher 1975; Sciulli 1984), the majority opinion has been that the early Parsons upheld a static, "overintegrated view of society" that overlooks "matters of . . . conflict and disorder," above all intrasocietal, group-level conflicts about resources, power, and human values themselves (Abercrombie et al. 1980, pp. 48–53, 159; Berger 1962, p. 511; see also Atkinson 1972; Burger 1977; Coser 1956; Ellis 1971; Giddens 1976b, pp. 95–98; Gouldner 1970, 1979; Lockwood 1956; Mayhew 1982, pp. 59–61; Rex 1961, p. 112). But both interpretations require qualification. According to Parsons, "the integration [of society through] a common system of ultimate ends . . . is not a generalized description of the usual concrete state of affairs but formulates only one extreme limiting type" of case (*S*, pp. 248, 263; also

pp. 238, 254–55). This is so because “there is room for wide variation both in the degree of integration and in the kind of [common-value] system”—a circumstance that allows for the “struggle[s] between different individuals and groups for power and wealth” *and* for those “irreconcilable [value] divisions in the social body [that appeared in] the religious wars of the post-Reformation period” (*S*, pp. 263–64, 434, 643–45; 1934a, p. 231; 1935c, p. 15). Parsons agrees, therefore, with Pareto’s “cyclical theory [of] social change,” according to which periods of social “integration”—when “ideal ends or value elements [exert] effective control . . . over conduct”—undergo “a gradual process of disintegration,” chiefly from “the pressure of appetites and interests” or “the pursuit of wealth and power,” until a “revolution of faith” brings a new end to the “conditions of instability” (*S*, pp. 284–88, 449–50; see also Buxton 1985, pp. 37–41).

Such passages seem to support the society-as-powder-keg reading of *Structure* over the “overintegrated” alternative. But it is the powder-keg interpretation that is, in fact, the more overstated. This is apparent when one remembers what *Structure* means by power, wealth, and interest. To repeat: for Parsons, power and wealth are instantiations of the broader factor of interest, which, when not a manifestation of value elements, itself derives from the conditional factors of unlimited appetite and desire. His observations on struggles for wealth and power do not, for this reason, open out theoretically into an analysis of the social relational and institutional bases of these struggles and of other tendencies to disintegration and disorder (cf. Dahrendorf 1958). Explaining power and resource struggles continually leads Parsons back, instead, to the *presocial* factor of egoistic human nature, which underpins the “means” and “ends” component of his argument for the Hobbesian problem (see *S*, pp. 284–88, 298, 402, 465; Warner 1978, pp. 1322–25). Loubser (1976, pp. 4–5) has shown that what the Parsons calls the problem of order is a variety of analytically distinct problems with different sources—economic, political, normative, symbolic, communicational, motivational, temporal. Here too, however, *Structure* suppresses the variety, offering a few comments on normative disunity but otherwise merging all forms of the problem with the conditional factor of unrestrained interests and appetites. This is a universalization of the local again, for Parsons hereby writes large those forces that were the particular preoccupation of his charter, thus replacing the powder keg that economic, political, communicational, motivational, and other forces may make up together with a single explosive—an explosive real enough to prevent perfect integration but still sufficiently delimited to be more or less easily defused.

When this step in Parsons’s reasoning is appreciated, it is possible to understand how *Structure* is also led to dehistoricize the problem of order

and obscure its character as “a concrete historical problem whose terms are defined by . . . the society in which it arises” (Clarke 1982, p. 4). O’Neill sees the particular problem of order at issue in *Structure* as a product of the transformation of “the psychology of individual wants and desires . . . under conditions of the capitalist property system” (1976, pp. 303–6); other scholarship roots the problem in other social and cultural developments in the period from the late 18th century to the early 20th century (see Camic 1979; Clarke 1982; Nisbet 1966; Peel 1971). But no such historical possibility is even raised by Parsons, who postulates that his rendition of the problem identifies a truly “general problem [that requires solution in] every society” (see Bershady 1973, pp. 42–47; Gouldner 1979, p. 299). To temporalize the problem (other than through Pareto’s eternal bust and boom cycles) would be to admit that the empirical issue that occupied the science of sociology lay outside the league of the general problems that occupied the already established sciences.

Similar tendencies toward overgeneralization appear when one turns to Parsons’s discussion of the *solution* of the problem of order. In proposing that order hinges on “the effective functioning of [common] normative elements” (*S*, p. 92), Parsons presupposes (i) that, in significant measure, common normative elements exist,²⁶ (ii) that these elements translate into the ends and regulatory rules of conduct, and (iii) that actors uphold ends and rules “for their own sake” and out of moral obligation. His analysis grants, as we have seen, that conditional forces may cloud this picture to an extent, but that is the only qualification he makes. For to take any of these three contentions away as a general principle would be to break a necessary link in the whole argument for the normative solution. The scholarly literature (including, in fairness, some of Parsons’s own subsequent work) has shown, however, that none of the three contentions qualifies as a general principle: each identifies only one among several possibilities and not the one most likely. Regarding i, empirical research disconfirms the significant presence of common normative factors not only in certain modern societies, characterized by divergent class, regional, ethnic, and religious subcultures rarely reconciled through higher values, but also in traditional societies, like the Christian Middle Ages—the prototype, for Parsons, of a situation of shared values (see 1935a, p. 296; *S*, p. 248)—where major segments of the population long remained culturally apart owing to the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms

²⁶ At one point, *Structure* appears to endorse Pareto’s statement that there are “two classes” of ultimate normative factors, “those held distributively by individuals and groups” and “those held in common by the members of the society” (*S*, p. 297). The book goes on, however, to assign exclusive priority to the second group while allowing the first to drop from sight. In Parsons’s view, “without a system of common values . . . there can be no such thing as a society” (*S*, p. 434).

for the dissemination of a common cultural code (see Abercrombie et al. 1980; Aberle 1950).

Regarding ii, the assumption that common normative factors translate into regulatory rules and ends has been faulted for failing to recognize (a) that the ambiguous, fluid, and often contradictory character of value elements impedes their attaining meaningful embodiment as specific ends and normative rules (see Cancian 1976; Kaplan 1968); (b) that even where value factors admit of such embodiment, this may be achieved in moral norms, abstract legal norms, ritual norms, technical standards, standards of public opinion, and elsewhere; the link between any of these domains and those rules that regulate force and fraud and bind actors together in daily conduct cannot be assumed but changes with the cultural integration of these domains and the properties of the normative standards (see Blake and Davis 1964, pp. 461–65; Levine 1968; Sorokin 1947, pp. 83–87); and (c) that even where there is a strong link between the value factors and the rules for daily conduct, action process may still remain unregulated in varying degrees owing to the (historically variable) disjunction between normative specifications and the exigencies of concrete practices (see Kaplan 1968, pp. 902–5; Williams 1977, pp. 130–32). Finally, in regard to iii, the message of the scholarship has been that “the extent to which [actors experience and affirm the] oughtness [of normative elements] is an empirical issue, not”—as is often true in *Structure*—a matter “to be decided a priori” (Warner 1978, p. 1341). This is so because not all normative factors possess the quality of obligatoriness, because not all actors who internalize formally obligatory norms internalize them as obligatory, and because even actors who do may not act (for reasons given in Sec. V) in accord with the normative standards (see Blake and Davis 1964, pp. 464–65; Cancian 1976, pp. 358–59; Holmwood 1983, p. 329; Lockwood 1956, p. 137; Swidler 1986; Warner 1978).

Against these lines of attack, *Structure* has little defense. Although Parsons in his later career conceptualized social psychological and cultural phenomena in ways less open to some of these empirical criticisms, his analysis of them in *Structure* is yet too scanty to lend support to the premises of the normative solution. The closest he comes to furnishing social psychological grounding for the idea that actors follow internalized norms out of obligation is to insert a few unelaborated references to Piaget’s work on socialization and Freud’s on introjection and to present these as if they applied to all normative elements in all social circumstances (see 1935a, p. 296; S, pp. 386, 388, 401; cf. Hamilton 1983, p. 28). His cultural theory is only slightly more ample. Integral to *Structure*’s assault on the reduction of human action to the terms of the natural sciences is, as noted before, the postulate that humans are “orient[ed] to

the nonempirical aspects of the universe,” that is, to a “‘nonempirical reality’ . . . not capable of being scientifically observed” (*S*, pp. 422–23). This established, Parsons, drawing vaguely on Whitehead (esp. 1925, pp. 159–72), conceptualizes “culture” (analytically) as the realm of “eternal objects”—of symbolic, “atemporal complexes of meaning”—that represent attempted “formulations of [this] nonempirical reality,” formulations that are necessarily “partial, imperfect, [and] unstable in relation to their referents” (*S*, pp. 449, 482, 763). Geertz (1971, pp. 371–73) judges this view superior to others current in early American social science, and while this may be correct, it is also the case that Parsons’s concept of culture is one singularly ill-fitted to his argument for the normative resolution of the Hobbesian problem. From Whitehead’s diverse, unstable eternal objects to a stable system of shared normative elements is a long distance, which *Structure* does almost nothing to overcome. Indeed, its only bridging device is the fragmented thesis that religious ideas hold an especially central place in the realm of eternal objects, that these ideas are strongly related to a society’s diffuse “ultimate value attitudes,” and that such attitudes are themselves interdependent with the society’s established system of shared ultimate values and, thus, with the obligatory normative elements that regulate the means and ends of action (*S*, pp. 255, 267, 424–27; for criticisms, see Alexander 1987b, pp. 29–31; Rex 1961, pp. 91–92; Sorokin 1966, pp. 417–18). That much of this is highly tentative, Parsons acknowledges. So firm, however, is his belief in the normative solution that he is willing to leave its needed cultural underpinnings for clarification at another time and to press on with his conclusion.

And regarding this conclusion, he does not equivocate. Having posed the Hobbesian question as a “general problem,” he formulates a resolution that, as Bershady (1973, p. 45) has shown, he likewise renders as the “*general solution of the problem of order*”—one apropos to “actual society,” in the sweeping singular (see also Burger 1977). But it is here, perhaps above all, that scholars have taken issue with *Structure*. In accord with their objections to the various steps in its case for the normative solution, the solution itself has been found not to obtain significantly in a diversity of societies, past and present, whose pattern of order—where order is achieved—has been traced far more to economic and political structures and processes, organizational arrangements, forms of intergroup conflict, and so on (see Abercrombie et al. 1980; Alexander 1987b, pp. 30–31; Barry 1970, pp. 86–87; Blau 1977; Cohen 1968; Coser 1956; Ellis 1971; Etzioni 1968; Jessop 1972; Kaplan 1968; Luhmann 1982, p. 74; Warner 1978). Where value factors play an important integrative role, moreover, this has been attributed, in many instances, not to what *Structure* sees as their “spontaneous” ordering effect but mainly to the

way in which “values are . . . selectively related to extant position-related interests” (Habermas 1981a, p. 179; see also Burger 1977; Ellis 1971; Giddens 1976b; Przeworski 1980).²⁷

In appraising this scholarship, one should beware of critiques that would simply invert Parsons’s approach and transmute various non-normative solutions into a “general” solution. Reflecting on the “historical realities” of ancient Sparta, Japan in 1866, Nazi Germany, and elsewhere, Mills long ago cautioned that “there is no *one* answer to . . . the tired old problem of social order . . . because social structures differ profoundly in their . . . kinds of unity” (1959, pp. 44–47)—a point corroborated by subsequent research on the differential regulative effects of various economic, political, normative, and other factors under different historical circumstances (see esp. Jessop 1972). Parsons, however, again in his eagerness to make sociology a generalizing science with its own domain, eschews such a viewpoint—and not only in its historicist dimension, but even in its concern with the interplay between the normative factors and the more standard economic and political solutions (cf. Burger 1977, p. 326). As one may see from the preceding summary, Parsons’s analysis of these two solutions is an example of “the fallacy of argument by elimination.” It locates aspects of the Hobbesian problem not resolved by market processes and political institutions and leaps to the conclusion that economic and political factors are not “solutions” at all—that they belong instead among the “randomizing,” disordering forces that the value factors are (universally) required to quell rather than (situationally) to complement (Alexander 1983b, pp. 213–14; see also Ellis 1971, p. 693; Williams 1961, p. 66).²⁸ It is interesting that “argument by elimination” was a strategem heavily used by Durkheim, particularly in his efforts to rule out all explanations of social facts aside from his own “sociological” alternative (see Lukes 1973, pp. 31–33), for it is similarly to further the

²⁷ Along similar lines, *Structure* has been attacked for making value elements “the unmoved mover in the theory of action” and failing to appreciate that values are themselves socially produced and sustained (Swidler 1986, p. 274; see also Blake and Davis 1964, p. 463; Giddens 1976b, p. 96; Kolb 1957, p. 116; O’Dea 1976, p. 276; Rocher 1975, p. 62; Scott 1971, p. 9). In fairness, however, it should be noted that, while the book exhibits a tendency in this direction, it does—briefly, to be sure—clearly associate the appearance of “new values” not only with charismatic breakthroughs and the “general effervescence” of social revolutions but also with the application of force (*S*, pp. 291, 450; cf. Alexander 1983b, p. 469; Mayhew 1984, p. 1301; Münch 1981, p. 726).

²⁸ Admittedly, *Structure* allows that a social order, once established, “can remain intact [because] there develops an interlocking of interests in the maintenance of the system.” The book hastens to add, however, that even here “the ultimate source [of order] is the common sense of moral attachment to norms.” Of itself, the “interlocking of interests is a brittle thing which comparatively slight alterations of conditions can shatter at vital points” (*S*, p. 404).

cause of sociology that *Structure* resorts to the tactic. As Parsons sees it, to include economic and political (or other nonsociological) factors in the solution to the problem of order is to minimize the general necessity of the normative element, the cornerstone of sociology, and to merge order with phenomena largely anchored in the conditional.²⁹ Given, though, his desire to extol the normative over the conditional and his belief that conditional elements are what produce disorder, it is a foregone conclusion that *Structure* will find the only genuine solution in the normative realm. In accord with the book's dichotomizing logic, whatever is not part of the required disciplinary solution is part of the problem.

IX

The preceding sections have shown that there is considerable thematic unity in *Structure*. Whether Parsons's immediate topic is social order, personality, the social system, action, the history of social thought, or the scientific method, not only does he focus on an issue relevant to the task of chartering sociology, but he also subjects each to the same polemical categories and universalized formulations so as to reach the same programmatic conclusion. For all this, however, there is a paradoxical tendency for unity on these matters to diminish unity elsewhere in the book. As Parsons mounts his campaign now on this front, now on that, he inevitably molds his message to the topic at hand, thereby producing arguments difficult to reconcile with one another, at least on the surface.

A case in point is "voluntarism," and the situation has wreaked havoc in the literature. According to one school of interpretation, *Structure* offers a major defense of the voluntaristic nature of action, and is right to do so in the judgment of some commentators, wrong to do so in the view of others, all of them further divided over whether Parsons's "voluntarism" stands for choice, freedom of choice, freedom, free will, purposiveness, subjective decision making, subjectivity, activity and creativity in conduct, autonomy from material conditions, or antideterminism (see Adriaansens 1980; Alexander 1978, 1979, 1983b, 1987b; Bershady 1973, 1974; Bourricaud 1977; Buxton 1985; Cohen 1975; Coser 1977; Devereux

²⁹ What Parsons wishes not to merge with conditional factors is "social order" in the sense of a resolution of the Hobbesian state of war. It should be clear from what has been said about the bipolar structure of his entire analysis, however, that Parsons does not attribute the concrete "factual order" of a society, i.e., the pattern of regularities that the scientist may observe in social phenomena, to normative elements alone (on these two meanings of order, see S, pp. 91–92). Rather, to the extent that factual order is the issue (albeit only to this extent), one may agree with Adriaansens that Parsons's "answer to the question of order in society [is] an answer in which both conditioning . . . factors and normative subjective factors alike play their part" (1980, p. 50; cf. Alexander 1983b; Münch 1981, 1987).

1961; Friedrichs 1970; Gerstein 1979; Gouldner 1970; Habermas 1981b; Hamilton 1983; Mayhew 1982; Münch 1981, 1982, 1987; Pope 1973; Savage 1981; Sciulli 1986; Scott 1963; Turner and Beeghley 1974). A second school of interpretation holds the opposite position, however: *Structure* does “not successfully embody [the voluntaristic] perspective” that it nominally embraces but advances a “deterministic” theory that suppresses the “active,” “free,” and “creative character of human action” (quotations adapted from Giddens 1976b, pp. 16–22, 94–96; 1977, p. 167; 1984, p. xxxvii; see also Atkinson 1972; DiTomaso 1982; Turner 1987).

Structure furnishes evidence to support nearly all these readings. This evidence appears in different contexts, however. In sections where the aim is to rescue action from the behaviorist assault, Parsons seeks entirely to affirm, as observed before, the significance of subjectivity, choice, purpose and decision, active agency, and the like; and, in loading on the synonyms, he is generous, too, with expressions such as “freedom of human choice” and “this creative element”—terms he then associates with the “voluntaristic character” or “voluntaristic conception of action” (*S*, pp. 251–53, 389, 391, 439–40, 446). His language here matches that of other contemporary critiques of behaviorism, whether by gestalt psychologists like Koffka, who wrote of “volition” and “voluntarism” (1935, pp. 416–21), or neoclassicists such as Knight, who dwelt on the actor’s “subjectivity,” “creativity,” and “choice” (1924, pp. 231, 243). What complicates things in Parsons’s case is that he is on the attack not only against behaviorism but also against neoclassicism. For, in those parts of the book where his concern is to indict the economists for neglecting problems of order and random ends and to demonstrate the role of normative factors in resolving these problems, what is instead emphasized is “the enormous empirical importance of coercion in actual economic life” and “human affairs” and the fact that normative elements regulate and “exercis[e] discipline over conduct” and thus “may be held to determine action”—“to be . . . fundamental elements in the determination of men’s action in society” (*S*, pp. 272, 284, 425–27, 658).

Squaring this talk of determinism with the language of voluntarism is not of primary concern to Parsons. His two vocabularies are not, after all, in direct collision; each appears in a fairly discrete context and works with the other to further the cause of sociology. For the most part, then, ad hoc reconciliations can suffice, and of these he offers two. The first is the quasi-Kantian idea that the discipline and constraint exercised by normative elements take the form of “voluntary adherence to [these elements] as a duty”: “The actor is not free to do as he likes [and] is bound,” but bound by “moral obligations” that he “desires” to fulfill (*S*, pp. 383–87). The second is an argument that actually turns the focus away from the concrete actor and onto the so-called general analytical level with the claim

that, although the individual's "own concrete ends or other concrete norms . . . are by no means wholly or even substantially his own creation," they are "not beyond the control of human agency in general" (*S*, pp. 370, 709).

What makes these formulations hard to sort out is that *Structure* favors the descriptive mention of voluntarism over the business of formal definition. Significantly, though, there are a few places in the text and in the early articles where Parsons does, nevertheless, affix a *core* meaning to the concept, equating "the voluntaristic character of action" specifically with "the independence of ends and other normative elements of the structure of action from determination in terms of heredity and environment" (*S*, p. 700; also pp. 483–84; 1934*b*, pp. 515–21; 1935*a*, pp. 284–92). This core idea is captured well by Alexander when he interprets Parsons's early voluntarism as "freedom vis-à-vis the conditions of action" (1983*b*, p. 35; also 1978), and one need only substitute for Alexander's notion of material conditions the factors of heredity and environment to arrive at the basic point. This is that Parsons's concept of voluntarism is shot through with the practical message of his charter, just as are his concepts of action, the social, and so forth. Engaged in a self-professed "war of independence" for the science of normative elements against the biological sciences (see Sec. I), he conceptualizes voluntarism itself as the "independence of normative elements from determination" by these same hostile forces. It is important to notice, furthermore, that this conceptualization affords Parsons considerable latitude to make the seemingly divergent statements he does about voluntarism without troubling over their consistency. Following one strand of the conceptualization, for instance, voluntarism emerges not as some unqualified antideterminism or freedom but as the autonomy from conditional forces that is made possible by the value factor, which Parsons describes accordingly as "the creative element in action in general" (1935*a*, p. 306 n. 19; also *S*, pp. 420, 446). Seen from this angle, voluntarism is not at odds with normative interposition but dependent upon it. This is what Parsons apparently has in mind when he affirms the large place of voluntarism with respect to "human agency in general."

But, from the same conceptual point of departure, Parsons goes in other directions as well. With the idea of voluntarism as "independence" from conditions in place, he moves to appropriate whatever other varieties of independence and autonomy serve his purpose, regardless of how well these would otherwise seem to fit together. It is thus that voluntarism comes to envelop freedom of choice, subjectivity, and voluntary obedience, and thus that, in a final major twist, it extends its hold as well to the force of human "effort." This is evident in an important set of passages where voluntarism is actually explicated chiefly with reference to "the

element of effort" that enables action processes to overcome conditional obstacles in the pursuit of normative ideals (*S*, pp. 251–53, 396; also Procter 1978; Savage 1981). Seeking to appear scientific, Parsons deems the notion of effort "closely analogous to [the concept of] energy in physics" (*S*, p. 719). This said, though, he assimilates it also with the term "will" (*S*, pp. 252, 440), which—if one accepts his later remarks on his early years—he associates further with "free will," but does not emphasize the association in deference to advice from L. J. Henderson (see Parsons's statements in Johnson 1975, pp. 2–3; see also *S*, p. 585).

What makes the equation of voluntarism with effort, will, and perhaps even free will especially significant is that it provides one of the strongest reasons that scholars have brought forth for viewing Parsons's book as an expression of his religious upbringing and bourgeois reaction to the chaos of the 1930s (see Sec. I). Creelan (1978, pp. 182–85) believes, for example, that it is *Structure*'s emphasis on will that particularly discloses its roots in the Congregationalist tradition, while Gouldner (1970, pp. 189–95) sees the concern with free will and effort as evidence of Parsons's interest in combating historical materialism by "reassur[ing] men that . . . their efforts make a 'difference.'" Even if warranted, however, these observations do not deny that Parsons also had two fundamental programmatic reasons for linking voluntarism to effort and will. The first was his desire to prevent possible counterattacks on the normative domain by proponents of the conditional. *Structure* raises the concern that, even when the role of the value element is demonstrated, "it may still be possible to think of this element as automatically self-realizing," much like the "automatic processes" of the biological sciences. By stressing the factors of will and effort, which are "far from being automatic," Parsons felt he was delivering a "decisive rejection of this position" (*S*, pp. 251, 440). But his second reason for accenting these factors was of greater importance: will and effort furnished incontrovertible proof of the inadequacy of the various theories of human conduct then available. What the neoclassicists, the behaviorists, and other enemy forces all share, according to Parsons, is the conviction that their own analytical schema is a "deterministic" one, that is, one that in and of itself allows for the "full explanation" of action and requires no theoretical supplementation; yet each schema rests on assumptions that hold only by virtue of "the exercise of will"—to the "laws" of neoclassicism and behaviorism, "there is always [attached] an 'if,' [which] is the hiding place for the freedom of human volition." These theories are incapable, therefore, of providing a full explanation of action, and the door is open to other disciplinary frameworks, not least one that not only makes way for this "voluntaristic" element but also brings it within the purview of science, the argument of *Structure* being that the common value factors that arouse human faith "in turn stimulate will" (*S*,

pp. 29, 88–89, 379, 440 n. 1, 476, 735; 1934b, pp. 539–40; 1935a, pp. 286–87, 303; 1936b, p. 257; and Parsons's late comments on *Structure* in Johnson 1975, pp. 155–58; Parsons 1973–74, pp. 5, 10–11; 1974, pp. 55–56). Sociology offers that framework; will and effort provide its ultimate justification.

Particularly striking in all this is Parsons's presumption that the specific conception of voluntarism that accords with his charter is voluntarism as such. To him, voluntarism, conceived as the independence of normative elements from heredity and environment, with a dose of subjectivity, free choice, and will superadded, is not one in an array of defensible conceptions; it is the only acceptable possibility—never mind all the meanings that terms like voluntarism, independence, and freedom have taken on for philosophers, social thinkers, and the bearers of the world's political, religious, and economic movements. But not only does he privilege his notion of voluntarism; he vastly generalizes its range of empirical applicability. When a contemporary of Parsons's like Koffka spoke of voluntarism, he too privileged a single analogous definition, but with the stipulation that voluntaristic conduct is most “typical of Western civilization” and of certain personality types found therein (1935, pp. 419–20). *Structure* does not say this; it presents voluntarism as (in Alexander's words [1978, p. 184]) “a universal property of all action abstracted from time and space,” not as a trait that sometimes accompanies action and sometimes does not (cf. Sciulli 1986). To see the issue in the latter way is unacceptable, according to Parsons, because it grants the existence of “nonvoluntaristic action,” which—following his dichotomous reasoning—amounts to action that *is* determined by heredity and environment and *is* explicable in “natural science terms” (*S*, p. 762 n. 1). But this is exactly what Parsons cannot grant without vitiating his rationale for an independent sociology, and he holds firm against it. For him, “nonvoluntaristic action” is a violation of the very definition of action,³⁰ not a point of departure for an analysis of the historical conditions that release or restrict the “voluntaristic character of action.” One might, it is true, extract from some of his statements about the changing content of norms and the increasing knowledge of conditions the suggestion that “independence from conditions” itself undergoes variation over time, but even this exceeds what Parsons actually says. At all events, the idea of historicizing voluntarism—whether in the meaning that he assigns to it or in other meanings that might be assigned—by embedding it in a changing matrix of personality forms, social practices and action modes, social relations,

³⁰ In the same vein, Parsons comments that “the qualifying adjective, ‘voluntaristic’ [is ultimately] superfluous”; “if a theory of action is to have the status of an independent analytical system at all, it must, in the nature of the case, be a voluntaristic theory” (*S*, p. 762 n. 1).

interactional patterns, and institutions is an idea that his book simply is theoretically unequipped to pursue.

CONCLUSION

Why still bother with *The Structure of Social Action*? There are obvious reasons: because of the book's large "influence" on the subsequent intellectual history of sociology;³¹ because of the substantive "contribution" it arguably still makes to sociologists' continuing discussion of such topics as the foundations of social order, the linkage between action and social system, the methodology of the social sciences, the meaning of the "classic" texts of Durkheim and Weber; because, like it or not, the book itself is now a classic in the theoretical tradition of sociology—a text to which theorists and students of theory appeal again and again, though generally without coming to terms with the vast body of piecemeal commentary that has accompanied the volume's rise to classic status. But were each of these whiggish reasons to dissolve, another would remain. By virtue of its sweep, its determination to take a single, bold line of argument and to work it out with regard to issue after issue, *Structure* is a great specimen of the theoretical logic of sociology in operation. In coming to understand the book, one comes to understand not only the views that one theorist put forth but also something about the manner in which a theorist reasons, about what underlies a particular form of theoretical reasoning, and about the critical limitations of that form.

When the scholarship on *Structure* is brought together and the book is examined in relation to the sociointellectual setting where it was produced, what emerges is that the volume is less a dispassionate dialogue with the masters of sociology over the timeless questions of social theory (see, *inter alia*, Alexander 1983b) than a deeply felt tract for the times. The analysis has shown that the issues Parsons chooses to address in his book, the way in which he conceptualizes these issues, and the conclusions he reaches in each major area are all fitted directly to his goal of defending the discipline of sociology at a time when its future was in considerable doubt—of supplying a comprehensive charter that would permanently redeem the fledgling science in the face of powerful intellectual and institutional forces either content with its "pariah" status or on

³¹ To date, there has been no systematic research on the book's influence. If one judges from the evidence available, *Structure* was a "sleeper," which was known at first chiefly in the network constituted by Parsons's early students and attained a wide audience only in the 1950s, when Parsons's later books (and positions) brought increased prominence to his work as a whole (see the sources cited on the first page of the article and Alexander 1982a, 1983b; Atkinson 1972; Berger 1962; Boskoff 1950; Friedrichs 1970; Gouldner 1979; Hinkle 1963; House 1949; Mullins 1973).

the assault against its field of study, the sociocultural realm of subjective purposes, attitudes, and values. *Structure* is the great manifesto for the normative domain and sociology's claim on it. In it, the science of normative elements at once receives a defensible method, a distinguished ancestry, an analytical framework, an appropriate conception of social structure and personality, an urgent empirical problematic, and a proto-philosophical justification.

But the book here reaches its limit, as its very effectiveness as a charter leads it not only to cast each of these issues too exclusively in terms of the dichotomy between normative factors and factors linked to the disciplines that sociology then opposed but also to render the specific formulations forged in the process as the only legitimate possibilities. The lesson of the numerous critiques of *Structure* taken together is that this charter maker's logic is a flawed one, a preemptive suppression of methodological alternatives, intellectual legacies, conceptions of action and social structure and personality, approaches to the causes and solutions of the problem of social order, and perspectives on human voluntarism that, when once subtracted from the field of sociological vision, are no longer readily recoverable. There is irony, of course, to *The Structure of Social Action*. The book is an all-out argument on behalf of sociology, but, as we look back upon it, it offers a theory of action, not a sociology of action concerned with sociohistorical differences in action modes; a discussion of past social theories, not a sociological analysis of the processes by which such theories emerge, grow, and change; a universalized conception of the actor, not a sociological model of historical changes in personality forms; a generalized treatment of the problem of social order, not a sociological examination of the problem's different causes and "solutions" in different times and places; and on it goes. Yet Parsons's sense of the matter was no doubt correct. Recalling the ancient epigram, revived by Isaiah Berlin (1953), that "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog one big thing," we might classify the author of *Structure* with the latter: a theorist who met the call for a hedgehog—for a generalized defense of a science of normative elements—in a historical setting where foxes, chasing all the differences in the social world, would surely have been routed by larger hedgehogs already on the field. Sociology has not yet outlived its need of hedgehog volumes—but foxes must beware.

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