

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979)

Talcott Parsons was born in 1902 in Colorado Springs and grew up under conditions that may be characterized as Protestant religious, liberal, and intellectual. In 1920 he went to the rather conservative Amherst College in Massachusetts where he took biology as his major subject. In 1924 he moved to Europe, first to the London School of Economics, where he attended lectures by the social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, and studied economics. The following year he went to Heidelberg, where Max Weber had been a professor until 1918. Besides Max Weber, Parsons became acquainted here with the then contemporary debates in German Philosophy and economic history, and wrote his doctoral thesis on *The Concept of Capitalism in Recent German Literature*.

In 1926 Parsons returned to America and became an instructor in economics and sociology, first at Amherst and then at Harvard, where he stayed until his death in 1979. In his earlier years he played an important role in making Weber (and other European classical sociologists) known to English-language audiences, partly by translating Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930). Parsons moved to the new Department of Sociology at Harvard, created in 1931 with Pitirim A. Sorokin as its head. Parsons became Professor of Sociology there in 1938 and Chairman of the Department in 1942.

Beyond this, especially after World War-II, his academic standing grew rapidly, and it is no exaggeration to say that during the following two decades he became one of the dominant figures in postwar sociology in the United States. In 1946 he became the head of the new, multidisciplinary Harvard Department of Social Relations from which emanated an impressive list of publications during the next ten years, and in which "structural functionalism" was constructed and articulated. Most of Parsons' later work can be seen as elaborations, corrections, and reactions to criticism of his theoretical constructions from that period. In 1967, Parsons became the first social scientist to be elected as the president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

From the late 1960s, however, Parsons witnessed the decline of structural functionalism, but he energetically continued his scholarship after retirement in 1973. He died of heart failure in 1979 in Germany, on a visit taking part in celebrations in Heidelberg of the fiftieth anniversary of his own doctoral degree.

Parsons published a very large number of books and articles during his long career (over 160 published items). The most important are: *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), *The Social System* (1951) and *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1951), *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (1971).

Talcott Parsons was probably the most prominent theorist of his time, and it is unlikely that any one theoretical approach will so dominate sociological theory again. In the years between 1950 and the late 1970s, Parsonian functionalism was clearly the focal point around which theoretical controversy raged. Even those who despised Parsons' functional approach could not ignore it. Even now, years after his death and more than four decades since its period of dominance, Parsonian functionalism is still the subject of controversy.

Drawing initially on the work particularly of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim (he also read Karl Marx, Werner Sombart and Thorstein Veblen but regarded their approach as insufficiently 'scientific'), **Parsons spent his whole career trying to develop a general theory of social action and of the social system by means of which, and within the limits of which, social action takes place.** Parsons' approach can be described as 'synthesising' in the sense that he draws together into a single grand design what he regarded as the key insights of the leading European social theorists. Developing what became known as **general systems theory** his objective was to devise a theoretical framework for making sense of all aspects of human social action within a single explanatory framework. The grand design would, he hoped, provide a blueprint for a universal sociological understanding of social action. It is useful to think of Parsons' work not so much as a theory that tries to explain social action as such, but as a *theoretical schema* into which theoretical explanations can be fitted. It is a grand design *for* theory rather than just *of* theory.

The possibility of developing such a grand design obviously also meant having a conception of 'society' or 'the social system' as a single unified system. The different systems, structures and functions could be looked at separately, but essentially they never are separate because they all fit together into one overall system. In this conception the combined entity of the *total social system* must also be regarded as greater than the sum of its parts in the sense that social systems have 'emergent properties' that cannot be attributed to any individual component when looked at individually. Very much following Durkheim's strong conception of society as an entity that has a real existence which exceeds that of its individual components, the meaning and purpose of the individual parts is lost unless they are seen in the context of the larger system. The

human liver, for example, is fascinating as piece of anatomical matter, but to really understand its significance it has to be seen in the context of the body it is part of.

[Dear Candidate, in simple words, a system refers to an orderly arrangement – an organization of interrelated and interdependent parts that form a unity. The term ‘system’ signifies patterned relationship among the constituent parts of any given structure, which is based on functional relations and which binds them into unity. ‘System’ is only a concept, it is not real. It is only an abstraction; it does not exist in reality. It is only a methodological tool that is used by sociologists to comprehend social reality. In sociology, the term ‘social system’ is primarily used as a conceptual tool to understand and comprehend the ever evolving social reality, in terms of the interconnectedness and interdependence of its various component parts. It is nothing but an analytical construct or model which is used by various sociologists in their sociological investigations. Although the origin of the systemic analysis of society could be traced back to Spencer’s idea of *organic analogy* but it was in the works of Talcott Parsons that the concept of system was applied as a conceptual tool in a comprehensive way to analyze social life.]

For Parsons, then, the unit of analysis of social theory is the total social system. Although the system, subsystems that it is made up of and the various functions they perform are massively complex, Parsons thought it was possible for social theorists to identify features that are found in all the systems of a particular society, and possibly of all forms of human society, and to describe some of the always-repeated characteristics of how functions are performed. For Parsons, the main effort of social theory should be directed towards perfecting our understanding of these systems, structures and functions. General systems theory provided theorists who were more interested in developing specific hypotheses about the nature of social action (sometimes referred to as ‘middle-range’ theory) with a higher-order theoretical map of the social system, thus giving empirical researchers a framework within which to make sense of their empirical data.

These assumptions of Parsons are also seen by some as a reaction against the then contemporary trend in American Sociology. American sociology of that period was dominated by the Chicago School which was pre-occupied with empirical research. Parsons considered this over-emphasis on empiricism by American sociologists as futile. According to him, empirical research tends to be barren unless guided by general theoretical framework. Parsons took upon himself the responsibility to provide a general theoretical structure for the whole of sociology which would serve also to integrate all the social sciences. Thus, in his own words, he wanted to build ecology of sociology.

To appreciate Parsonian achievement in bringing functionalism to the second half of the twentieth century, it is best to start at the beginning, in 1937, when he published his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action*.

The Structure of Social Action (1937)

The first exposition of Parsons' theoretical scheme for the analysis of social action is found in his more than 800-page book of 1937, *The Structure of Social Action*. The focus of this volume is a comprehensive scrutiny of the works of various social scientists, including utilitarians (classical economists) like Alfred Marshall (1842-1924), positivists like Durkheim and idealists like Weber. Critically analyzing these works, Parsons came to the conclusion that all their ideas represent only partial truths. Their works were like "the efforts of blind men to see the elephant", whereby each blind man came out with one-sided view of the elephant, not being able to describe the elephant in its totality. The book became the starting point for a new theoretical movement in American sociology.

Parsons starts with tracing the solution to *the problem of social order*, that is, how relatively ordered patterns of social actions are maintained in a society resulting in the overall social order. Parsons calls it 'the Hobbesian Problem of Order' as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), an English philosopher, was one of the first scholars to raise and address the problem of social and political order: how human beings can live together in peace and avoid the danger and fear of civil conflict. For Hobbes, all humans existed 'in a state of nature', by which he meant that they were dominated by their base instincts. Because basic human nature was essentially egoistic and self-centered, human relationships took the form of a 'war of all against all', of selfish and aggressive competition. Under these circumstances, Hobbes believed, 'the life of man' was likely to be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

In order that social relations should not collapse into a state of total self-destruction, Hobbes developed the idea of a social contract, arguing that people are prepared to compromise a little by forfeiting some of their autonomy to a sovereign authority. Thus, the only solution for Hobbes was the force of a sovereign, installed through a contract, who by sword could compel people into obedience to law and order. This represents a coercive solution to the problem of social order. (However, critics saw this argument of Hobbes as an attempt to justify absolute monarchy.)

This type of solution Parsons considered flawed. Like Durkheim, he did not believe in sheer fear of punishment as sufficient to secure social order. Parsons' main objection was the perception of human action underlying the individualist

theories, and especially the utilitarian model of human action (egoistic and self-centered). Typical of the utilitarian model is the perception that all action is rational in the sense of purposive (means-end) rational, taking for granted the ends which actors pursue. The problem of action is reduced to (1) choosing the most efficient strategies when (2) the end (goal) is given and (3) the situational conditions are known. Rationality simply refers to collecting data about situational conditions and causal laws in order to predict consequences of feasible action, and then calculating optimal action.

The defect in this model is defined under the label “the utilitarian dilemma.” The dilemma, according to Parsons, emanates from the indeterminate status given to the *ends* in the utilitarian model of action.

‘though the conception of action as consisting in the pursuit of ends is fundamental, there is nothing in the theory dealing with the relations of the ends to each other, but only with the character of the means-end relationship.....the failure to state anything positive about the relation of means and ends to each other can then have only one meaning – that there are no significant relations, that ends are random in the statistical sense.’

Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937)

Parsons then proceeds to demonstrate that utilitarianism thus understood is unable to account for the existence of social order. In reviewing the thought of classical economists, Parsons noted the excessiveness of their utilitarianism: unregulated and atomistic actors in a free and competitive marketplace rationally attempting to choose those behaviors that will maximize their profits in their transactions with others. Parsons believed such a formulation of the social order presented several critical problems: Do humans always behave rationally? Are they indeed free and unregulated? How is order possible in an unregulated and competitive system? Here Parsons criticizes the classical economic theory for making overly simplified assumptions about the nature of the man. Classical economic theory treats man as a purely rational being, ignoring thus, the non-rational aspects of human behavior. Secondly, it also ignores the fact that economic activities of man are essentially embodied in a wider socio-political and cultural context. Thus a purely economic theory could never achieve the status of a general theory, not even of economic behavior because it left out non-economic (sociological) factors which also need to be taken into account.

Yet, Parsons saw as fruitful several features of utilitarian thought, especially the concern with actors as seeking goals and the emphasis on the choice-making capacities of human beings who weigh alternative lines of action. Stated in this minimal form, Parsons felt that the utilitarian heritage could indeed continue to inform sociological theorizing.

In a similar critical stance, Parsons rejected the extreme formulations of radical positivists, who tended to view the social world as observable cause-and-effect relationships among physical phenomena. In so doing, he felt, they ignored the complex symbolic functioning of the human mind. According to Parsons, the positivist tradition, in its attempt to mould sociology on the pattern of natural sciences has ignored the fact that man is essentially an active, creative and evaluating creature. While trying to objectify the study of human behavior, positivism ignores the subjective dimension of the social action. Thus, Parson argues that positivist theories leave no room for such notions as mind, consciousness, motives, values, etc. Parsons strongly asserts that a comprehensive sociological theory must necessarily be a ‘voluntaristic theory’, that is, it should also take into account the role played by subjective factors like meaning, motives, values etc., in guiding social action.

Finally, in assessing idealism, Parsons saw as useful the conceptions of “ideas” that circumscribe both individual and social processes although all too frequently these ideas are seen as detached from the ongoing social life they were supposed to regulate. Parsons wanted to avoid the idealist pitfalls of the hermeneutic, Neo-Kantian tradition of Rickert and Dilthey, which were also visible in the work of Max Weber, George Simmel and others. Here he found a tendency toward allowing material situational conditions to disappear so that actions and their products could be understood as the “externalization of spirit,” that is, actions, norms, social institutions, and cultural product are seen as external, objectified products of ideas, intentions, and other subjective factors.

In other words, idealists have been concerned with the human qualities of action like meanings, motives, values, etc. Parsons did appreciate this. Nevertheless, he also saw serious defects in the way these elements have been treated by the idealists. According to him, they tended to explain or interpret each society in terms of its own unique spirit. They have not formulated general theories or laws which would apply to all societies. According to Parsons, a sociological theory while taking into account the subjective dimensions should also be a general theory permitting systematic comparison of all societies and the development of general laws about them.

Thus, the explanatory problem that Parsons confronted was how to explain the existence of relatively ordered patterns of social actions and recurring social institutions from individualistic premises, implying that people independently choose what they want to do.

Thus, having reviewed the theories of utilitarianism, positivism and idealism, Parsons arrived at certain basic orientations on sociological theory. Parsons' basic orientations toward sociological theory can be summarized in terms of three guiding principles which are as follows:

Firstly, a sociological theory should adequately be a '*general theory*' which could be applied to different societies.

Secondly, a sociological theory must be a '*voluntaristic theory of action*', implying that it should take into account goals, values, normative standards and action choices which actors make on the basis of alternative values and goals.

Thirdly, a sociological theory must take into account the 'principle of emergence'. For Parsons, this means that at various levels of organizational complexity, systems emerge with properties which cannot be explained merely in terms of the way their component parts operate. In simpler words, it means that social interaction among individuals in a society give rise to a new level of reality, that is, social reality. Parsons had developed a systemic view of social reality, that, '*social reality must be viewed as a system*'. By this he implies that social reality or society must be seen as an 'integrated whole' made up of various parts (institutions) existing in a mutual interrelationship with each other. Following Durkheim (his concept of *conscience collective*), Parsons argues that this systemic reality, being a distinct level of reality, cannot be adequately explained or understood by reducing it to its component parts.

Thus, Parsons found the solution to the 'problem of social order' in his 'voluntaristic theory of action'. The guiding principle here, clearly influenced by the teachings of Max Weber and his method of *Verstehen*, was the idea that sociology should be the study of (subjectively) *meaningful social action*. It had to be built upon a *voluntaristic* perception of social action, that is, the assumption that action is the result of what people voluntarily choose to do. Please read the next section very carefully.

As stated earlier, the explanatory problem that Parsons confronted was how to explain the social stability and order in a society or 'a social system'. We also now know that Parsons was driven by the ambition of developing a 'general systems theory,' or, in other words, to account for social stability and order at a macro level, *systemic level*. (Please note that by social system, here, Parsons implies a plurality of patterns of interactions in society.) However, before he did that, he argued that the conception of social system begins at the micro level with *interaction between ego and alter ego*. This could be understood as the most elementary form of the social system.

Parsons, in his book, *The Structure of Social Action*, begins with a basic assumption that **social action is the basic unit of social life**. He defines social action as ‘the meaningful response of the actor (an individual) to the external stimuli.’

Thus, in his first step, he proceeds to specify that the basic building block of all social action is ‘*the unit act*’, i.e., a single social action.

Please note that a ‘single social act’ does not exist in social reality. Each action is a response to some previous action (*stimuli*) and, in turn, gives rise to a further action. So what exists in reality is a chain of interconnected actions – social interactions. It is, however, used by Parsons to facilitate our understanding of his major theoretical assumptions.

The *unit act*, according to Parsons, consists of the following elements:

- **The actor:** (actor, who at this point in Parsons’ thinking, is an individual person. To be an actor means ‘being-in-a-situation’. However, in his later works, ‘actor’ may be understood as any *agency* that is involved in attributing meaning to a given situation. This agency, then, could either be an individual, group or any form of collectivity.)
- **An end (or goal):** (a future state of affairs toward which the process of action is oriented. In other words, actor is viewed as goal seeking.)
- **The situation:** This is divided into two.
 - i. **The conditions of action** (these are the factors that cannot be altered by the actor, such as his own biological makeup and heredity as well as various external ecological constraints, that influence the selection of goals and means);
 - ii. **The means of action** (these are the factors that the actor can control, such as the resources and technique at his disposal)

(In simple words, whatever the actor gives meanings to, at a given point of time, becomes the situation. Further, any given situation may have three kinds of components

viz. physical, social and cultural objects. Physical objects imply the physical environment, social objects may be understood as the ‘other’ actors with whom the actor enters into certain relationship, or to whom the actor’s action is oriented. Cultural objects include shared norms, values, ideas, symbols, etc. in a given society.)

- **Norms:** (actors are governed by norms, values, and other ideas such that these ideas influence what is considered a goal and what means are selected to achieve it. In other words, the business of acting to achieve a purpose by responding to environmental conditions has to be done in a way that conforms to the prevailing norms of that society. There has to be what he calls ‘*a normative orientation to action*’ in the sense that when making choices over how to act, and assuming that alternatives are available, the making of choices is guided by social norms. (Please note that this view of Parsons tends to legitimize and maintain the status quo, for which he was criticized later.)

So, this is what constitutes, according to Parsons, the structure of social action i.e., the structure of a single *unit act*.

Parsons further argues that action involves actors making subjective decisions about the means to achieve goals, all of which are constrained by ideas and situational conditions. In this initial formulation, he conceptualized voluntarism as the subjective decisions-making processes of individual actors, but he viewed such decisions as the partial outcome of certain kinds of constraints, both normative and situational. [In other words, all of the elements have to take place in a knowledgeable or informed way so that the action-choices social actors make can be regarded, not as passive and random responses, but as consciously made rational choices. Part of what makes a choice of action rational is whether or not it conforms to the social norms of that society. If a social actor is unable to make rational and informed choices they are likely to be categorized by others as irrational or possibly as mad.]

Confused? Let me simplify this.

As we know that for Parsons, social action is the meaningful response of the actor to the external stimuli in a given situation. An actor is goal seeking. **Important:** However, he further argues that both, the goals as well as means employed to achieve them by the actor, are guided by the normative orientation,

i.e., they are largely prescribed by the culture. So, it is within the realm of the culturally prescribed goals and means that the actor exercises his volition.

In other words, what Parsons is implying here is that it is through culture (cultural knowledge) that the actor interprets the situation, finds meaning in it or assigns meanings to it. So, meanings are culturally shaped. Hence, what goals to pursue and what means to be chosen for their achievement, are largely prescribed by the normative charter (culture) of the society. Culture offers a range of choice within which the actor exercises his volition, which is expressed in his choice of action, in order to attain the goal.

‘Action must be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional. As process, action is, in fact, the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity of norms.’

Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937)

(Dear Candidate, please read this quote very carefully. This holds the essence of the Parsons’ *voluntaristic theory of action*. The figure below represents this conceptualization of voluntarism.)

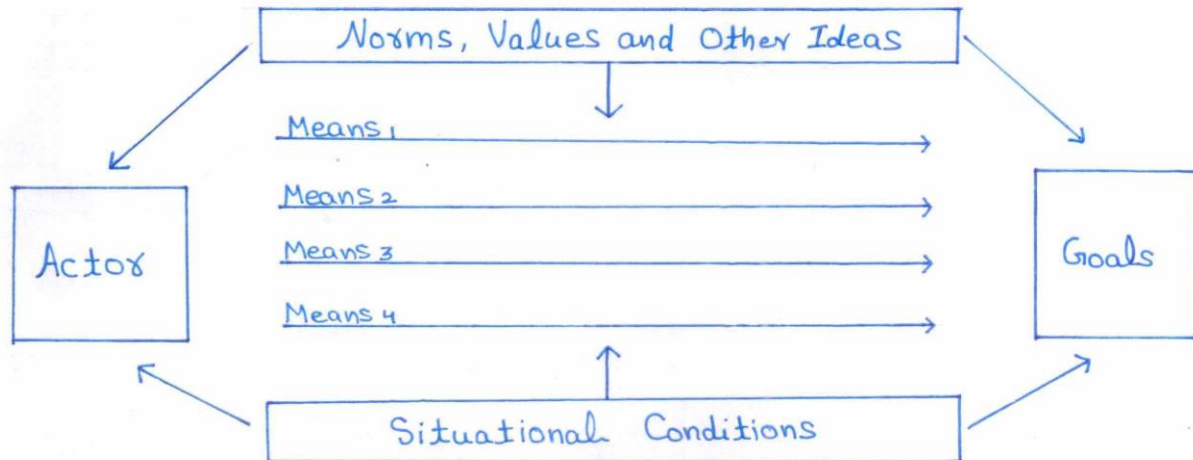


Figure: The Units of Voluntaristic Action

Parsons refers to his approach as an ‘*action frame of reference*’ as he is keen to specify that he is developing a theoretical framework not only for making objective assessments of social action in the manner of a positivist (observing the mechanical actions of a cyclist), but also to include the subjective or voluntaristic dimension of action as well (why cyclists cycle). He regards social actors as conscious, knowledgeable and intentional. This is why he makes a sharp distinction between sociology and psychology, and especially behaviour

psychology, which had become very popular in America at this time. As soon as social actors are recognized as acting in accordance with value-laden social norms, human action cannot be adequately explained in terms of psychological or biological causes alone.

In terms of the concepts used by classical social theorists discussed in the previous sections, the first three constituents of the unit act (agents, ends and conditions) correspond with a fairly straight forward positivistic and utilitarian conception of action in which social action is explained in terms of the ends actors seek and the means they employ to achieve them. It is by introducing the fourth element, the key idea that all of this takes place in the context of, or is oriented in terms of, identifiable systems of norms and values, that Parsons really moves social theory forwards. Metaphorically speaking, if classical social theory (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) provides the basic spokes of a theory for describing social action in terms of a series of means-ends relationships, Parsons adds the rim of the wheel by asking what the relationship is between these various 'ends'. As far as Parsons is concerned, patterns of norms and values are the means by which the different spokes of social action are combined into something that really can rock and roll.

Dear Candidate, please note here that Parsons is combining the Weberian notion of the subjective (voluntary) aspect of social action with the Durkheimian notion of the objective contexts of action in society. From the Weberian side, social actors do act in a rationalistic means-ends kind of way and make knowledgeable choices in order to fulfill various goals and objectives. Often these goals and choices are to do with the ideas, values and beliefs they hold. From the Durkheimian side Parsons takes the idea that social actors cannot act in an entirely free way, because the resources at their disposal, and the rules and conventions that they have to follow if their actions are to be effective, are, to a greater or lesser extent, regulated by society.

If we take the example of language, there is nothing to prevent a social actor from making whatever vocal sounds they like. If, however, they want others to understand these sounds, they need to accept the rules and convention of the language system around them. Making linguistic sense to others means accepting the limits of their language code. The language code does not belong to any particular social actor, but to society (for Durkheim the rules of language are a social fact). Human action can be regarded as free in the modified sense that once social actors *have accepted* the limitations imposed by the rules and norms of society, they can express themselves in any way they like up to those limitations.

----- Dialectics IAS (Sociology) -----

Please note that the introduction of ‘norms’ constitutes a radically new element in Parsons’ theory when compared to the utilitarian theory. It is their role in specifying and reconciling the ends of individual actors, and integrating them with the ends of other actors which provides the solution to the problem of order. Normative orientation, including norms, values, beliefs, etc., is supposed to guide and limit the choice of ends, as well as means, in the course of action. As Parsons describes, ‘normative orientation is the *motor* of social action’.

The processes diagrammed above are often termed the *unit act*, with social action involving a succession of such unit acts by one or more actors. As stated earlier, a single social act does not exist in isolation. Each action is a response to some previous action and, in turn, gives rise to a further action. So what exists in reality is a chain of interconnected actions – social interactions. Please keep in mind that, it is this plurality of patterned interactions that Parsons calls social system. This will also help you to understand the shift in Parsonian works from the study of structure of social action to the analysis of action systems.

[After the Second World War, Parsons sought to construct a rigorous sociological theory by, in particular, analyzing the systematic properties of societies that allow them to maintain and reproduce themselves. Commentators are divided over the extent to which this shift in focus represents a conceptual break with Parsons’ earlier writings, which follow Weber and Neo-Kantian tradition in stressing the ‘voluntaristic’ character of human action.]

[Please note that though in *The Structure of Social Action* Parsons lays great stress on Weber’s contribution to the development of the voluntaristic theory of action, (but as the later developments and shifts in his theory suggests) his approach to social theory seems in fact much closer to Durkheim’s. Indeed he declared in 1967: ‘My own inclination is to refer above all to Durkheim (*The Division of Labour in Society*, especially) as the fountainhead of the primary fruitful trend.’]

Sociology is Simple
Sociology is Scoring
provided that you
Study Sociology Systematically

Having described the basic building blocks of his theoretical grand design by developing the descriptive analytical concept of the *unit act*, Parsons proceeds in his later key works (*The Social System* and *Towards a General Theory of Action*), to discuss a theoretical framework of the overall social system where action takes place. I repeat that, for Parsons, a single social act does not exist in isolation. Each action is a response to some previous action and, in turn, gives rise to a further action. So what exists in reality is a chain of interconnected actions – social interactions. These social interactions get patterned and institutionalized over a period of time. Such institutionalized patterns can be, in Parsons' view, conceptualized as a social system.

So, the next problem that Parsons was concerned with was: How are *unit acts* connected to each other, and how can this connectedness be conceptually represented? After all, Parsons' unit of analysis in *The Structure of Social Action* remained the individual actor. What was needed was an elaboration on the properties of actors in interaction with other actors, and on the properties of the social systems constituted by these interactions. This indicates the shift in Parsons to the perspective of social systems. **In other words, this marks a transition in Parsonian works from a microscopic analysis of the structure of social action (voluntarism) to the macroscopic systemic analysis of the social reality.**

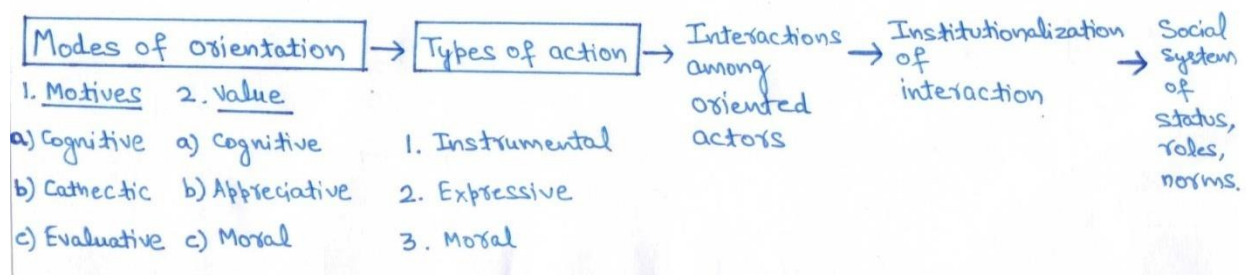


Figure: Parson' conception of Action, Interaction, and Institutionalisation

The figure above summarizes the transition from unit acts to social system. This transition occupies the early parts of Parsons' next significant work, *The Social System*.

However, before proceeding further, I would like to briefly introduce you to Parsons' conception of the system. Now, if you remember the third guiding principle of Parsons' theory of voluntaristic action stated that social reality must be viewed as a system. Here, system is only a way of understanding or looking at reality. System, by itself, is not real. It is only a methodological tool to understand the reality. So, the reality must be viewed as a system. In other words, we should

try to understand social reality in terms of the concept of system. According to Parsons, if sociology has to be a science, it must resort to systemic analysis as has been done in natural sciences like biology.

Parsons' concept of system implies certain attributes that are ascribed to the reality when we try to understand it as a system. Parsons enumerated several characteristics of a system which are as follows:

Firstly, the chief characteristic of any system is that it is a 'unified whole' made up of interconnected and interdependent parts. These parts are called subsystems. Each sub-system can also be treated as a system by itself.

Secondly, system is structured, which implies that there exists a definite pattern of relationships between sub-systems.

Thirdly, system has goals and based upon the goals there is a boundary and beyond the boundary there is the environment. The system exists in a symbiotic relationship with the environment which implies that there is a continuous interaction between the two.

Fourthly, the system has, according to Parsons, a 'self-equilibrating tendency'. However, the equilibrium is not a fixed state, it is a dynamic process. It implies that, continuously, the equilibrium of the system tends to get disturbed and continuously the system tries to restore the state of equilibrium.

Fifthly, system has internal dynamics. System goes through a process of constant change either owing to internal dynamics (i.e. changes within various sub-systems) or due to changes in its environment with which it is in continuous interaction. But despite these challenges, the system is able to restore equilibrium due to its highly adaptive character. There is a continuous process of adjustment and modification within the system in order to restore equilibrium. Thus, for Parsons, equilibrium is not a fixed state, rather it is a dynamic and continuous process. But how this equilibrium is maintained? Parsons explains this with his notion of needs.

Sixthly, System has needs. Parsons argues that if a system is to exist and maintain itself certain elementary needs of the system must be met. These needs are of two types namely, universal needs and derived needs. Universal needs are those which are universal to all systems. They have been termed as '**imperatives**' (later, Parsons used the term '**functional pre-requisites**'). Then there are other needs which are unique to each system. Therefore, they vary from system to system. They are known as '**derived needs**'. For example, all societies have to

fulfill the need of arranging food for their members, which is a universal need. But an agrarian society, which has a special mode of food getting, will have its own unique needs (fertile land, division of labour, plough technology) different from those of a society based on hunting and fishing (hunting skills, etc.). We will return to the discussion on ‘functional pre-requisites’ later.

Let us now try to understand the transition in Parsons from the study of the structure of social action to the study of social action(s) in terms of action systems. As stated earlier, Parsons viewed actors as goal seeking. Now, how does an actor arrives at his goal(s)?

Parsons argues that the actor has certain needs and thus his action is guided by certain ‘*need-dispositions*’. [Parsons described need-dispositions as the “most significant units of motivation of action.” He differentiated need-dispositions from drives. Drives refer to the innate tendencies of any biological organism. On the contrary, he argued that need-dispositions are drives that are shaped by the social setting. For example, need for food is the innate need for every living organism, however, in case human beings (eg., in agrarian society), the need for food gets transformed into need-disposition for cultivation of crops.]

Parsons further argues that guided by need-dispositions, motives arise or, in other words, *motivational orientations* develop. There are three types of motives: (1) **cognitive** (need for information), (2) **cathectic** (need for emotional attachment), and (3) **evaluative** (need for assessment). He further states that corresponding to these three motivational orientations, culture offers three value standards or *value orientations*. There three corresponding value orientations are: (1) **cognitive** (evaluation by objective standards), (2) **appreciative** (evaluation by aesthetic standards), and (3) **moral** (evaluation by absolute rightness and wrongness).

Parsons called these *modes of orientation*. Although this discussion of Parsons is somewhat vague, the general idea seems to be that the relative salience of these motives and values for any actor creates a composite type of action, which can be one of three types: (1) **instrumental** (action oriented to realize explicit goals efficiently), (2) **expressive** (action directed at realizing emotional satisfactions), and (3) **moral** (action concerned with realizing standards of right and wrong). That is, depending on which modes of motivational and value orientation are strongest, an actor will act in one of these basic ways. For example, if cognitive motives are strong and cognitive values are most salient, then action will be primarily instrumental, although the action will also have expressive and moral content. Thus, the various combinations and permutations of the modes of orientation – that is, motives and values – produce action geared in one of these

general directions. [Thus, drawing inspiration from Weber's typology of social action, Parsons too develops his own typology of social action in terms of instrumental action, expressive action, and moral action.]

For Parsons, "unit acts" therefore involve motivational and value orientations and have a general direction as a consequence of the combination of value and motives that prevails for an actor. Thus far Parsons had elaborated only on his conceptualization of the unit act. The critical next step, which was only hinted at in the closing pages of *The Structure of Social Action*: As variously oriented actors (in the configuration of motivational and value orientations) interact, they develop agreements and sustain patterns of interactions, which become "institutionalized." Such institutionalized patterns can be, in Parsons' view, conceptualized as a **social system**. Such a system represents an emergent phenomenon that requires its own conceptual edifice.

Parsons recognized that the actors are motivationally and value oriented; thus, as with patterns of interaction, the task now becomes one of conceptualizing these dimensions of action in systemic terms. The result is the conceptualization of action as composed of three "interpenetrating action systems": the cultural, the social and the personality. That is, the organization of unit acts into social systems requires a parallel conceptualization of motives and values that becomes, respectively, the personality and cultural systems. The goal of action theory now becomes understanding how institutionalized patterns of interaction (**the social system**) are circumscribed by complexes of norms, values, beliefs, and other ideas (**the cultural system**) and by configurations of motives and role-playing skills (**the personality system**). Later Parsons also added the organismic (subsequently called **behavioral organism**) system. Behavioral organism simply refers to man as a biological being, underlying and conditioning the other systems of action.

In his work "*Toward a General Theory of Action*" Parsons argued that even a single social action can be analysed as a system.

Thus Parsons argues that when we look at social action as an action system, we can identify the structural components of the action system in terms of four subsystems viz. social system, cultural system, personality system and behavioral organism.

Now the question arises that if we look at social action as an action system, then how equilibrium is maintained in such a system. As stated earlier, according to Parsons, one of the characteristics of the system is its self-equilibrating tendency. For Parsons, the tendency of a given social system to maintain itself is 'the first law of social process.'

Parsons argues that every system has certain needs. As long as the needs of a system are fulfilled by the various parts (structural components) of the system, equilibrium would result. The contribution of parts towards fulfillment of needs is called *function*.

According to Parsons, there are four ‘functional pre-requisites’ that are necessary for (characteristic of) all systems – **adaptation** (A), **goal attainment** (G), **integration** (I) and **latency** (L). Together these four functional pre-requisites are known as the **AGIL** scheme. In order to survive, a system must perform these four functions:

1. *Adaptation*: A system must cope with external situational exigencies. It must adapt to its environment and adapt the environment to its needs.
2. *Goal Attainment*: A system must define and achieve its primary goals.
3. *Integration*: A system must regulate the interrelationship of its component parts. It must also manage the relationship among the other three functional pre-requisites (A, G, L).
4. *Latency (pattern maintenance and tension management)*: A system must furnish, maintain, and renew both the motivation of individuals and the cultural patterns that create and sustain that motivation. (Latency means existing, but not very noticeable, ‘hidden’. By this Parsons implies that cultural values are internalized by the various parts of the system and it is this internalization of values that facilitates pattern maintenance. Tension management concerns dealing with the internal tensions and strains of actors in the social system.)

[With the introduction of A, G, I, and L, however, a subtle shift away from the analysis of structures to the analysis of functions occurs in Parsons’ theory. Structures are now evaluated explicitly by their functional consequences for meeting the four requisites.]

The next step is to connect each of these four functional pre-requisites to the four action systems. Parsons argues that the *behavioral organism* is the action system that handles the adaptation function by adjusting to and transforming the external environment. The *personality system* performs the goal-attainment function by defining system goals and mobilizing resources to attain them. In other words, the individual’s goals as well as the motivational energy to pursue those

----- Dialectics IAS (Sociology) -----

goals, is mobilized by the personality system. The *social system* copes with the integration function by controlling its component parts. Finally, the *cultural system* performs the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action.

The following diagram summarizes the structure of the action system in terms of the AGIL schema.

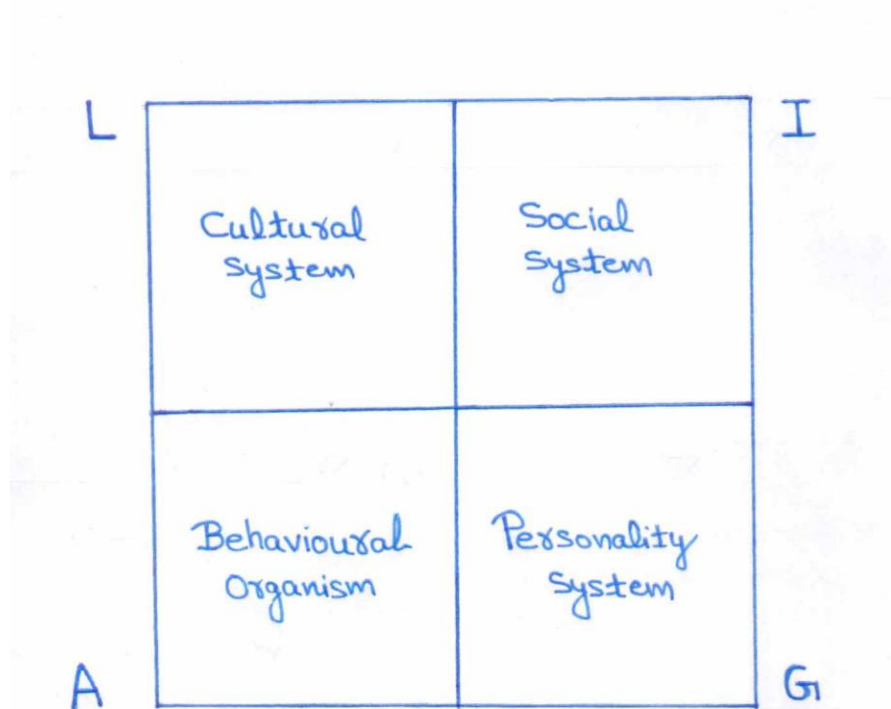


Figure: Structure of the General Action System
(also known as **Functional Paradigm of System of Social Action**)

So, that is how the equilibrium in the general action system is maintained.

Parsons states that it is the social system (in its plurality of patterns of social interaction) that constitutes the subject matter of sociology and the other subsystems constitute the environment of the social system. So, the sciences that are concerned with the study of other subsystems constitute the ecology of sociology. For example, organismic system is studied by biology, personality system is studied by psychology, and cultural system is studied by anthropology and other disciplines like linguistics, etc. So, these sciences constitute, according to Parsons, the ecology of sociology.

The next question that arises is that if the social system is nothing but the institutionalized patterns of interactions, then how these patterns are maintained. In answering this, Parsons argued that value orientations (cultural system)

circumscribe the norms of the social system and the decisions of the personality system. Thus, the structure of the personality and social systems reflects the dominant patterns of value orientations in culture. This implicit emphasis on the impact of cultural patterns on regulating and controlling other systems of action became even more explicit in his later work. In other words, what Parsons is implying here is that when looking at social action as a system, the social action (in terms of social interaction) must be understood as being largely shaped by the value orientations (culture).

As you can see here that Parsons very cleverly moves away from his earlier conception of social action in terms of its 'voluntaristic' aspect to the one where it is understood as being largely culturally shaped. At this stage Parsons is interested in the study of social action only in so far as it is patterned or culturally shaped. He seems to be least bothered about the conscious action choice of the actor, which was one of the guiding principles of his social theorizing (that the sociological theory must be a 'voluntaristic' theory of social action). [This is how he moves away from the study of the structure of social action to study of the structure of general action system.]

Since social action is conceived as patterned, social interaction also gets patterned. How social action gets patterned? Because it is culturally shaped and culture itself is patterned, thus giving rise to patterned social interactions in society. Thus culture is seen as a patterned, ordered system of symbols that are objects of orientation to actors, internalized aspects of the personality system, and institutionalized patterns in the social system.

Let me elaborate on this.

For Parsons, the social system is the key subsystem (which is why Parsons writes a whole book about it), as its function is to hold all the other subsystems together (integration). Parsons was now asking that how systems resolve their integrative problems. The answer is provided by the elaboration of additional concepts that point to how personality systems and culture are integrated into the social system, thereby providing some degree of normative coherence and a minimal amount of commitment by actors to conform to norms and play their respective roles.

The figure below delineates the key ideas in Parsons' reasoning.

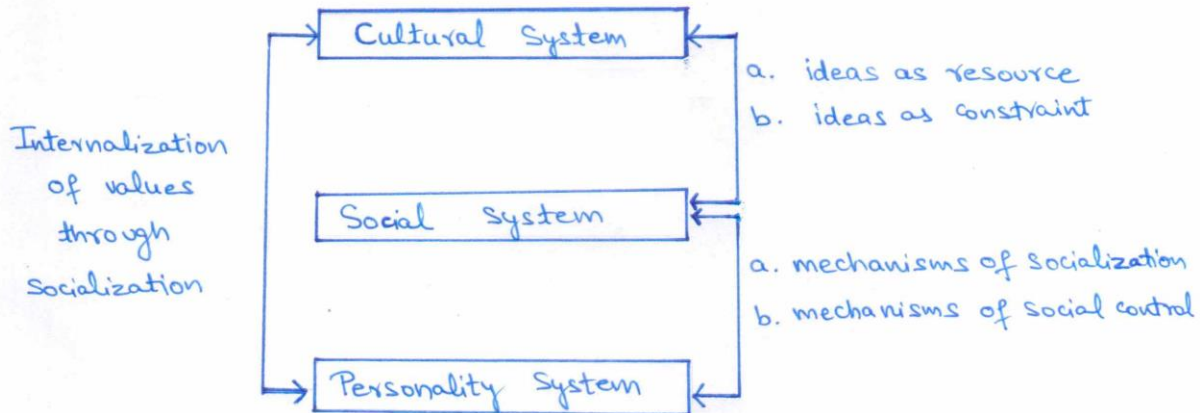


Figure: Parsons' early conception of integration among Systems of Action

Just how are personality systems integrated into the social system, thereby promoting equilibrium? At the most abstract level, Parsons conceptualized two mechanisms that integrate the personality into the social system: (1) mechanisms of socialization and (2) mechanisms of social control.

1. *Mechanisms of socialization* are the means through which cultural patterns – values, beliefs, languages and other symbols – are internalized into the personality system, thereby circumscribing its need structure. That is, Parsons was interested in the ways in which the norms and values of a system are transferred to the actors within the system. In a successful socialization process these norms and values are internalized; that is, they become part of the actors' "consciences." As a result, in pursuing their own interests, the actors are in fact serving the interests of the system as a whole. [In general, Parsons assumed that actors usually are passive recipients in the socialization process. Children learn not only how to act but also the norms and values, the morality, of society. Socialization is conceptualized as a conservative process in which need-dispositions (which are themselves largely molded by society) bind children to the social system, and it provides the means by which the need-dispositions can be satisfied. There is little or no room for creativity.]
2. *Mechanisms of social control* involve those ways in which *status-roles* are organized in social systems to reduce strain and deviance. *Status* refers to a structural position within the social system, and *role* refers to the

‘normatively-defined’ expectations from the actor occupying a certain status. Role is the behavioral aspect of status. There can be no status without a corresponding role attached to it. Role is, thus, the dynamic aspect of status and consists of rights and duties attached to it. Thus, an individual occupying the status of a father/teacher, simultaneously, has some rights over his children/students, as well as some responsibilities towards them. Statuses and roles are, thus, two sides of the same coin. [As you can notice that Parsons here is looking at the actor not in terms of thoughts and actions but instead as nothing more than a bundle of statuses and roles. In other words, he is looking only at social action only to the extent it is culturally patterned.]

Parsons further argues since single social action does not exist in isolation, the social situation is marked by the presence and interaction among plurality of ‘actors-in-role’. This gives rise to ‘*role-reciprocity*’, that is, each role exists in relation to its corresponding role, eg., father-son, teacher-student, doctor-patient, etc. Roles are thus backed by internalized *mutual normative expectations* concerning what are considered proper actions in particular situations, furthered by mechanisms of social control (i.e., sanctions in the form of punishments, etc.). Subjective meaning and legitimacy of role expectations are derived from the value pattern, and supported by institutionalized systems of sanctions. Thus, although culture is separate from its social system, cultural values interpenetrate the social system by setting normative standards for evaluating role performance. Similarly, roles also represent interpenetration between social system and personality, where interpenetration results from processes of socialization, internalization of norms and values, and social control.

It should be obvious how these concepts and assumptions influence the problem of social order, also known as the problem of “*double contingency*.” In every interaction, the outcome for each actor is dependent not only upon his or her own choices, but also upon those of other actors as well. Thus, social order becomes a problem of coordination, focusing attention on how harmony can be achieved between personalities from differentiated role systems, each with their own internalized norms, expectations, value orientations, and sets of moral standards. The key element, according to Parsons, is culture. Internalization of common cultural values in the personality is basic to norms and evaluative standards that bring about coordination of action orientations and motivation, and thereby the harmonious functioning of the social system.

A tendency towards attributing primacy to culture over the individual volition can be observed here, which later became one of the main targets of criticism of Parsons. Parson's model presents a very passive image of actors. They seem to be impelled by drives, dominated by the culture, or, more usually, shaped by a combination of drives and culture (that is, by need-disposition). The dominant impression that emerges from Parsons' works is one of a 'passive personality system.'

But Parsons was after all Parsons.

Parsons tried to sort out this ambivalence concerning the relationship between action and culture through his famous *pattern variables*. Thus again showing the significance of the voluntaristic dimension of the action frame of reference.

How he did this?

As mentioned earlier, Parsons has stated that value orientations (cultural system) circumscribe the norms of the social system and the decisions of the personality system. Thus, the structure of the personality and social systems reflects the dominant patterns of value orientations in culture. In other words, at this stage, Parsons is interested in the study of social action only in so far as it is patterned or culturally shaped. Since social action is conceived as patterned, social interaction also gets patterned. How social action gets patterned? Because it is culturally shaped and culture itself is patterned, thus giving rise to patterned social interactions in society.

Moving forward Parsons argued that though culture is patterned but not monolithically, but rather dualistically. Further, this duality of cultural patterns is manifested at four or five levels, the number depending on the context. Parsons calls this duality of cultural patterns (or value orientations) as *pattern variables*. Thus, pattern variables, according to Parsons, represent basic values or types of action orientation between which actors have to choose in every action situation. In other words, this duality of cultural patterns (pattern variables) offers a range of choice to the actor. [This is how Parsons tried to bring back 'voluntarism'.]

The five pattern variables are:

1. **Affectivity** versus **Affective Neutrality** concerns the amount of emotion or affect that is appropriate in a given interaction situation. Should a great deal or little affect be expressed? If the actor, while defining his relationship with the object, choose to set aside his own feelings and emotions for the benefit

of an instrumental relationship oriented to the ends (goals), then, it is a case of affective neutrality. Relationships in the occupational sphere are characterized by affective neutrality like in case of civil servant and mercenary soldiers. The other possibility is that the actor allows his feelings and emotions to dominate his relationship with a physical or social object, which is a case of affectivity. The relations in a family or peer group are characterized by affectivity.

2. ***Diffuseness*** versus ***Specificity*** denotes the issue of how far-reaching obligations in an interaction situation are to be. Should the obligations be narrow and specific, or should they be extensive and diffuse? If the actor orients himself in a diffused manner than he is involved as a total person as in the case with one's spouse or children. On the other hand, one might relate with the others in a highly specific for a limited purpose as in case of doctor-patient relationship.
3. ***Particularism*** versus ***Universalism*** points to the problem of whether 'evaluative standards' (i.e. evaluation of 'others' in an interaction situation) are based on universal criteria or the beliefs only of a particular society. This is the dilemma which relates to the criteria to be adopted in judging a physical or social object. Whether someone is a good student or beautiful woman can be judged according to criteria applicable to a whole range of objects. If one adopts such criteria one has opted of universalism. Alternately, while judging the object one can look at the ways in which the respective physical or social object is unique like a father looks at his son or a man looks at his girl friend. To look at things in this way is to opt of particularism.
4. ***Ascription*** versus ***Achievement*** deals with the issue of how to assess an actor, whether by inborn qualities, such as sex, age, race, and family status or by performance. Should an actor treat another in a certain way because of achievements or ascriptive qualities that are unrelated to performance? This pattern variable can also be understood in terms of *quality* versus *performance*. The actor can judge a physical or social object according to what it does or achieves; his judgement in this case is based on the object's performance (achievement). On the other hand, the actor might attribute

importance to the object in itself independently of its achievement. In this case, the actor's judgement is based on the quality of the object.

5. **Collective orientation** versus **Self-orientation** denotes the extent to which action is to be oriented to self-interest and individual goals or to group interests and goals. Should actors consider their personal or self-related goals over those of the group or large collectivity in which they are involved? [Please note that Parsons later dropped some of these concepts from the action scheme such as *collectivity* versus *self*, because he believed that these are implied or covered in the other four pattern variables.]

Important: Please note that Parsons considered the pattern variables to be a kind of specification of Ferdinand Tonnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, but they can also be connected with Max Weber's ideal types of action and authority, related to traditional versus modern societies.

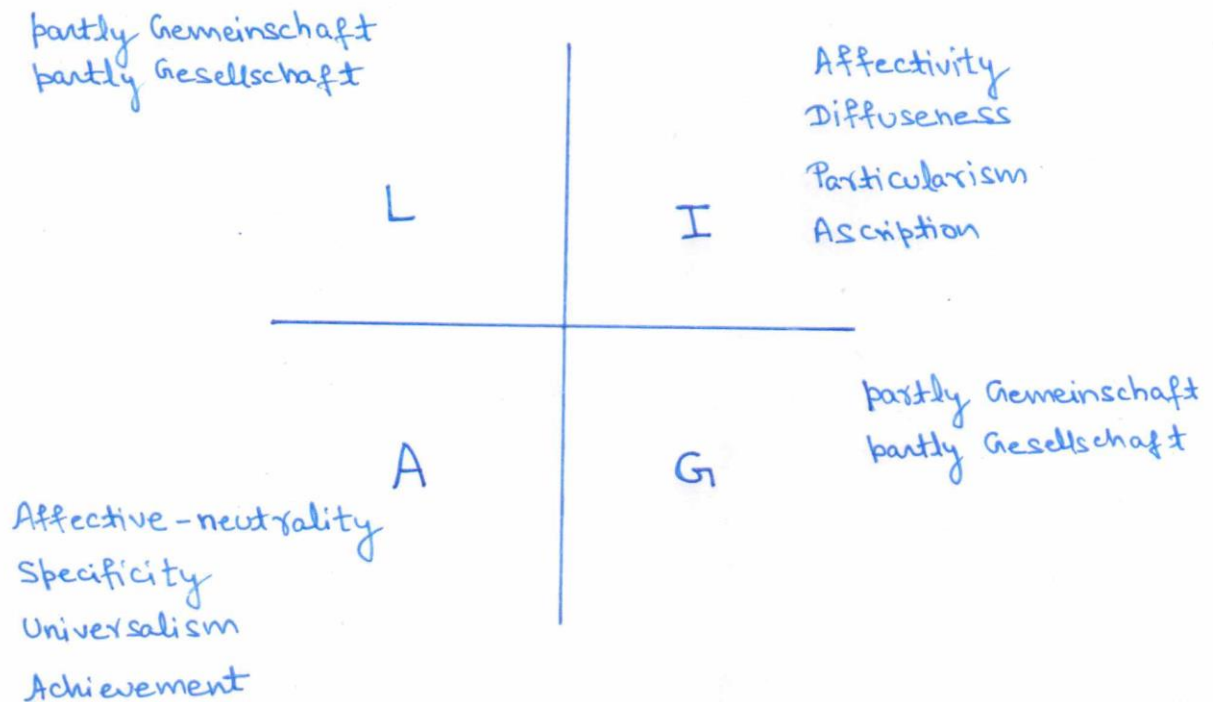
Ferdinand Tonnies (1855-1936): Tonnies was a German scholar. In his most famous work "***Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft***" (1887), he argued that all social relations are creations of *human will*, of which there are two types. The first is **essential will**, the basic instinctive organic tendencies which drive human activity from behind. The second is **arbitrary will**, the deliberative and purposive form of volition, which determines human activity with regard to the future. Thus, by emphasizing the importance of will or volition in the human behaviour, Tonnies made a significant departure from the then dominant classical evolutionist approach.

He further argued that these two modes of will explain the existence of two basic types of social groups. A social group may be willed into being because sympathies among the members make them feel that this relationship is a value in itself. On the other hand, a social group may arise as an instrument to attain a definite end. The first type of group, the expression of essential will, is called *Gemeinschaft*, while the other is called *Gesellschaft*. The term ***Gemeinschaft*** means "**community**" in German and refers to a society characterized by the predominance of intimate primary relationships and by emphasis upon tradition, consensus, informality, and kinship. This pattern of society is most closely approximated by rural-agricultural societies. The term ***Gesellschaft*** means "**society**" in German, and by this term he referred to a type of society in which secondary relations predominate, that is, in which social relationships are formal, contractual, expedient, impersonal and specialized.

In current terminology, the term Gemeinschaft approximates to community, while Gesellschaft refers to association. For Tonnies, the concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft refers not only to types of human groupings but also to stages of growth whereby Gemeinschaft type of society, over time gives way to Gesellschaft type of society. Here, one can find the influence of evolutionism in his ideas.

Thus, *affectivity, diffuseness, particularism, and ascription* (quality) comprise Tonnies' Gemeinschaft relationship, while *affective neutrality, specificity, universalism, and achievement* (performance) are typical patterns in Gesellschaft relationship.

Further, Parsons also related these pattern variables with his paradigm of 'functional pre-requisites.' He argued that systems engaged in Adaptation largely follow the Gesellschaft pattern, the systems engaged in Integration largely follow Gemeinschaft pattern while the systems engaged in the Goal-Attainment and Latency follow partly Gesellschaft and partly Gemeinschaft pattern. This linkage reflects the cognitive consonance between 'pattern variables' and 'paradigm'. Please note that this was only a speculative exercise on his part, not based on any empirical research.



He further argued that these four pattern variables represent dilemmas or choices of orientation which have to be resolved before an action is performed. Referring to the way those dilemmas get resolved, Parsons emphasizes on the fact

that the choice of one pattern over other in different situations has been defined by culture and institutionalized as normative patterns (since he presumed that the values-choices that guide social action become embedded in the institutions of society). In other words, having accorded primacy to the culture (value orientations) over the other subsystems, Parsons tends to imply that even the actors' choices with regard to the pattern variables is largely culturally shaped.

The implication of pattern variables for Parsons and his followers was that it appeared that American society of the 1950s had reached the highest level of social and institutional sophistication yet achieved. Society operated on the principles of rational detachment, which characterized the modern approach to life in general. Social action was also relatively specified (rather than diffuse) in the sense that it was focused on and regulated by the functional requirements of specific social roles. The general value system exhibited high levels of universalism (rather than particularism) as it tried to enact the basic civic principles of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. The irrational claims of selfish individuals and particular groups were prevented from eclipsing the collective interest of American society as a whole. Finally, society had become fully meritocratic in the sense that actors could be rewarded for their own achievements in society rather than being pigeonholed into ascribed categories over which they had no control. Using the technical jargon of Parsons' theory, America in the 1950s could be described as having reached the advanced and sophisticated pattern of 'universalistic-achievement'.

It is worth noting that the cultural prescriptions (as stated by Parsons in the form of *pattern variables*) are unambiguous and clear only in large stabilized social systems of developed industrial societies. In third World countries which are in the process of transition from Gemeinschaft type of relations to Gesellschaft relations one can often comes across conflicting cultural prescriptions, because cultural patterns of both Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft coexist. In such situations it is not easy to resolve the dilemma. For example, in a country like India, where caste, religious and regional identities and affinities coexist with modern values of rationality, secularism and democracy, an individual may find it hard negotiating with traditional as well as modern values.

This completes Parsons' transition from the structure of social action to the structure of general action system.

Now he moves on to an even higher level of social theorizing. Here we will witness the transition in Parsonian writings from the analysis of the structure of social action as such to the structural-functional analysis of social systems.

Remember that for Parsons, a single social act does not exist in isolation. Each action is a response to some previous action and, in turn, gives rise to a further action. So what exists in reality is a chain of interconnected actions – social interactions. These social interactions get patterned and institutionalized over a period of time. Such institutionalized patterns can be, in Parsons’ view, conceptualized as a social system. So, in reality there could be many social systems coexisting. For example, patterns of interactions among father, mother and their children could be understood as a social system, namely, family system. Similarly, patterns of interactions relating to the production, distribution and consumption could be understood as yet another social system, namely, economic system. Likewise, patterns of interactions related to political affairs constitute another social system, namely, political system. Since all these systems coexist with a society, so the entire society in itself could also be viewed as a system. So, now Parsons moves on to explain that how society (as a whole) maintains itself as a system and how the equilibrium results in the society.

As stated earlier, although the idea of a social system encompasses all types of collectivities, one specific and particularly important social system is *society*, “a relatively self-sufficient collectivity the members of which are able to satisfy all their individual and collective needs and to live entirely within its framework.” As a structural functionalist, Parsons distinguished among four structures, or subsystems, in society in terms of the functions (AGIL) they perform. The **economy** is the subsystem that performs the function for society of adapting to the environment through labor, production, and allocation. Through such work, the economy adapts the environment to society’s needs, and it helps society adapt to these external realities. The economy represents the interface between the social system and the physical environment. The **polity** (or political system) performs the function of goal attainment by pursuing societal objectives and mobilizing actors and resources to that end. The integration function is performed by the **societal community** (for example, nation, law) which coordinates the various components of society. Finally, the **fiduciary system** (for example, in the schools, the family) handles the latency function by transmitting culture (norms and values) to actors and allowing it to be internalized by them. “Fiduciary system” is the name that Parsons preferred for the social subsystem that performs the pattern-maintaining function of reproducing, legitimizing, and maintaining commitment to beliefs, moral values, and expressive symbols. Its primary link is to the cultural action system.

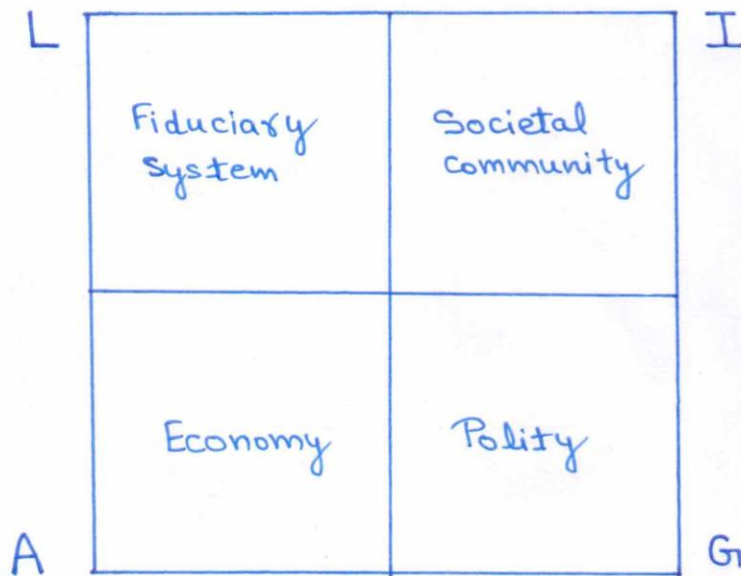


Figure: Society, its subsystems and the functional imperatives
(also called **Functional Paradigm of Social System**)

Parsons further argues that these subsystems of society are interconnected and interdependent. Hence, for equilibrium in society, it is necessary that these subsystems exist in harmony with each other. Thus every society must ensure compatibility at its subsystem level. Since society is dynamic in nature, changes in one subsystem without corresponding changes in other subsystems give rise to subsystem incompatibility. Subsystem incompatibility would result in social disorder. Through internal dynamics, subsystem incompatibility in society is resolved and equilibrium is restored. Please also remember that Parsons in his discussion on action systems had given primacy to cultural system (value orientations) over and above personality and social system. This implied that actors' needs, motives and his action choices are largely determined by the cultural norms and values. [This resolves the motivational problem of order.] Since culture is ordered, patterned and shared by all members of society, conformity to cultural norms and values gives rise to order and equilibrium in society. In other words, for Parsons, a general **value consensus** among the members of a given society along with the **subsystem compatibility** is essential for social order and equilibrium in society. Parsons thus addresses the problem of order in society.

However his paradigm of structural-functional analysis came under severe criticism, particularly by conflict theorists. Critics argued that Parsons' paradigm has a *status quoist* bias and it is unable to account for conflict and change. So much so that Parsons' theory of social system was criticized as 'veiled status quoist ideology'.

In the light of these criticisms, Parsons, taking a cue from the advances in biology, adopted the idea of **cybernetic hierarchy of control** in his theory of social system and social change. After viewing each action system as a subsystem of a more inclusive, overall system, Parsons explored the interrelations among the four subsystems in terms of exchange of information and energy. What emerged is a hierarchy of informational controls, with culture informationally circumscribing the social system, social system informationally regulating the personality system, and personality system informationally regulating the organismic system. For example, cultural value orientations would be seen as circumscribing or limiting the range of variation in the norms of the social system; in turn, these norms, as translated into expectations for actors playing roles, would be viewed as limiting the kinds of motives and decision-making processes in personality systems; these features of the personality system would then be seen as circumscribing biochemical processes in the organism. Conversely, each system in the hierarchy is also viewed as providing the “energetic conditions” necessary for action at the next higher system. That is, the organism provides the energy necessary for the personality system, the personality system provides the energetic conditions for the social system, and the organization of personality systems into a social system provides the conditions necessary for a cultural system. Thus, the input/output relations among action systems are reciprocal, with systems exchanging information and energy. Systems high in information circumscribe the utilization of energy at the next lower system level, and each lower system provides the conditions and facilities necessary for action in the next higher system.

This scheme has been termed a *cybernetic hierarchy of control* and is diagrammed in figure below.

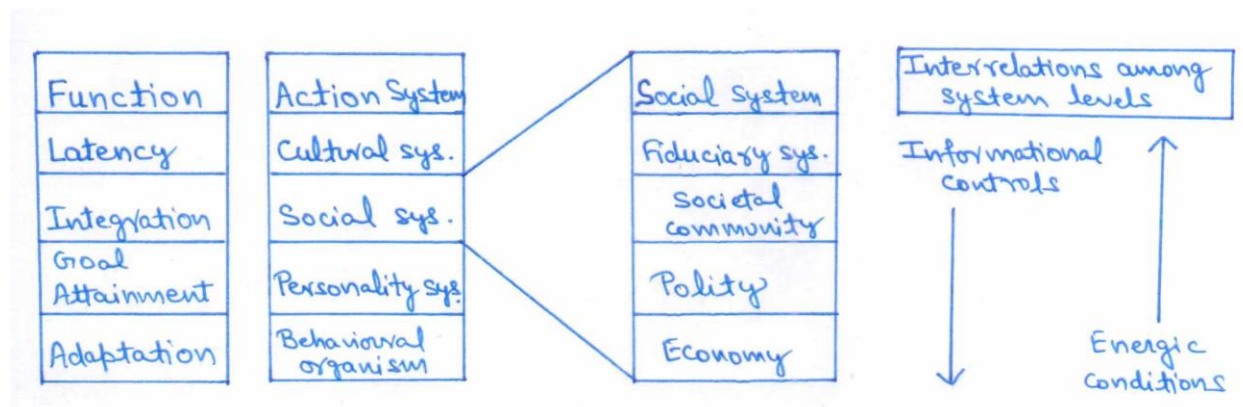


Figure: Parsons' Cybernetic Hierarchy of Control

To explain how the social subsystems and their interchange work and how the functional control is mediated, Parsons introduced his concept of *generalized symbolic media of interchange*. This idea was fostered by his studies in the fifties,

together with Neil Smelser, of the economic subsystem (Parsons and Smelser 1956), where he dealt with the function of money as a symbolic medium, carrying information on needs (as purchasing power) from potential buyers to potential sellers, thus allocating productive efforts according to purchase power in the economy. Money symbolizes economic goods. Money is a symbolic medium because the money is not worth by itself; its value is evident only for what it says symbolically in an exchange relationship. By looking in the other subsystems for analogies to money as a steering medium in the economic subsystem, he constructed three other symbolic media, characteristic of each of the other subsystems. In the polity, the medium of interchange is power, in the societal community, the medium is influence, and in the fiduciary system, the medium is value commitment.

Thus, power is seen as a generalized symbolic medium in the sense that a power position in an institutional structure implies entitlement to make certain decisions that are binding and obligatory on the collectivity and its members. Under representative democratic rule, it can be said that voters exchange their votes for expected benefits from political system, implying an obligation, enforced by law, to obedience to legitimate decisions made by government. Power symbolizes a capacity for instrumentally effective and organized, collective efforts. By analogy, influence means a capacity to bring about desired decisions in the interest of collectivities, though in this case by persuasion and appealing to loyalty on behalf of common interests, based on position in a prestige hierarchy in a societal community. Influence thus symbolizes the will to act according to principles of solidarity. Finally, the generalized medium of value commitment operates through a general conviction of legitimacy of norms and moral values, and a readiness to implement them into action. Thus, value commitment appeals to concepts of moral duty, honor, and guilt.

In the last decade of his career, Parsons became increasingly concerned with social change. Built into the cybernetic hierarchy of control is a conceptual scheme for classifying the locus of such social change. What Parsons visualized was that the information and energetic interchanges among action systems (or social systems at societal level) provide the potential for change within or between the action systems. One source of change can be excesses in either information or energy in the exchange among action systems. In turn, these excesses alter the informational or energetic outputs across systems and within any system. For example, excesses of motivation (energy) would have consequences for the enactment of roles and perhaps ultimately for the reorganization of these roles or the normative structure and eventually of cultural value orientations. Another source of change comes from an insufficient supply of either energy or information, again causing external and internal readjustments in the structure of action systems. For example, value

(informational) conflict would cause normative conflict (or anomie), which in turn would have consequences for the personality and organismic systems. Thus, concepts that point to the sources of both stasis and change are inherent in the cybernetic hierarchy of control. To augment this new macro emphasis on change, Parsons used the action scheme to analyze social evolution in historical societies. In this context, the first line of *The Structure of Social Action* is of interest: “Who now reads Spencer?” Parsons then answered the question by delineating some of the reasons why Spencer’s evolutionary doctrine had been so thoroughly rejected by 1937. Yet, after some forty years, after some forty years, Parsons chose to reexamine the issue of social evolution that he had so easily dismissed in the beginning. And in so doing, he reintroduced Spencer’s and Durkheim’s evolutionary models back into functional theory.

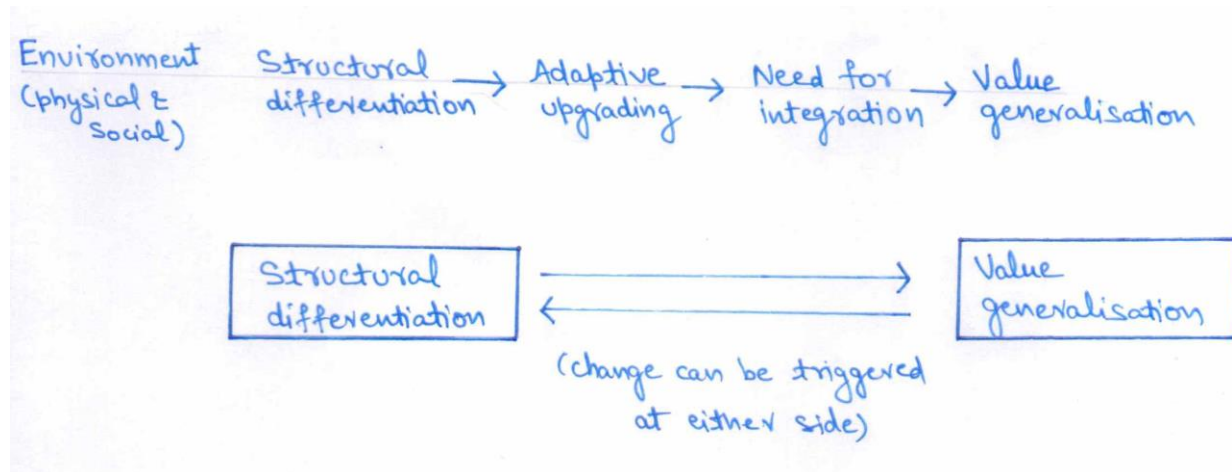
As earlier stated, Parsons’ general orientation to the study of social change was shaped by biology. To deal with this process, Parsons developed what he called “a paradigm of evolutionary change.” According to Parsons, social change involves the twin processes of differentiation and integration. The first component of that paradigm is the process of **differentiation**. Parsons assumed that any society is composed of a series of subsystems that differ in both their structure and their functional significance for the larger society. As society evolves, new subsystems are differentiated. This is not enough, however; they also must be more adaptive than earlier subsystems. Thus, the essential aspect of Parsons’ evolutionary paradigm was the idea of *adaptive upgrading*. This is a highly positive model of social change. It assumes that as society evolves, it grows generally better able to cope with its problems. In contrast, in Marxian theory social change leads to the eventual destruction of capitalist society. For this reason, among others, Parsons often is thought of as a very conservative sociological theorist. In addition, while he did deal with change, he tended to focus on the positive aspects of social change in the modern world rather than on its negative side.

Next, Parsons argued that the process of differentiation leads to a new set of problems of **integration** for society. As subsystems proliferate, the society is confronted with new problems in coordinating the operations of these units. A society undergoing evolution must move from a system of ascription to one of achievement. A wider array of skills and abilities is needed to handle the more diffuse subsystems. The generalized abilities of people must be freed from their ascriptive bonds so that they can be utilized by society. Most generally, this means that groups formerly excluded from contributing to the system must be freed for inclusion as full members of the society.

Finally, the **value system** of the society as a whole must undergo change as social structures and functions grow increasingly differentiated. However, since the

----- Dialectics IAS (Sociology) -----

new system is more diverse, it is harder for the value system to encompass it. Thus a more differentiated society requires a value system that is “couched at a higher level of generality in order to legitimize the wider variety of goals and functions of its subunits”. However, this process of generalization of values often does not proceed smoothly as it meets resistance from groups committed to their own narrow value systems.



He further argues that evolution proceeds through a variety of cycles, but no general process affects all societies equally. Some societies may foster evolution, whereas others may “be so beset with internal conflicts or other handicaps” that they impede the process of evolution, or they may even “deteriorate”. What most interested Parsons were those societies in which developmental “breakthroughs” (**evolutionary universals**) occur, since he believed that once they occurred, the process of evolution would follow his general evolutionary model. Although Parsons conceived of evolution as occurring in stages, he was careful to avoid a unilinear evolutionary theory: “We do not conceive societal evolution to be either a continuous or a simple linear process, but we can distinguish between broad levels of advancement without overlooking the considerable variability found in each”. Making it clear that he was simplifying matters, Parsons distinguished three broad evolutionary stages—primitive, archaic and modern. Characteristically, he differentiated among these stages primarily on the basis of cultural dimensions. The crucial development in the transition from primitive to archaic is the development of language, primarily written language. The key development in the shift from archaic to modern is “the institutionalized codes of normative order,” or law. [Please note that in his theory of social change, Parsons uses the concept of ‘evolutionary universals’ – “any organizational development sufficiently important to further evolution that rather than emerging only once is likely to be hit upon by various systems operating under different conditions”.]

One particular point is worth underscoring here: Parsons turned to evolutionary theory, at least in part, because he was accused of being unable to deal with social change. However, his analysis of evolution is not in terms of process; rather, it is an attempt to “order structural types and relate them sequentially”. This is comparative structural analysis, not really a study of the processes of social change. Thus, even when he was supposed to be looking at change, Parsons remained committed to the study of structures and functions.

Parsons: An Assessment

Parsons was one of the first iconic figures in American sociology. He was instrumental in developing Harvard University’s Sociology (then called Social Relations) Department into one of the top-ranked in the world. His theoretical formulations were influential not only within sociology, but throughout the social sciences, often associated with conservative political ideologies and free market capitalism.

Parsons’ later work focused on a new theoretical synthesis around four functions common to all systems of action, from the behavioral to the cultural, and a set of symbolic media that enable communication across them. However, his attempt to structure the world of action according to only four concepts was difficult to accept for many American sociologists, who were at that time retreating from the grand pretensions of the 1960s to a more empirical, grounded approach. Thus, Parsons’ influence waned rapidly in the U.S. after 1970. The most prominent attempt to revive Parsonian thinking, under the rubric “neofunctionalism,” was made by sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, working at Yale University.

Parsons is at least partially responsible for Max Weber’s popularity in the English speaking world, as he translated and compiled a number of Weber’s key ideas. The impact of Parsons’ work is also evidenced through his students at Harvard, of whom some of the most notable included Robert K. Merton and Kingsley Davis.

Parsons by 1950s to 1970s was the most influential sociologist in America. Parsons alongwith R.K. Merton provided a refreshing break from the over-empiricism tradition of Chicago school and contributed to its decline. Parsons’ achievements lie in the fact that he made a successful break with the empiricist tradition of American sociology. He started with the ambitious objective of synthesising disparate elements into a single conceptual structure for the whole of sociology which would also serve to integrate all other social sciences. Constituent elements of this theoretical system were drawn from British utilitarian economics,

French positivism and German historicism. While such an enterprise provided a corrective to over empiricism sociology, his theoretical model became too grand to be of any empirical value. By 1960s and 1970s criticisms against Parsons started mounting.

In his theory of social action, Parsons wanted to harmonize idealists with positivists but in his later works he ended up subordinating agency to structure. He initially gave importance to individual meanings and motives but later restricted his study of social action only to the extent it is shaped by culture. His whole analysis is based upon an overly-socialized conception of man, thus subordinating voluntarism to culture.

Responding to the Structure-Agency debate, Anthony Giddens introduced the concept of “structuration.” Anthony Giddens argues that society constrains as well as enables the individual at the same time. Thus, for Giddens, structuration is a process. Parsons’ theory failed on this account. Parsons completely subordinated the individual (agency) to culture (structure). Parsons’ theory is suitable only for macro analysis as it takes into account only the patterned aspects of social reality. Parsons’ theory is not suitable for micro sociological analysis. Thus in response to this lacuna of Parsons’ theory, various micro sociological traditions emerged which gave more importance to the subjective dimension of the individual’s behaviour, his unique meanings and motives, such as, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, etc.

Parsons was criticized by his contemporary, C. Wright Mills (1916-62), for his grand theory. Mills believed that a grand theory was not based on fact but was the product of sociologists attempting to impose their will and interpretation upon data. Mills’ influential book, *The Sociological Imagination*, was highly critical of the Parsonian approach, and recommended that it should be replaced by a much more bottom-up style of social research. Mills’ book certainly hastened the dramatic fall in the popularity of Parsons’ work during the 1970s and prefigured a new trend in American and British sociology at this time, which was pretty much to avoid looking for ‘the bigger picture’ altogether. Whatever ‘the whole’ is, the general presumption has been that its discovery no longer provides the point of departure for the research process. The ground workers of the social research no longer felt they needed to justify their activities in terms of some grandiose theoretical project. This separation between theory work and grounded research has largely remained in place.

Taking to heart Weber’s observation that social research is inherently selective and partial, and that there are whole areas of personal and subjective experience about which it is extremely difficult to give a coherent account, social

theorists adopted the view that having a few pieces of the puzzle, especially if they can be related to a few others, is enough to be going on with. There is plenty of room for theorising at a relatively moderate level of abstraction ('middle range theory') without necessarily having to fit this into a grand scheme at all.

Merton questioned the theory building strategy of Parsons. He criticised Parsons' theory as premature, sterile and motivated by extra-scientific considerations. According to Merton, "a theory is a clearly formulated generalisation between specific variables". He argued that a theory can be productive when while being a general theory it is specific enough to produce a testable hypothesis. The most important criterion of a testable hypothesis is its potential falsifiability. Merton argued that Parsons' theory is too general that it cannot be falsified.

According to Merton, a truly scientific theory should be a grounded theory, that is, it must grow out of the empirical research. Merton argued that generalisation is the part of theory building in sociology but it should be limited generalisation unlike Parsons' universalistic generalisation. Merton suggested Middle Range Theories for limited generalisation in response to Parsons' universal and grand theory. Merton argued that social scientists should only aspire for limited generalisations (MRT) at the present stage of development of sociology.

In an attempt to base his theory on fact, Parsons traced societal development through history. He explored three stages of evolution: 1) "primitive", 2) "archaic" and 3) "modern" (where he defined archaic societies as having knowledge of writing and modern societies as knowledge of law). Viewing Western civilization as the pinnacle of modern society, Parsons declared the United States as the most dynamically developed society, and for this, he was attacked as an ethnocentrist.

In Parsons' theory, societal evolution parallels biological evolution, with modern societies evidencing greater "generalized adaptive capacity" than earlier ones. He postulated that all social systems tend toward a state of equilibrium, although never actually reaching a perfectly equilibrated state. However, his critics, particularly those like Mills who favoured the Marxist approach, maintained that the basic tendencies in social and cultural systems are toward social change rather than toward equilibrium. Critics argue that he has shown too much of a preoccupation with order and equilibrium. This has rendered his theory status-quo oriented. Social conflict and social change have not been given adequate importance in this scheme. As a result, Parsons' theory of social system is sometimes criticised as a veiled status quoist ideology.

Further, Parsons's notion of social system which was based on organismic analogy and its self-equilibrating tendency was also criticised. Critics argued that Parsons' idea of social system and its comparison with biological organism is flawed and is only a logical assumption. Organismic system might be self-equilibrating but not necessarily the social systems. Parsons didn't account for social pathology, conflict, etc. His theory is suitable only for the analysis of large and stable social systems like America, Scandinavian countries, etc. Parsons' theory fails to account for the developments taking place in third world countries of Asia and Africa which are marked with chaos and conflict. Parsons' assumptions were criticised as unscientific as they could not be empirically verified.

Parsons is credited with reviving as well as refining the evolutionary theory of social change. In his neo-evolutionary theory of social change he discarded some dogmas of the classical social evolutionism. Parsons incorporated the idea of diffusion as a source of social change and proposed a multi linear theory of social change. But critics argue that Parsons' theory of social change is inadequate as it does not take into account the process dimension of social change.

Please note that Neo-evolutionism is concerned with long-term, directional, evolutionary social change and with the regular patterns of development that may be seen in unrelated, widely separated cultures. Neo-evolutionism is objective and simply descriptive, eliminating any references to a moral or cultural system of values. Its theories are based on empirical evidence from fields such as archeology, paleontology, and historiography. While the 19th century evolutionism explained how culture develops by giving general principles of its evolutionary process, it was dismissed by Historical Particularism as unscientific in the early 20th century. It was the neo-evolutionary thinkers who brought back evolutionary thought and developed it to be acceptable to contemporary anthropology.

The neo-evolutionism discards many ideas of classical social evolutionism, namely that of social progress, so dominant in previous sociology evolution-related theories. The neo-evolutionism discards the determinism argument and introduces probability, arguing that accidents and free will have much impact on the process of social evolution. It also supports the counterfactual history – asking 'what if' and considering different possible paths that social evolution may (or might have) taken, and thus allows for the fact that various cultures may develop in different ways, some skipping entire stages others have passed through. The neo-evolutionism stresses the importance of empirical evidence. While 19th century evolutionism used value judgment and assumptions for interpreting data,

the neo-evolutionism relied on measurable information for analyzing the process of cultural evolution.

Further, Parsons' writing style was difficult to understand and he was often vague and inconsistent with key terms. Thus, although initially well received, and his work in developing the sociology department at Harvard had lasting impact on the field, Parsons' theories were severely criticized.

Despite these criticisms there is no doubt that Parsons' work constituted a major contribution to the general body of material that social theory is made of. His ideas are now part of the intellectual stuff that social theorists who came after him have inevitably had to address. Even more deliberately than this, a number of social theorists have taken on the task of trying to identify the weaknesses within Parsonian functionalism in order to move functionalist theory into its next stage, for example, Jeffrey Alexander has made a very significant contribution to the development of neo-functionalist social theory during the 1990s.

Sociology is Simple
Sociology is Scoring
provided that you
Study Sociology Systematically

Under New UPSC Regulations

Choose Your Attempt Cautiously

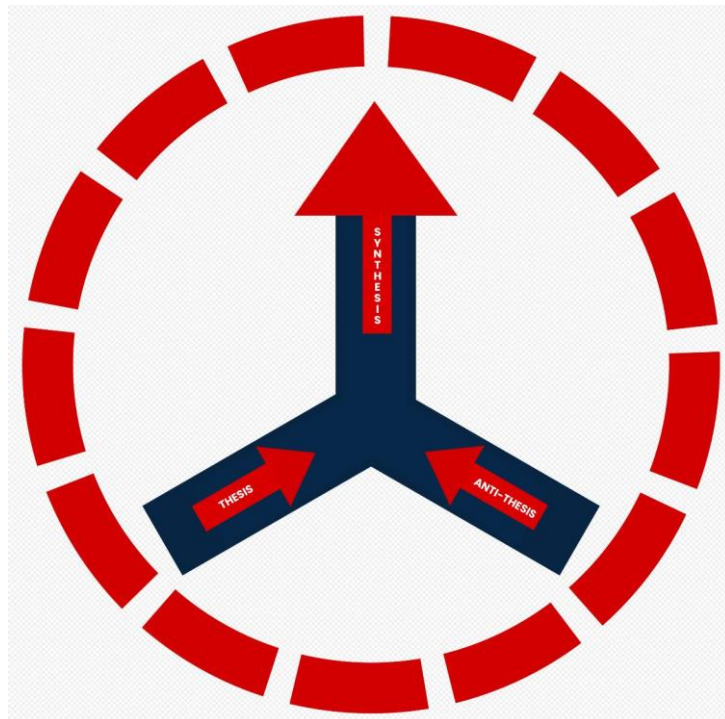
Choose Your Optional Carefully

Choose Your Test Series Wisely

Online Module I: 15 August 2026

Test Series Batches (Online): June, October and January

For counselling and admission, please email at **dialectics79@gmail.com**
or WhatsApp at **9811633903** (Messages Only)



DIALECTICS IAS

Email: dialectics79@gmail.com

Website: www.dialecticsias.com

Telegram Channel: Dialectics IAS (Sociology)