THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIETIES

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CHAPTER 1
PARSONS' THEORY OF SOCIETAL EVOLUTION

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Parsons' interest in societal evolution may have surprised some sociologists because it seems on first thought unrelated to his previous intellectual preoccupations. Actually it represents a return in a more sophisticated form to a problem that engaged him as a young man. Recall that his earliest publications were concerned with the development of capitalism (1928; 1929; 1930). In particular, he was impressed with Max Weber's interpretation of the role of religious values in the emergence of capitalism in the Christian West rather than in China or in India. His analysis of societal evolution in this book revises and extends the Weber thesis so as to make it relevant not merely to the emergence of capitalism but to the development of modern societies from the earliest beginnings of social organization. Parsons approaches this monumental task with a three-fold strategy:

1. He goes much further back in time than Weber. Since the historical record is only about five thousand years old, he relies on archeological evidence to place some societies in his scheme. For very primitive societies, he shifts to contemporary anthropological evidence—on the reasonable assumption that the simple social structure of the Murngin of Australia and the Shilluk of the Sudan tell us what human societies were like at early stages of social evolution.
2. He uses as his pivotal concept, not religious values, as Weber did, but shared symbolic systems (culture) of which religious values are only one subtype (constitutive symbols). Cognitive symbols, moral-evaluative

I am grateful to Victor Lidz and Frank Pearson for suggestions clarifying passages that would otherwise have been misleading.

symbols, and expressive-appreciative symbols are the other subtypes.

3. He formulates a theory of social change *logically* more compelling than Weber's. It provides a cybernetic model for the cultural direction of change; the model emphasizes four processes (differentiation, adaptive upgrading, inclusion, and value generalization) that clarify the ambiguous relationship between religious ideas and modernization in Weber (1964).

THE THEORY OF ACTION

Shared symbolic systems (culture) is the pivotal idea in Parsons' analysis not only of societal evolution but of human behavior generally. As early as *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) he explained what he meant by "action" and the implications of this orienting concept for understanding human behavior. By action, Parsons means the attempt of human beings to realize their symbolically defined intentions in symbolically defined environments. The definition does not sound revolutionary. In fact, it sounds as though Parsons is a symbolic interactionist in the Cooley-Mead-Thomas-Blumer tradition. It ought to; there is no important intellectual distinction between the action frame of reference and that provided by symbolic interaction. Both perspectives insist that the meaning of behavior to the participants, a meaning provided by their common interpretation of shared symbols, is essential for sociological understanding (Turner, 1974). The reason Parsons is not ordinarily thought of as a symbolic interactionist is that he has built a complex theoretical edifice on the symbolic-interactionist starting point, and it is not generally appreciated that the theory is inseparable from its point of departure.

Consider what Parsons accomplished in *The Structure of Social Action*. He demonstrated the intellectual inadequacy of two perspectives on human behavior, the positivistic perspective that denied the independent role of *values* and the idealistic perspective that denied the importance of environmental *conditions*. Parsons was reacting against purported explanations of human behavior that he considered unsuccessful, such as John Watson's behaviorist psychology (1925), an example of positivism, and Ruth Benedict's cultural determination (1934), an example of idealism. Despite Parsons, neither positivistic nor idealistic models of human behavior have disappeared, so it might be useful to point to more current illustrations of the intellectual errors that Parsons was trying to prevent. In Kinsey's surveys of American sexual behavior (1948; 1953), the basic strategy was to count the number of orgasms that a human individual produced during his or her life cycle. True, Kinsey classified orgasms in terms of the circumstances in which they occurred, e.g., whether with a member of the same sex, with the opposite sex, with a lower animal, or through self-stimulation, but he was basically uninterested in the *meaning* of the orgasm for the persons involved. As a

biologist whose original specialty was the taxonomy of the gall wasp, he assumed that the *biology* of human sexuality *explained* human sexuality. But a sociologist coming to the study of sexuality within the action frame of reference would insist that the *values* and *beliefs* of the participants in a sexual act (their definitions of the situation) must be known in order to understand their behavior adequately. Thus, heterosexual intercourse may mean to the male participant an affirmation of his masculinity, an expression of affection for his partner, an act of aggression, or a combination of these meanings. For Parsons such meanings are crucial; for Kinsey they were theoretically unimportant. Kinsey's research illustrates the positivistic error against which Parsons warned. The idealistic error can be illustrated by the attempt to explain the delinquent behavior of members of adolescent gangs entirely in terms of the cultural values of the neighborhoods in which they live (Miller, 1958). Miller, an anthropologist by training, discussed the "focal concerns" of lower-class culture—"trouble," "toughness," "smartness," "excitement," "fate," and "autonomy"—and ignored circumstantial conditions American males face in their life situations, e.g., adapting to school and later to occupational requirements.

According to Parsons, action, organized in systems and subsystems, takes place in environments. These environments include other action systems—that is, other human beings and their symbolically meaningful behavior—but also include *nonaction* environments, of which there are two. One is the physical-organic world including subhuman species and the nonsymbolic aspect of human anatomy and physiology. This is what Parsons called the *conditions* of action in *The Structure of Social Action*. These conditions must be controlled or adapted to, and, as we will see, Parsons regards the incentive to improve adaptation as the major factor in social evolution. The other nonaction environment Parsons calls "ultimate reality," a term with a metaphysical flavor. He is not referring to the supernatural so much as to the univeral tendency for societies to address symbolically the uncertainties, concerns, and tragedies of human existence that challenge the meaningfulness of social organization. In an effort to resolve enduring problems of good and evil in society, of justice and injustice, of chance and fate, men formulate the fundamental premises of their cultures; these implicit assumptions constitute the normative patterns of social action. Most theorists would not insist on referring constitutive values to a nonempirical realm, but Parsons does so because of logical considerations. Here is how he put it:

> As humans, we know the physical world *only* through the organism. Our minds have no direct experience of an external physical object unless we perceive it through physical processes and the brain processes information about it. Only in their psychologically known sense are physical objects aspects of action.

> Similar considerations apply to the environment above action—the "ultimate reality" with which we are concerned in grappling with the problems of meaning—e.g., evil and suffering and the temporal limitations of human life. Ideas in this area, as cultural objects, are symbolic representations (e.g., gods, totems, the supernatural) of the ultimate realities, but are not themselves such realities. [Parsons, 1966:8, slightly edited]

THE DIFFERENTIATION OF ACTION SYSTEMS

The concept of action is Parsons' criterion of relevance; it explains why he is interested in some human behavior and not in other behavior. In point of fact, Parsons interprets action so as to include nearly all behavior that social scientists study. Thus, the only human behavior excluded from "action" is unmotivated behavior, i.e., the circulation of the blood or the blinking of the eye. Even physiological behaviors like belching, crying, or eating are action in Parsons' sense if they are used to communicate meanings, as they usually are. And if a sex researcher like Kinsey insisted that he wished to count orgasms because for many human beings sexual intercourse does not communicate meanings any more than it does for terriers, Parsons would reply that human behavior is inescapably meaningful and that the same order of difference exists between human sexuality and terrier sexuality as between linguistic communication and barking.

So far, Parsons' theory of action does not depart from symbolic interaction theory. Where it begins to depart is in Parsons' conception of the *differentiation* of action systems. What does he mean by the differentiation of action systems? On what he calls the level of the "general theory of action," he means that behavior tends to have four distinct, symbolically organized emphases: (1) a search for psychic satisfactions, (2) an interest in decoding symbolic meanings, (3) a need to adapt to the physical-organic environment, and (4) an attempt to relate to other members of the human species. These four tendencies may not seem controversial in the form I have stated them, but when Parsons gives them the descriptive label he does—personality systems, cultural systems, behavioral organisms, and social systems—some sociologists become uneasy. They fear that Parsons may be reifying these analytical constructs. They cannot see how a cultural system can exist without personality systems or social systems, not to mention behavioral organisms.

Parsons would agree; he denies explicitly that one of these four action systems can exist without the others. They are simply the four directions in which meaningful human behavior tends to go. But as Figure 1 tries to suggest, Parsons does not believe that these tendencies are present to the same extent in all societies. One aspect of his theory of social evolution—or "action evolution," as he has recently termed it—is that

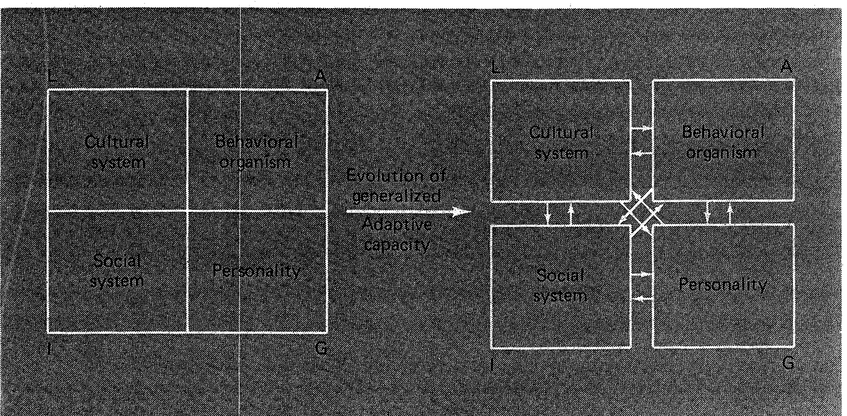

Figure 1. The differentiation of the general action system

differentiating tendencies are relatively undeveloped in primitive social organization, while in modern societies they have evolved much further. Take cultural systems as an example. Parsons would hold that all societies from the most primitive to the most advanced face the problem of interpreting the world, the people in it, and their activities, e.g., birth, death, dancing, and worship. In modern societies, however, cultures and subcultures have developed so much further and in so many specialized directions that they appear to be self-contained. Ogburn (1922) based his theory of social change on the seemingly uncontrollable proliferation of technological innovations. Actually, technological innovations grow at a compound rate in modern societies, not because inventions breed inventions by automatic reproduction but because people are more likely to think of new technological relationships when the scientific and technological base is large than when it is small. In the same way, *sociology* as a cultural system—a system of ideas about the structures of and the processes in social systems—now has a momentum of its own. Sociology could not continue as a functioning cultural system without a host society containing personalities and their associated behavioral organisms. Nevertheless, in modern society, sociology is sufficiently differentiated as to have much greater autonomy than do cultural systems among the Murngin.

Consider one implication of the differentiation of the general action system: Cultures and personalities can be critical of their host societies in a way that is literally unimaginable with less differentiation. In modern societies, personality systems function *relatively* autonomously vis-à-vis social, cultural, and even organistic systems; this is Parsons' way of describing the individualism of Western societies. Modern individualism is

purchased at a price: a more problematic relationship between the personality system and the cultural system and between the social system and the cultural system. In modern societies there is less likelihood, as contrasted with more primitive social organization, that inputs of meaning from the cultural system will give personalities a sense of identity and direction and give legitimation to social systems. To put the same point another way, the differentiation of the general action system requires complex integrative processes. Identity crises and anomie are symptoms of malintegration between these differentiated action systems.

As Figure 1 makes clear, Parsons regards social evolution on the general action level as consisting of the increasing differentiation of personality systems, cultural systems, social systems, and the behavioral organisms *from one another*. But this is only part of his theory of action evolution, indeed a part only incidentally discussed in this book. His main interest is in the differentiating process *within societies*—societies being the most nearly self-sufficient type of social system vis-à-vis their environments. The differentiating process *within* societies consists of increasing specialized functioning parallel to that which characterizes the general action system. Parallel to the increased autonomy of the cultural system is the more clearly differentiated pattern-maintenance system (one aspect of which is the separation of the family as a socializing agency from the economic and political participations of individual members). Parallel to the increased autonomy of the personality is the more distinct polity. Parallel to the increased autonomy of the behavioral organism is the more distinct economy. Parallel to the increased autonomy of social systems generally and societies in particular is the greater specialization of an integrative subsystem—what Parsons calls the societal community—with responsibility for maintaining the solidarity of society. Figure 2 attempts to represent this differentiation of societal subsystems.

WHAT IS A SOCIETY?

At this point it is useful to explain more fully Parsons' conception of a society. Recall that he regards a social system as one of four analytically distinct aspects of human behavior—specifically the one concerned with the coordination of mutually responding actors with one another. Most social systems—local communities, schools, firms, families—are not societies but *subsystems* of a society. He defines a society as a special type of social system, one characterized by the highest level of *self-sufficiency in relation to its environments*, including environing social systems. Self-sufficiency in relationship to environments means that, although the society is dependent on its environments, it is *less* at the mercy of its environments than are most social systems. That is to say, a society can

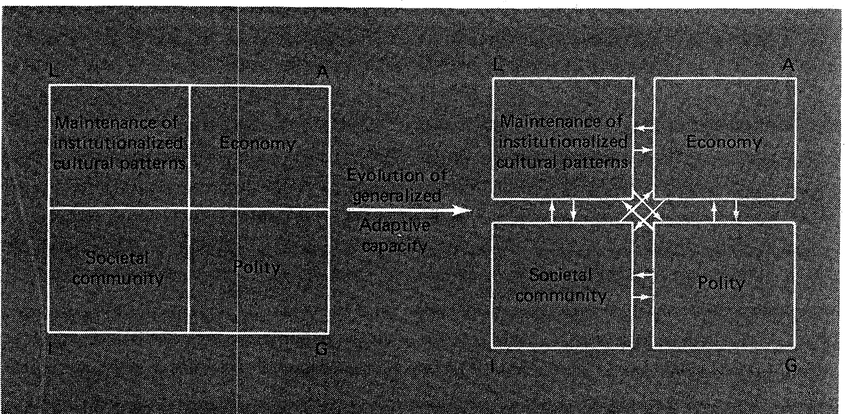

Figure 2. The differentiation of society

control interchanges with its environments fairly successfully so as to promote societal functioning—and thereby societal survival. Consider this relative autonomy in relation to each of the various environments of a society in turn.

1. *The physical-organic environment,* being the source of the resources which the society can utilize to satisfy the needs of its members, must be controlled or adapted to. Self-sufficiency with respect to the physical-organic environment implies sufficient control over the economic-technological complex so that, for example, food and shelter can be obtained. A family is less self-sufficient with respect to the food and shelter supply than is American society as a whole.

2. The *personalities* of members of the society are also part of its environment in the sense that the society must be able to count on its members to contribute to societal functioning. Just as the society must maintain some control over the physical-organic environment through technology, so it must maintain some control over the personalities of its members so that most personalities can assume roles in the society without undue strain. The society could not be considered self-sufficient with respect to environing personalities if the majority of its personalities were radically alienated. All societies guarantee a favorable personality environment by shaping personalities (largely in the family) through the socialization process. As a result of socialization, personalities learn adequate motivation for participating in socially valued patterns of action, and these internalized norms help to solve the problem of social order. Parsons assumes that American society is more self-sufficient with respect to its

constituent personalities than are smaller social systems like schools or business firms.

3. The *symbolic environment of a society* (cultural systems) includes empirical knowledge, expressive symbol systems, religious ideas and practices that define the society's collective identity, and conceptions of the desirable (values). Self-sufficiency with regard to the symbolic environment means that the institutions of the society are legitimated by the cultural system. Enough members of the society have made commitments to the values and other symbols of the culture so that a sociological observer could infer a sufficient level of consensus on the legitimacy of institutions. Of course, no social system is self-legitimating; all social systems must appeal for legitimation of their norms to the larger culture. But a *society* is in a stronger position to obtain legitimation than more limited social systems because the cultural elements embodied in its institutions are routinely internalized in personalities in the course of socialization.

4. The *social environment* of society includes all the environing social systems with which it must deal. Other societies are obviously part of the social environment, but the social environment of a society is far more inclusive. Some social systems cut across societies (such as the organization known as the Roman Catholic Church), and other social systems, though fully included within a society, must be adapted to, for example, the millions of individual families, schools, governmental organizations, and voluntary associations of American society. Self-sufficiency with regard to the social environment means (1) that clear boundaries exist defining who is a member of the society and who is not and (2) that greater solidarity exists among members than between members and nonmembers. These criteria, while not so difficult for a small social system to fulfill, are extremely difficult to fulfill on a large scale. That is why problems in the "societal community"—Parsons' term for the fulfillment of these two conditions—are often the most serious problems faced by a society.

THE CYBERNETIC HIERARCHY

In a weak moment Parsons called himself a cultural determinist (1966: 113). By this he does not mean that cultural developments are the only or even the main source of social change. Rather he means that the conditions of action set limits but do not thereby give *direction* to change; direction is given by cultural values. The concept of the cybernetic hierarchy represents Parsons' return to the relationship between values and conditions. He grappled with this intellectual problem in *The Structure of Social Action,* but this time he achieves a more elegant solution. As Figure 3 shows diagramatically, he conceives of a hierarchy of

value guidance leading down from the cultural system into the society by way of the pattern-maintenance subsystem, then into the societal community, the polity, the economy, then out of the society into the personality system, and finally into the behavioral organism. Thus, the adaptive needs of the behavorial organism vis-à-vis the physical-organic environment must be solved; food and clothing are necessary. But the personality system and the values incorporated in it control the behavioral organism in the sense that the learned predispositions of the personality direct the organism to steak or to rattlesnake meat. Higher than the personality system in the cybernetic hierarchy is the social system (society) where the search of a multiplicity of personalities for gratifications must be coordinated. Within society, the economy directs personalities by allocating resources for gratifying some desires but not others. The polity is superordinate to the economy in the cybernetic hierarchy because collective goals must take precedence in a society over individual goals. The societal community is in turn superordinate to the polity because the preservation of solidarity is a paramount collective goal. Superordinate to the societal community is what Parsons has recently begun to call the fiduciary subsytem, the subsystem of society concerned with the maintenance of institutionalized cultural patterns. In this subsystem are processes of socializing motivation for role playing through teaching the norms and values of the society. Finally, since the values institutionalized in the role structure are not self-legitimizing, the cultural system stands higher in the cybernetic hierarchy than the fiduciary subsystem of the society.

The theory of the cybernetic hierarchy is not without its intellectual problems; some of the assumptions as to what controls what are arguable. But the theory of cybernetic control is not a theory of cultural determinism in the same sense as Ruth Benedict's theory of cultural patterning. The difference lies in the role of conditioning factors in Parsons' thinking. As he shows in his detailed examination of societies, Parsons does not treat social evolution as inevitable. In order for differentiation to occur, crucial problems must be solved, and these problems emerge at every level, even the sub-action level, e.g., an epidemic or an Ice Age. An adequate solution to a problem posing an obstacle to further evolution is not necessarily discovered. If it is not found, the society does not evolve further; it may disintegrate as Greece and ancient Israel did. If, however, a solution is discovered, the direction in which the solution proceeds is provided by controlling factors on higher levels of the cybernetic hierarchy. Thus Parsons explains the ultimate failure of the Roman Empire in terms of its inability "to develop a dynamic religious system which could legitimate and strengthen the enormously expanded societal community" (1966:92). Detailed knowledge of the societies about which Parsons writes is necessary to assess the extent to which his theoretical framework illuminates the responses of societies to challenging problems.