

control of their environments than others. Growth in ability to control their environments is, for Parsons, the explanation of societal evolution. When Parsons talks about increased "generalized adaptive capacity," he means increased societal control over their environments. However, Parsons does more than *define* the principle governing societal evolution. He attempts to identify the major evolutionary spurts. Each spurt forward constituted a solution to an environmental problem of some kind. Or, to put it another way, each solution marked an evolutionary breakthrough. Parsons identifies the breakthroughs partly on the basis of theoretical analysis of functional requirements of societies and partly through an examination of archeological, anthropological, and historical evidence (Parsons, 1964).

One of the first breakthroughs, according to Parsons, is the emergence of a system of social stratification. Stratification? Why should the division of society into more privileged and less privileged strata increase its "generalized adaptive capacity"? Parsons' answer to this question is mainly theoretical. A society organized in terms of a seamless web of kinship but not integrated in hierarchical terms has certain limitations in utilizing environmental resources. No member has sufficient prestige, including prestige based on universalistically assessed abilities (merit), to claim leadership in dealing with a military threat or a national disaster. And even if a charismatic member with superior ability attempted to provide leadership, he could not command the resources needed to carry out the new initiatives. In short, in a society where kinship is the paramount organizational principle, kinship considerations intrude into every allocation of resources.

Parsons is calling attention to an aspect of stratification that is usually forgotten—even by experts in the field of stratification—namely, that stratification increases mobility of human and nonhuman resources over the level of mobility possible in a system of kinship ascription. For those egalitarians who might object that resource mobility is purchased at too high a price, Parsons would answer that he is not talking about social "progress," which must be judged in terms of the values of the observer, but of social evolution, which is a matter of whether generalized adaptive capacity has increased or not. Thus, in the course of explicating an early breakthrough, Parsons begins to differentiate his theory of societal evolution from the nineteenth-century theories that failed to distinguish between scientific and valuational questions.

As soon as social stratification emerges, that is, as soon as social status is based on considerations that go beyond biological relatedness (kinship), the centralization of responsibility for economic, religious, or political activities becomes possible. But before such centralization actually occurs, a secondary evolutionary breakthrough is necessary: *explicit cultural legitimation*. "Explicit cultural legitimation" means sufficient differentiation

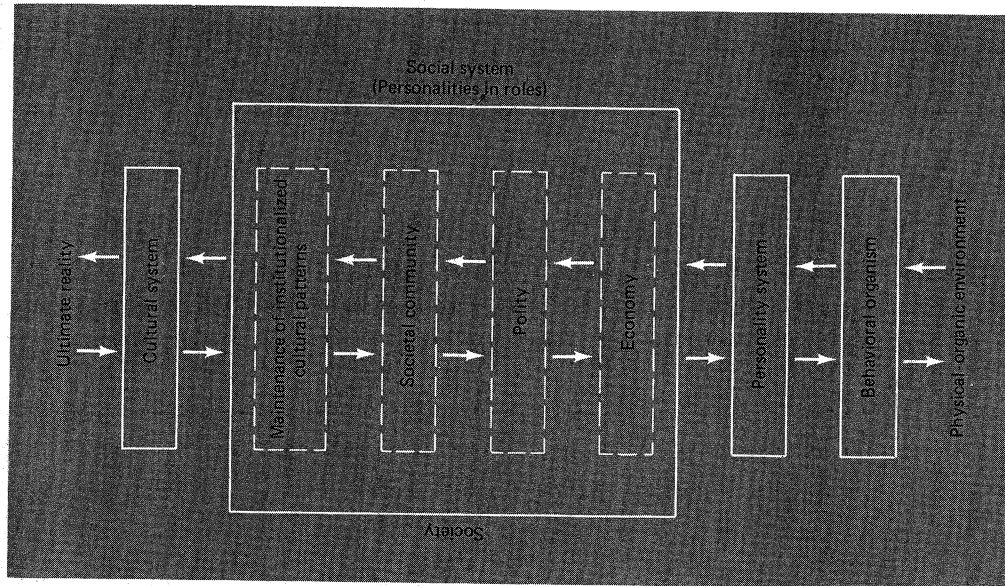


Figure 3. The cybernetic hierarchy

**EVOLUTIONARY BREAKTHROUGHS**

Although a society has, by definition, greater control over its environments than other social systems, some societies are more effectively in

of the cultural system from the society so that the cultural system can justify societal asymmetries of authority and prestige. This may not seem like much of a breakthrough because we are so familiar with differentiated cultural and social systems. But Parsons argues that in primitive societies the social and cultural aspects of action are closely linked. Until that link is broken by legitimizing myths that account for differential wealth, prestige, and power, evolutionary development must mark time. Note that Parsons does not consider this cultural breakthrough inevitable. But if evolution is to proceed further, explicit cultural legitimation must occur. When it *does* occur, Parsons argues that it occurs in conjunction with the development of a written language. At this point Parsons begins to speak of "intermediate societies" instead of "primitive societies":

*Written language*, the focus of the development out of primitiveness, increases differentiation between the social and cultural systems and extends the control of the latter. The symbolic contents of a culture can, with writing, be embodied in forms independent of concrete interaction contexts. This makes possible wider cultural diffusion, both in space (e.g., relative to populations) and in time. It initiates the phenomenon of broadcasting—i.e., the orientation of messages to undefined audiences, to whoever is literate in the language and comes across the document. There is no inherent time limitation on the relevance of a message. Only literate cultures can have a *history* in the sense of an awareness, based on documentary evidence, of past events beyond the memories of living persons and the vague hearsay of oral traditions. . . .

Written language and the availability of documents act to stabilize many social relations. For example, the terms of a contractual agreement need not depend on the fallible memories of the parties or witnesses but can be written and made available for verification as need arises. Such stability is a condition for increasing the extent of many components of social organization. At the same time, writing is a source of flexibility and an opportunity for innovation. However frequently classical documents have provided the basis for a rigid traditionalism, the availability of officially correct documents makes possible critical analysis of relevant cultural issues. If the document is normative for some sphere of action, it poses the problem of how, in practical situations, its injunctions may actually be fulfilled. Written documents form a basis for a *cumulative* cultural development; they permit the *differences* introduced by an innovation to be defined more precisely than by oral tradition alone. In short, written language furthers the *independence* of the cultural system from the more conditional exigencies of the society. [Parsons, 1966: 26-27, slightly edited]

Parsons considers a variety of societies "intermediate": ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, India, the Islamic empires, Rome. Like Weber, he wants to know why these societies were, despite undeniable development on the evolutionary scale, qualitatively different from modern societies. What crucial breakthroughs did they fail to make? Although he describes several necessary breakthroughs—the institutionalization of the authority of office, the use of market mechanisms for mobilizing re-

sources, a generalized legal order, and the democratic association (Parsons, 1964)—he seems to consider the development of a generalized legal order as the special hallmark of modernity:

Law furthers the independence of the normative components of the societal structure from the exigencies of political and economic interests and from the personal, organic, and physical-environmental factors operating through them. It is the *kind* of law, the institutionalization of which marks the transition from intermediate to modern societies, that poses the theoretical problem. Its organization must be *generalized* according to universalistic principles. This requirement precludes such imposing systems as the Talmudic law or that of traditional Islam from being classed as modern law. They lack the generality which Weber called *formal rationality*. Modern legal systems must also emphasize the factor of *procedure*, as distinguished from substantive precepts and standards. Only on the basis of procedural primacy can the system cope with a variety of changing circumstances and cases without prior commitment to specific solutions. [Parsons, 1966:27, slightly edited]

Ancient Greece and ancient Israel were the twin sources of a generalized legal order—even though both failed to capitalize on their invention because historical circumstances put them out of business as functioning societies. They provided a cultural legacy that was necessary if modern societies were to evolve—Parsons calls them "seed-bed" societies—but the legacy was not incorporated into an institutional structure of a going society until more than a thousand years later. Thus Parsons once again calls attention to the interplay between conditioning circumstances and cultural direction; he does not regard the evolutionary process as inexorable. What was the cultural seed that Greece and Israel planted? It was the idea of a *moral order*. In the Israelite case the moral order was thought of as a divine mandate; the Greek conception was more secular; the order existed in nature. But both enunciated universalistic principles that transcended vested interests, including political interests, and particularisms, including the kinship and ethnic particularisms, that interfere with the emergence of a principled normative order. According to Parsons, the English common law seized upon this universalistic idea and thereby opened up the possibility of modernity.

A generalized legal system is an integrated system of universalistic norms, applicable to the society as a whole rather than to a few functional or segmental sections, highly generalized in terms of principles and standards, and relatively independent of both the religious agencies that legitimize the normative order of the society and vested interests in the operative sector, particularly in government. [Parsons, 1964:35f]

Consider where Parsons has taken us so far. His account of the emergence of social stratification, of explicit cultural legitimation, and of a generalized legal system is simultaneously an account of the subordina-

tion of ascription and particularism as organizing principles of society to achievement and universalism. His examination of the other evolutionary breakthroughs proceeds in the same general direction. Take his discussion of money and the market system. Every society must mobilize human and nonhuman resources to deal with its responsibilities. There are only three ways to do this. One is political coercion: a military draft or the requisition of property by the state. The second is appeal to particularistic loyalties—help to one's family, one's neighbors, one's countrymen. The third is to go into the marketplace with a generalized inducement (money) and bid for whatever resources are needed. The disadvantage of non-market techniques for mobilizing resources is that they tend to produce cleavages in the society. Coercion is resented—by some persons at any rate. Appeals to particularistic loyalties force a choice between solidarities, all of which may be important; the other side of the loyalty coin is possible *dis*loyalty to other groups. The market, on the other hand, emancipates resources from ascriptive and particularistic roots; resources can be mobilized for instrumental purposes without pulling apart the fabric of community. Thus, Parsons argues that, other things being equal, a society with a monetary system for mobilizing resources through markets has greater generalized adaptive capacity than a society having only non-market methods of mobilizing resources.

He uses similar reasoning to explain why the institutionalization of the authority of *office* is another breakthrough in the direction of modernity. "Office implies the differentiation of the role of the incumbent from a person's other role involvements, above all from his kinship roles" (Parsons, 1964:347). Every society allocates rights to make decisions on behalf of collectivities or on behalf of the ultimate collectivity, society itself. These rights to make binding decisions on behalf of collectivities is what is meant by "authority." But in pre-modern societies authority is more often *ascribed* on the basis of biological or relational factors irrelevant to the use of that authority in the interest of effective attainment of societal goals. A king is king because his father was king. The concept of office frees authority from this ascriptive limitation. Parsons, like Weber before him, swims against the ideological current that decries bureaucratic inefficiency. Parsons maintains that administrative bureaucracies, institutionalizing as they do the authority of office, are potentially *more* effective than pre-modern types of authority.

When capacity to carry out large-scale organized operations is important, e.g., military operations with mass forces, water control, tax administration, policing of large and heterogeneous populations, and productive enterprises requiring large capital investment and much manpower, the unit that commands effective bureaucratic organization is inherently superior to one that does not. . . . it is built on further specializations ensuing from the broad

emancipation that stratification and specialized legitimation make possible. [Parsons, 1964:349]

The development of authority of office is an evolutionary breakthrough because it makes possible a more flexible use of power. Flexibility in the mobilization of power doesn't *necessarily* imply greater adaptive capacity for the society, but other things being equal, it tends to produce this result by opening political opportunities up to a larger number of potential leaders. Another way of making this same point is to say that institutionalization of the authority of office created fluid symbolic power systems, which had not existed before. Parsons puts it this way to emphasize the analogy between power and money (as symbolic media of interchange among role players in modern societies). Unfortunately, though, this creates some confusion among readers not aware of the special definitions that Parsons gives to power and authority (1963a; 1963b). Authority is an aspect of a status; it is the *right* to use power. Power itself circulates in modern societies; it is dynamic, as contrasted with authority, which is static. The process of voting involves a transfer of power; the *right* to vote as a method of selecting leadership is part of the definition of political authority.

These definitions are rather different from traditional treatments of power and authority in the sociological literature. But, taken together with the other elements in his approach, they help to explain why Parsons regards the *democratic polity* as an evolutionary breakthrough also. First, Parsons emphasizes the *collective* aspects of power, the opportunity power gives to accomplish something important on behalf of society, rather than the *distributive* aspect of power, the opportunity power gives individual A to oppress individual B. Obviously, the theorist who discusses power in the benign terms of effective attainment of societal goals will talk past the theorist worried about the possibility that, to use the modern idiom, "the strong will screw the weak." Related to *this* point is a second; Parsons refuses to treat power as *either* coercive *or* consensual; he insists that it is *both*. This insistence is related to a problem Parsons wrestled with in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937:460-470), namely, the Durkheimian characterization of a social fact as "exterior" and "constraining" despite the voluntary aspect of it on the aggregative level. A trivial example will make this point clear. If I ask a male undergraduate why he wears trousers instead of a kilt or a dress, he will tell me that he has no effective choice, that the social disapproval that he would evoke if he wore a kilt or a dress would make that an unbearable alternative. If I ask him further whether he felt *oppressed* when he put on his pants that morning, he will say that he never thought about it; his own inclinations and the social rules happen to coincide. But they didn't just *happen* to coincide, Parsons tells us. What on the *collective* level is a *voluntary* commitment to certain

norms, e.g., wearing trousers, for some individuals may be coerced consent. Whether it is coercive or not depends on the degree to which they share a normative consensus prescribing trousers for males. Several years ago Swedish society illustrated the relationship between these levels by changing at one moment of one day from driving on the left hand of the street to driving on the right. The collective commitment to make this change took a long time to make. Sweden is a democratic country, and the change not only ran counter to existing habits; it cost a great deal of taxpayers' money to put into effect. Nevertheless, once the political process produced this collective decision, the individual who continued to drive on the left would thereafter be coerced by the police—just as right-lane drivers had been coerced before.

This distinction between the individual and the collective levels explains why power is simultaneously consensual and coercive. On the individual level it is sometimes coercive. By definition, power wielders have the right (and the obligation) to impose negative sanctions in order to enforce binding decisions. If American society has collectively agreed on a 55-mile-per-hour speed limit and I exceed it for idiosyncratic reasons, I may legitimately be coerced. Furthermore, however much I dislike receiving a ticket for speeding from a policeman, on one level I may even agree that I deserve it. What does all this have to do with Parsons' contention that the democratic polity is another evolutionary breakthrough? Parsons contends that the larger and more complex a society, the more necessary it is to legitimate its universalistic legal order. Furthermore, the democratic polity, through its elective leadership and its fully enfranchised membership, links the consensual and coercive aspects of power more closely together than is likely in other types of political structure. If Parsons is correct, the democratic polity potentially has greater generalized adaptive capacity because its four structural features make possible the achievement of a broadly-based consensus. These four features are as follows:

1. *Electing leaders by popular vote.* Abiding by the verdict of the electorate means dispersing power widely in the society. An election is an institutionalized mechanism for collecting the power that has been dispersed. Those skeptical about the dispersal of power in democratic polities argue that elections are meaningless because a single vote counts so little. To this, Parsons responds that a little power is power just as a little money is money. But the real issue is whether or not leaders are actually chosen by an electoral process. Clearly, they are not chosen in this way in the Soviet Union despite public rituals that resemble democratic elections. Equally clearly, high officials are selected for office in countries like the United States, Great Britain, Sweden, Holland, France, Japan.
2. *Institutionalizing an opportunity for the participation of a large proportion of the adult population in collective decision making.* The

significance of the franchise, according to Parsons, is that it encourages participation not only in the choice of leaders but even in the selection of specific policies. From this point of view, higher voter turnout is an expression of involvement in the decision-making process and failure to participate in a particular election may mean dissatisfaction with all the candidates. However, it may also mean that the nonvoter was reasonably satisfied with the candidate and policy options offered and therefore did not take the trouble to vote. The democratic election offers an opportunity to participate; it is the opportunity that is important for a sense of involvement, not necessarily the actual vote.

3. *Institutionalizing procedural rules for the voting process, for determining its outcome, and for campaigning for votes by candidates for election.* Such procedural rules protect the integrity of the voting process, thereby giving voters confidence that the competition for support is conducted fairly.

4. *Institutionalizing an approximation to voluntary participation in the polity.* Actually, even in democratic polities, citizenship is ascribed and therefore not as fully voluntary as it is in voluntary associations of persons linked only by their common interests, e.g., a tennis club or a religious sect. But unlike the situation in totalitarian societies, where voting is a civic ritual in which the citizen is obliged to participate, the individual is permitted to participate or not participate in the democratic political process, as he wishes. Parsons considers the invention of the democratic polity—he calls this invention the “democratic revolution”—another evolutionary breakthrough. Although undemocratic political forms can organize and legitimate authority and power, the democratic polity is potentially more effective at mediating the consensual aspect of power. Certainly those who have been socialized in a democratic polity are tempted to think so. Is Parsons merely rationalizing his preferences for a democratic society by arguing that democratic polities have greater generalized adaptive capacity? Given the political alienation that seems to afflict democratic societies, the distrust of politicians, the loss of a sense of national mission, why is Parsons optimistic about the superior adaptive capacity of the democratic polity? Basically, his answer is (1) that he has made a plausible theoretical argument for its greater adaptive capacity and (2) that he can account for temporary fluctuations in trust and distrust in other ways. He is willing to put his theories to the empirical test, but he is aware that a war or an economic crisis can cause temporary fluctuations in political morale. His theories are long-run theories, and they require long-run empirical tests. He discusses some of the current tensions in American society not as evidence of declining adaptive capacity but as due to transitional strains. He denies that he has an ethnocentric value preference for American society; he believes that American society has simply proceeded further along the evolutionary path than even its

European counterparts. To assess the validity of this line of reasoning, let us consider in some detail Parsons' analysis of the inclusion problem of modern societies.

### THE INCLUSIVE SOCIETAL COMMUNITY OF MODERN SOCIETIES

Parsons points out that one consequence of the democratic and industrial revolutions was to weaken the ascriptive framework of early modern societies. Monarchy moved toward constitutionalism. Aristocracy lost its political power. National citizenship and representative government spread. A universalistic legal system became further rationalized. Residential communities grew more associational and less ascriptive. The factory broke the ascriptive link between the family and the occupational system. Religion lost the protection of establishment in state churches; denominations moved toward the status of voluntary associations.

At the same time that the ascriptive framework was weakening, the evolutionary process was differentiating one societal subsystem from another. Thus, the industrial revolution differentiated the economy from the polity, and the democratic revolution differentiated the polity from the societal community. He gives this last point special emphasis. The societal community, "the patterned normative order through which the life of a population is collectively organized" (1966:10) does not necessarily coincide with the society's human population. Every society contains within it persons not fully included at all levels of citizenship. Migrant laborers and inner-city slum dwellers are second-class citizens within the American societal community (Toby, 1971:223-230). But Parsons' evolutionary analysis reveals that premodern societies had a much smaller proportion of their populations fully included in the societal community than modern societies. To put it another way, premodern societies had difficulty developing a large citizen base, and one important reason for this difficulty was the ascriptive barriers that relegated so many people to undifferentiated inferiority. When the industrial and democratic revolutions undermined ascriptive limitations while at the same time differentiating the societal community from its previous economic and political involvements, a breathtaking possibility began to emerge. Why not include everybody?

Parsons argues that, partly because of American ethnic and religious diversity, the logic of this possibility in the United States was more attractive than in other modernizing societies. Consequently the inclusion process has been proceeding rapidly as Irish, Italians, Jews, and (most recently) nonwhite minorities move toward full participation. If Parsons is right and that is what is happening, why are so many intellectuals so sour about the United States? Why the complaints about poverty, the erosion of com-

munity, the power élite, immorality, bureaucracy, student unrest? Parsons' answer is a twofold one. First, he examines the three subsystems of society other than the societal community and does not find a worsening capacity to adapt. In the fiduciary subsystem, he does not observe moral deterioration but rather a more flexible application of value commitments legitimated by the cultural system. In the economy, he does not find increasing polarization between the rich and the poor, the owners and the proletariat, but instead growth of professional and white-collar groups that cannot easily be categorized in terms of the rhetoric of traditional Marxism. In the polity, he does not find power more centralized but rather more dispersed to electorates and more subject to veto groups.

Second, he concludes that the objectively incorrect charges concerning the polity, the economy, and the fiduciary subsystem stem from *residual problems of exclusion from the societal community*. Exclusion is minimal and growing less, but what remains is more painful because of a relative deprivation effect. The destruction of the ascriptive framework makes anything less than equality of *outcome* difficult to justify. Yet achievement leads to new forms of inequality (Parsons, 1970). The pain of partial exclusion may be subjectively experienced as political, economic, or moral dissatisfaction, but the real source of the malaise is the pressure of egalitarian ideals on an achievement-oriented societal community. Egalitarian pressure is expressed in calls for a greater sense of community, for participatory democracy, and for the elimination of race prejudice and poverty. But difficult problems must be faced in trying to reconcile the ideal of equality of results with the hierarchical role structure necessary for an efficient economy, for an effective polity, and even for competent scientific research. The educational revolution (through which the modern world is now passing) may help with this reconciliation by legitimating hierarchical distinctions based on technical competence. The educational revolution is closely associated with the rise of the professions, which bring influential ideas from university centers to the occupational and political systems. Since the power of the expert seems less arbitrary than the power of ascription, the educational revolution may help to integrate society by legitimating a new kind of stratification. Stratification by achievement requires radical equality of opportunity (if it is to seem—and be—fair) as well as greater accountability on the part of those accorded superior status in the economic, cultural, and political systems. (Accountability in the polity can be illustrated by officials seeking reelection on the basis of their performance in office.)

### CONCLUSION

Societal evolution can hardly be called an idea whose time has come. Many sociologists would say it came in the nineteenth century—and went, along with Herbert Spencer. Parsons is attempting to breathe new

life into the theory despite a contemporary preference for explanations of the immediate present over explanations of long-run trends. Thus, many sociologists—and not just radical sociologists—cannot muster enthusiasm for a theory of social change so detached from current anxieties that it disregards the latest war and the next presidential election. His focus on the long view makes Parsons seem complacent about the present. As Keynes put it, in the long run we are all dead. But Parsons' theory of societal evolution is not a retooled version of the romantic faith in the inevitability of progress—despite the congratulatory tone that creeps into his analysis when cultural or social innovations solve conditional problems at lower cybernetic levels. He sounds this way because he is aware of the inability of many societies to meet such challenges. Parsons' theory faces another obstacle to popularity; it claims to account mainly for the sequence of stages rather than for detailed processes by which one societal stage evolves into the next. Failure to deal with process is perceived as a serious drawback by those with social psychological interests.

On the other hand, Parsons is not the only contemporary social scientist interested in societal evolution. The distinguished psychologist, Donald Campbell, in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association (1975) chose to focus on sociobiology in relation to moral development in human societies. Campbell argued that evolutionary genetics and his own field, experimental psychology, were insufficient to account for the "socially useful, individually self-sacrificial altruism" (1975:1123) necessary for social order; he considered the possibility of a religious and ethical tradition for societal survival. In short, there is growing interest in the basic *intellectual* problem that Parsons has addressed. There ought to be interest also in the application of evolutionary theory to the *practical* problem of modernization; without economic and social development some considerable proportion of the four billion persons on the planet have a bleak future. Parsonian theory may turn out to be surprisingly "relevant."

## ADDENDUM TO CHAPTER 1

Talcott Parsons has supplied Figures 4 and 5 to make even more explicit the theoretical basis of his evolutionary scheme.

Figure 4 presents the relations between the social system and its total system of environments in terms of the functional scheme I have used. Column I lists the functional categories, interpreted here at the general action level. Column II singles out the social system from the others according to its integrative functions within the action system. Column III, corresponding to column IV of Figure 5, lists the other three subsystems of action as immediate (i.e., as intra-action) environments of the social

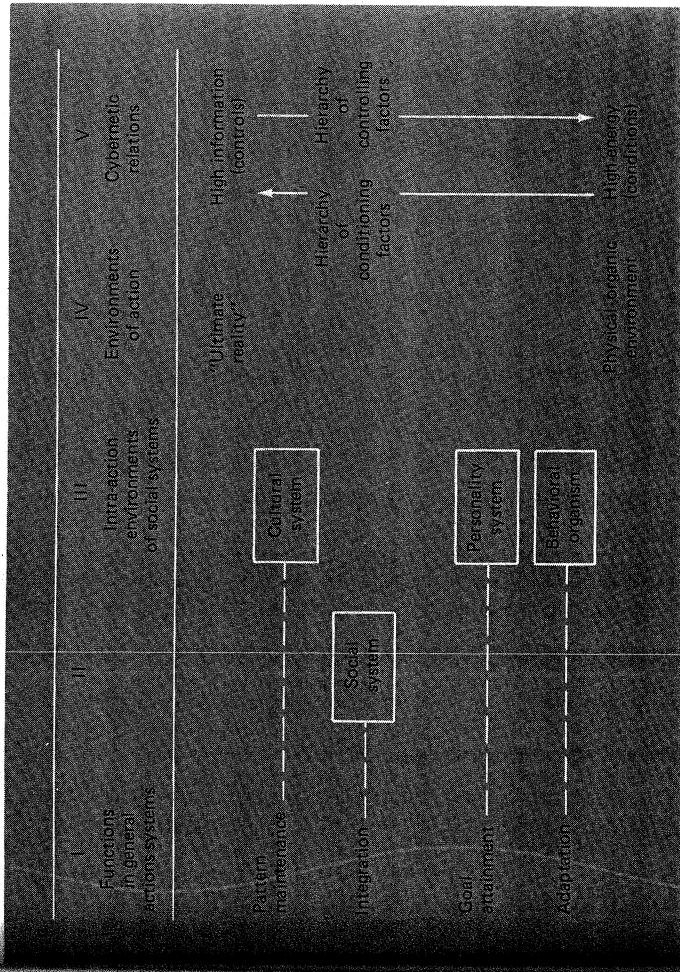


Figure 4. Subsystems of action

system. Column IV presents the two environments within which action systems function—namely, the physical-organic environment, relations with which are mediated through the behavioral organism and the environment called "ultimate reality," relations with which are mediated through the constitutive symbol systems (i.e., religious components) of the cultural system. Finally, column V indicates the two directions in which factors exert their effect on these systems. The upward-pointed arrow indicates the hierarchy of conditions, which at any given cumulative level in the upward series is necessary but not sufficient. The downward-pointed arrow designates the hierarchy of controlling factors in the cybernetic sense. As we move downward, control of more and more necessary conditions makes the implementation of patterns, plans, or programs possible. Systems higher in the order are relatively high in information while those lower down are relatively high in energy.

Figure 5 presents schematically the set of relationships concerning the structure of the society as a system, centering on the place of the societal community. Column I lists the four functional categories according to their place in the cybernetic hierarchy of control. In relation to col-

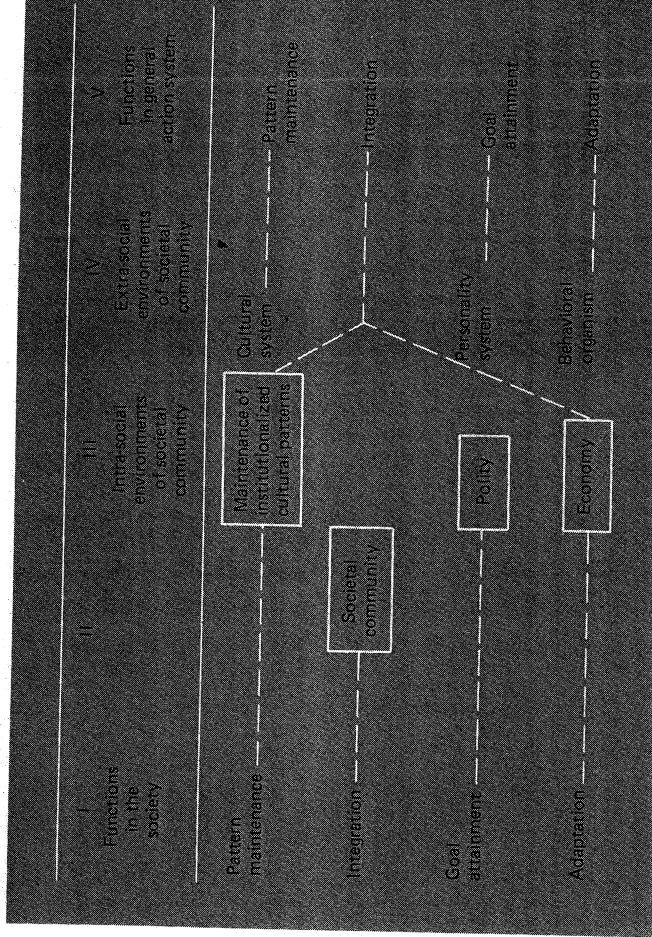


Figure 5. The societal community and its environments

Column I, column II identifies the societal community as the integrative subsystem of the society—i.e., that *analytically* defined subsystem characterized by the primacy of integrative function in the larger system. Column III designates the other three primary analytical subsystems (the functions of which are also given in relation to column I) as constituting environment of the society community which are *internal* to the society as a social system. It carries on processes of input-output interchange and shares zones of interpenetration with them. Column IV details in the cognate order the primary subsystems of action other than the society itself, showing them as constituting environments for the society, presuming the same order of interchange and interpenetration, but with different specific content. The slanting dashed lines indicate that the *entire* societal system, not each of its subsystems, is involved in these interchanges with the action environments. Finally, column V lists the functional categories in terms of which action systems are differentiated, this time in the context of the general action system rather than of the social system. Note that the functions in the general action system and in the social system are identical.

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