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978-0-521-12518-5 - The Theory and Scholarship of Talcott Parsons to 1951: A Critical  
Commentary

Bruce C. Wearne

Excerpt

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**PART 1**  
*Unravelling Talcott Parsons'*  
*theoretical development*

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# 1

## Introduction

As the reader works through this book the going will get progressively more difficult. My aim, in this discussion of Talcott Parsons' contribution to sociology, has been to encourage the reader to experience something of the way Parsons' project developed, especially in the 1940s. By writing a critical commentary in this way, I wish to encourage a deepened and sympathetic critique of the theory of this 'incurable theorist'. Two central problems are addressed here: how did Parsons develop his theory over time? and how are we to interpret his theoretical statements, especially his major ones?

The method of presentation is chronological and comparative. I compare what Parsons wrote as a professional with what he wrote earlier in his intellectual odyssey. Consequently, I have limited myself very much to what he wrote and I have, in the main, refrained from comparing his evolving theory with what it became after 1951. This, I believe, constitutes the strength and the limitation of this critical commentary.

Parsons' theoretical development, as much as his theory itself, was a complex process. Here I try to outline some of the major lines of continuity manifest in his thought up to 1951. Some of the material I discuss is new, particularly the 'Amherst Papers' (T. Parsons 1922, 1923) – see Chapter 3 – as well as the unpublished paper 'Actor, Situation and Normative Pattern' (T. Parsons 1939/40), examined at length in Chapter 7.

This critical and textual examination of Parsons' writings gives special attention to his theoretical development between 1937 and 1951. These two dates represent the two major publications for which Parsons is famous: *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) and *The Social System* (1951).

These two imposing works have made their mark upon sociological theorizing world-wide for decades. The foundations of Parsons' theoretical approach were laid out in his 'first major synthesis' of 1937, and fourteen years later this perspective was fully developed into his 'major exposition'. Hence the focus of this study.

According to Jurgen Habermas 'any theoretical work in sociology today that failed to take account of Talcott Parsons could not be taken seriously' (Habermas 1981: 174). My aim is to produce a narrative which takes Parsons seriously. I have tried to present the student of social theory with a readable

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introduction and have concentrated upon showing the consistency and continuity of Parsons' theory *from his writings*. There are indeed many arguments about Parsons' contribution to sociology. I could have contributed to this controversy in novel ways. Perhaps a case can be made for asserting that over the years his theory progressively converged with his father's view of Christianity. How should we interpret Parsons' theoretical differences with Sorokin? How should we now unravel the reality of his theory from the image of 'incurable theorist', and what do we make of the controversial nature of his contribution? There are many questions like these which simply beg to be answered within the ambit of contemporary sociology. I have restricted myself to making a critical commentary on his theoretical development up to 1951. This may disappoint some readers, yet I am convinced that this kind of textual examination is most important.

Where I have broached controversy – namely in relation to Parsons' collegial relationship with his student Robert K. Merton – I have restricted myself to analysis of the public record, setting forth my conjectures in that context. There are other conjectures woven throughout the narrative, yet I would not have counted myself qualified to delve into Parsons' social setting if I had not first attempted to master his written and published statements.

In a previous publication (Wearne 1981) I argued that Parsons' appraisal of Alfred Marshall's economics gave critical leverage to his theoretical outlook, without which *The Structure* would not have been conceivable. Moreover, Parsons there adopted an experimental Paretian approach to the ongoing evaluation of his own theoretical writings and the long-term significance thereof. The incorporation of Pareto into Parsons' 'canon of classics' is indicative of a most important dimension of this theory; surprisingly, this has been neglected in the critical secondary literature.

Although Paretian logic is a most important part of the famous 'convergence' argument in *The Structure*, Pareto, along with Alfred Marshall, is all but ignored in Jeffrey Alexander's recent work, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982–4).

So this work is envisaged as a conventional secondary analysis of Parsons' theoretical perspective and how that emerged. I do not interpret Parsons solely in terms of Weber and Durkheim, but have expanded the secondary analysis to show, among other things, how Marshall and Pareto were *integral* components of Parsons' emerging project. Given the overwhelming concern in Alexander's work for divining the theoretical logic of sociology in the 1980s, his neglect of Pareto and Marshall is understandable. But this approach is not appropriate when we are trying to set forth Parsons' method in the terms in which he initially formulated it. Camic (1987), by seeking to reckon with the empirical importance of *all* the theorists considered by Parsons, has provided a very welcome addition here.

Moreover, my work not only tries to show the 'inner logic' of Parsons' convergence argument. It also seeks to delve into Parsons' intellectual *Umwelt*.

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In the years before his arrival at Harvard in the late 1920s as a tutor in economics, Parsons had been nurtured into the intellectual culture of North American liberalism. As he developed his professional career in the 1930s he adopted his distinctive style of theory-writing. I shall try to outline how this style developed, how important factors from his background became manifest in his scholarship.

*The Structure* was the work of an aspiring professional. To develop a clear concept of this complex work I have tried to see its central argument in the North American context, in particular the Harvard (social science) academy. In addition I try to develop an argument about the manner in which Parsons continued European lines of theory in a typically American way.

To gain adequate understanding of *The Social System* it is important to analyse it as a product of a literary process. In my view the peculiar form of this famous document has everything to do with the way Parsons worked as a writer. I argue that Parsons-the-writer aimed to become Parsons-the-author.

Critical analysis has been combined with biographical material and other suggestive ideas about Parsons' background. Overall the focus is upon the development of Parsons' theory. Parsons wrote much about the term 'system', but, as he recognized, it is a matter of judgement whether he is to be viewed as a systematic thinker. New aspects of his project did not always emerge in a logical and sequential manner.

In 1951, when *The Social System* was published, another work appeared, the fruit of an inter-disciplinary co-operative effort in the 'theory of action'. This was *Towards a General Theory of Action* (T. Parsons and E. A. Shils (eds.) 1951). There is a slight puzzle here. It concerns Parsons' haste in having *The Social System* published alongside the book in 'general theory'. He says that a draft of *The Social System*, three-quarters completed, was in existence first, and was thoroughly revised in the light of the joint project. He then envisaged the need for further revision five years hence (T. Parsons 1951: ix-x). The three-quarter draft called 'The Social System: Structure and Function' (1949-50) was not published, and the anticipated revision never appeared either. (The 'empirical' chapter on 'Modern Medical Practice' in *The Social System* is the same as in the draft, with only minor amendments.) These facts point to an important aspect of Parsons' work. His theory was always subject to rapid development, with unevenness of progress on its various fronts. He saw a theoretical 'order' emerging out of the past to culminate with the fruits of theorizing in the present. Publication was a convenient sign-post. It indicates a provisional closure to the endless process of revision. Each particular publication dealt with a special problem. Upon its becoming available for professional consideration, Parsons was freed to 'revisit' more general problems. The process went on. Parsons was a writer and author of Theory. If this is kept in mind by the reader of his work then Parsons' writing, as human artifact, becomes that much more accessible.

Important theses about *The Social System*, included in Chapter 11 below,

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have been formulated on the basis of a close exegetical study of Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Social System*. The actual exegesis does not appear in this book. Such secondary work is somewhat at odds with contemporary academic publishing, and in any case it is perhaps better if the critic of *The Social System* reads it closely and painstakingly for himself. My view of Parsons' contribution has surely been sharpened by trying to follow the twists and turns of his difficult prose. Moreover, I found it very difficult to work out my own critical response to his argument until I began to write my own line-by-line commentary of the work, and I would expect that other critics will have to do the same if we are to contribute to an informed and truly critical debate about Parsons' contribution.

*The Social System* was chosen for my close exegetical scrutiny rather than the Parsons and Shils essay 'Values, Motives, and Systems of Action' (T. Parsons and E. A. Shils 1951) or the 'General Statement' (in T. Parsons and E. A. Shils (eds.) 1951: 13–29). *The Social System*, also published in 1951, was the culmination of his own project in theory-formulation which had begun in the 1930s. *Towards a General Theory* is important, but the internal logic of Parsons' theoretical development is adequately displayed in his own work. The organization of the material in *Towards a General Theory* gives a false impression about the logic of Parsons' theory. *The Social System* illustrates his 'emergent' logic much better. Furthermore his characteristic style, which also needs to be considered in any thorough examination of his approach to theory-building, is better exhibited in *The Social System*.

The material of this work falls into three phases: (1) the personal background which involves family, schooling and his 'conversion' from biology to social sciences; (2) the pre-1937 development in which he was busy searching for intellectual unity and a basis from which to launch his 'organon' – the theory of action (the Aristotelian term *organon* was the term he used to describe the 'extraordinarily complex' nucleus of Marshall's 'economic theory proper' (T. Parsons 1931: 102)); (3) the process by which he constructed his 'organon' – how he located his 'social system' within the structure of his own thought.

Throughout our concern is to identify major aspects of Parsons' view of the interdependence of the development of theory with the theory itself. This book is a conventional secondary study which takes a textual-critical point of view as its major focus. In other words the focus is upon what Parsons actually wrote, in the context of the theoretical problems he formulated.

There is a brief annotated bibliographical essay of some recent works on Parsons in the Appendix. The character of this work, concerned with how Parsons composed his own theoretical text, precludes exhaustive discussion on the other secondary literature.

The task has not been to demonstrate dogmatically that Parsons' theory was consistent or inconsistent; rather my aim has been to explore its internal consistency. What were the leading ideas of this single-minded project? My assertion that Parsons' theory manifests a consistent continuity of development

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does not mean, however, that his theory is taken to be internally consistent. Any definitive judgement of that kind will have to be based upon a careful and thorough analysis of his major writings and the other things he wrote, in critical confrontation with his leading ideas.

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**PART 2**  
*Talcott Parsons:*  
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## 2

Talcott Parsons in relation to the  
thought of his time**Was this man a Calvinist?**

Future biographers of Talcott Parsons might ponder the likelihood that his birth was not a 'meticulously planned' event. He was the sixth and youngest child in his family, considerably younger than the next youngest. His father, Edward Smith Parsons (1863–1943), was a 'Congregationalist' minister of 'calvinistic' orientation, who came from a long line of Yankee merchants. According to Martel he 'broke family tradition' by attending Yale Divinity School and becoming a Congregationalist minister (Martel 1979: 609–10). It is of note, however, that the 'Smith' in Talcott's father's name was given in remembrance of Edward Parmelee Smith (1827–76). Talcott's paternal grandmother was Smith's cousin. This man, also a Congregationalist minister, was general field agent for the US Christian Commission during the Civil War, general field agent for the American Missionary Association after the Civil War, later US Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and still later President of Howard University (Armstrong 1983).

Edward S. Parsons became an independent scholar of social gospel orientation, and specialized in the literary study of Milton (E. S. Parsons 1903). He wrote articles and books on various themes: religious, social and literary (E. S. Parsons 1889; 1904; 1912). Like E. P. Smith he became an academic administrator.

But E. S. Parsons was not a 'strict' Calvinist. Massachusetts Congregationalism, weakened through its controversy with Unitarianism, had dispensed with any 'calvinistic' formulae in the middle of the nineteenth century (Meyer 1964: 80). If Edward Parsons was 'calvinistic' it was in terms of an activistic predestinarianism. The doctrine was accepted as a motor for social action.

**Father and son: the Christian-liberal orientation of  
Edward Smith Parsons**

The words of Talcott Parsons can be used to justify this brief excursion into the thought-world of Edward S. Parsons.



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Talcott Parsons: the roots of his thought

The specificities of significant change could not even be identified if there were no relative background of non-change to relate them to. (Parsons 1961a: 220)

This principle is applicable to the analysis of intellectual change – the history of ideas. The ‘relative background of non-change’ – Parsons Snr’s approach to society – suggests important themes of New England liberalism which were part of Talcott’s world. Martel records what are, presumably, Parsons’ own comments concerning his home life:

Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, the family moved to New York City, where Talcott attended Horace Mann, the experimental boys’ high school of Columbia University. He described his home environment as liberal for that era. His mother, Mary A. Ingersol Parsons, was a suffragist who also supported other progressive causes, and his father was a ‘social gospel’ Protestant of broad academic interests, who accepted the theories of Charles Darwin and viewed science as supplemental to religion. In the fall of 1920, Parsons entered Amherst College, which his father and two older brothers had attended.

(Martel 1979: 610)

Just how does Parsons Snr’s ‘acceptance’ of the theories of Charles Darwin throw light upon the son’s intellectual development? This question can only be answered in general terms and should include some indication of how ‘religion’ and ‘science’ were related in Edward Parsons’ thought. Talcott writes in the footnotes of his intellectual history that his father was an important personal influence in his switch from biology to economics.

[In] my undergraduate days a . . . basic decision was made, namely to go into social rather than biological science. My switch to social science – a qualified economics initially – was associated with my father, who, during my development, was a college teacher and administrator. When I was a student in college my father was President of Marietta College in Ohio. He had begun his career as a Congregational minister and was very much involved with the then important ‘social gospel’ movement, which, it is now clear, had much to do with the origins of sociology in this country.

(T. Parsons 1970: 877, n. 23.)

The exact nature of this advice is not clear, yet it seems likely that E. S. Parsons’ liberalism was involved. Parsons Snr’s approach to society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is outlined in ‘A Christian Critique of Socialism’ (1889), ‘The Church and Education’ (1904) and *The Social Message of Jesus* (1912).

Parsons Snr’s critique of socialism, published in the *Andover Review* of 1889, involved an attempt to ascertain which, if any, of the possible relationships between Christianity and socialism was the correct one. Rather than put the case for Christian socialism in which the similarities between Christianity and socialism were the mutual basis for an historical synthesis, he put his case for a Christianized socialism. The great truths underlying socialism had been derived from Christianity in the first place. Socialism did not present them in their correct light. Certain facts had been omitted because socialism denied reality; it had no place for ‘the facts of God and sin’. For Edward S. Parsons

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Christianity, as the Church militant, should transform culture according to the mandate of its dynamic inner principle. For him 'culture' included systems of doctrine, religious and social, but it referred particularly, in the sense of 'cultivation', to the system of education.

Christianity cannot yield the field to Socialism. The two cannot work together as collaborators. Christianity must be the teacher, and Socialism the pupil. Socialism must be Christianized, and it is a question whether Socialism could then exist, whether a Christian Socialism is possible. Can the Christian ideas of the worth of the individual and true cooperation be reconciled with the idea of the Socialistic state? One can readily believe that as society becomes more and more complex, there will be a great extension of the powers of the state; but that a Christian society will ever turn over into the hands of the state the control of those interests which are so powerful in the development of individual character is quite a different expectation. But however that may be, society has nothing to fear from a Christianized Socialism. (E. S. Parsons 1889: 611)

On the one hand, Edward Parsons was accepting the biblical doctrines in a personal sense. On the other hand he was using this Spencerian argument to secure a place for individual freedom *over against* State control.

Parsons Snr called upon the heirs of New England Puritanism to take up the Christian cultural task. The *Civitas Dei* will prevail and in the mean time a Christian transformation will only be possible on the basis of an *antithesis* in all social progress. In E. S. Parsons' view, Christians who join the socialist movement out of a desire to Christianize it are actually contributing to a way of life antithetical to Christianity.

Fifteen years later 'The Church and Education' appeared, in which the major issue was no longer socialism but the widespread perception of the irrelevance of the Christian Church. No doubt the 'retreat' of Christian faith involved the advance of evolutionism, yet Parsons admitted that the Church had been shackled by the inherent conservatism of human nature. It had been an obstructive force in the path of human progress.

Parsons Snr's response to this situation was three-fold. His historical argument focussed upon the central role of the Church in the development of education and scholarship. Then the discussion pinpointed the place of the Church in contemporary society. He then identified some important responses that the Church should make.

Historically, the Church had, like all human institutions, 'stood in the way', preventing the Truth coming to light, but on balance the historical record was favourable to the Church. 'He must be a blind man indeed, and woefully ignorant of the progress of human thought during the last twenty centuries, who does not realize the incalculable debt which education owes to the church' (E. S. Parsons 1904: 86). The Church emphasized the 'truth spirit'. The Church was 'one of the strongest influences in the development of the best scholarly type ... The highest type of scholarship is the product of the Christian character and the Christian Spirit' (ibid.: 88). The oft-despised