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978-0-521-17458-9 - Talcott Parsons: An Intellectual Biography

Uta Gerhardt

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Talcott Parsons

An Intellectual Biography

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) has been called the most influential of American sociologists for his theoretical work on social systems and for his important role in delineating the field of sociology as a distinct discipline. He is credited with introducing to the United States and further refining and applying the social theories of European thinkers Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. He is best known for his classic works *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), once called a “charter for sociology,” and *The Social System* (1951), which laid the building blocks for what was to become known as the “functionalist perspective” in sociology.

As a pivotal figure in the history of the field of sociology, Parsons has been the subject of a long line of writing seeking to explain and interpret, or critique his theories. Parsons was often accused, among other things, of being an overly abstract, even apolitical thinker, remote in Harvard’s ivory tower. As this book argues cogently, however, this accusation is false. The controversial Parsons, in fact, emulated his mentor, the venerable Max Weber, in at least two respects: As a scholar, he practiced *Wertfreiheit* (scientific professionalism) and as a political activist he worked for the preservation and expansion of democracy. In this unique, intellectual biography, Uta Gerhardt traces this double commitment and links Parsons’s scholarship to his politics.

Utilizing rich archival material, Gerhardt examines four periods in Parsons’s intellectual life in the context of American history and society. From the New Deal and the rise of German fascism to World War II, through the McCarthy era and the Civil Rights movement, Parsons’s overriding agenda was to develop both a sociological understanding and a defense of the development of modern democracy. By taking into account the larger, intellectual context of these years, Gerhardt offers a valuable and vibrant account of Parsons and the political aspects of his work. Those concerned with the historical development and contributions of the field of sociology more broadly will find Gerhardt’s portrayal of Parsons richly informed and illuminating.

Uta Gerhardt holds a chair and professorship in sociology at the University of Heidelberg. She is the editor of *Talcott Parsons on National Socialism* (1993) and *German Sociology* (1998), among many other published titles. She is a member of the advisory board of the *Journal of Classical Sociology* and *American Sociologist* and other journals.

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If you think you understand some of these things at first reading, let this be a warning. You will get something, but to really understand you must go back and back and back.

—Parsons, *A Short Account of
My Intellectual Development*

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Preface

Talcott Parsons may be one of the truly tragic figures in the history of sociology in the twentieth century. Although he struggled all his life to make sociological theory more concrete when it went beyond mere description of apparent social facts, he was charged to remain unable to incorporate reflexivity into social thought. Although he aimed vigorously to account for the dynamics of meaning orientation in the increasingly pluralist modern society, he was accused of mechanistic systems thinking fitting a hermetic *Brave New World*. Although he personally contributed to political program planning for democratization in post-Nazi Germany, he was suspected of shepherding a Nazi sympathizer into the United States. Although he remained a Weberian all his life subsequent to his encounter with Max Weber's intellectual genius during work on his doctoral dissertation, he had to defend himself against attempts, by younger colleagues, to rescue Weber (and also Durkheim) from the prongs of an allegedly false Parsonian interpretation.

My purpose in writing this book has been to make Parsons's sociological work more accessible, by documenting three things. For one, I wish to show how a recognizable knowledge interest in sociological understanding of modern democracy, understood as both a methodological desideratum and an analytical-empirical program, pervaded Parsons's oeuvre from the 1930s to the 1960s (and beyond).

Second, I want to document how this focus on democracy had different forms of expression in the succession of periods of American history. As political agendas changed, reaching from the New Deal through World War II and McCarthyism to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, and eventually Watergate in the 1970s, he revised his concern for democracy accordingly.

Third, I want to argue that despite his constant openness for the problems and solutions of the society of the day in his various analyses, two basic tenets remained unchanged throughout his life. One was that he warned of utilitarianism (ranging from social Darwinism to exchange theory and rational-choice theory). The other was that his conceptual framework for sociology, emulating Weber, endorsed society as it was to be, not only as it could be observed. The conceptual scheme envisaged a two-pronged system for social action varying between a favored pole

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of integration (denoting potential for democracy) and a dreaded one of anomie (denoting danger of authoritarianism).

Parsons's writings comprised seventeen books, among them the world classics *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) and *The Social System* (1951), and more than two hundred articles in scholarly journals and contributions to books, frequently translated into foreign languages and reprinted in collections of essays worldwide. In addition, the Harvard University Archives contain a wealth of book reviews, lecture notes, memoranda, memoirs, research proposals and reports, and speeches, as well as an immense collection of letters and other material.

This vast oeuvre is difficult to penetrate, even for American scholars. Apparently, Parsons's style of thought was adopted from the German when he read Weber in the original as he first discovered sociology during his sojourn in Heidelberg. Students at Harvard in the 1950s who were required to know two foreign languages as an entrance requirement for sociology are said to have inquired whether "Parsonese" could be one of the two. His Weberian style made him proceed, in his published works, from the highly generalized aspects of a phenomenon or problem to its empirical forms (often complicated by an outline of methodological presuppositions). As can be learned from the material preserved in the Harvard Archives, however, his style of work when he familiarized himself with a topic was different from the procedure in the finished product. He studied historical records and empirical as well as analytical accounts characteristic of the phenomenon concerned, before giving it a tentative analytical shape in his lecture notes or draft paper(s), to be revised time and again.

Working from the published texts only, as most secondary accounts have done, tends to de-emphasize the background and sometimes miss out on the baseline of his analyses. Even as outstanding an author as Jürgen Habermas, in *Theory of Communicative Action*, misinterprets Parsons's knowledge aim and overlooks his political engagement.¹ My book takes notice of preparatory material, lecture notes, or draft versions of Parsons's works, to assure that their interpretation be (more) adequate. Incorporating archival materials into the database used in this book, I focus on four central phases of his oeuvre. My venture is to ascertain the cumulative

¹ The literature used in this preface is Jeffrey Alexander, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Bernard Barber and Uta Gerhardt, eds., *Agenda for Sociology: Classic Sources and Current Uses of Talcott Parsons's Work* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999); Max Black, ed., *The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1961); Charles Camic, ed., *Talcott Parsons: The Early Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Uta Gerhardt, ed., *Talcott Parsons on National Socialism* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993); Uta Gerhardt, "From Brave to New: Talcott Parsons and the War Effort at Harvard University," *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 25, 1999, pp. 257–289; Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Robert S. Holton and Bryan S. Turner, *Talcott Parsons on Economy and Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1986); William C. Mitchell, *Sociological Analysis and Politics: The Theories of Talcott Parsons* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967); Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); and Bruce Wearne, *The Theories and Scholarship of Talcott Parsons to 1951* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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achievement in his analysis of a sociology of democracy, predominantly in the time period between the 1930s and the 1960s. My hope is to elucidate – in our age of globalization – the greatness of this American sociologist, making a contribution to renewed understanding of his exceedingly contemporaneous sociological theory.

This book, to be sure, is written from what may be a European standpoint. Such effort might emulate Parsons's endeavor as he endorsed, in *The Structure of Social Action*, the theories of four then-recent European writers and rejected Spencerian liberalism, which still prevailed in mainstream American sociology, in the 1930s. In this vein, my book may add another perspective to contemporary views on Parsons, supplementing the many existing accounts that seek an understanding of his oeuvre with an intellectual biography. From a presumably European standpoint, I undertake to rearrange some hitherto known as well as unknown sources, proving how Parsons's scholarship benefited from and was related to his politics, passionately pro-democracy.

Since the early 1960s, in a succession of appreciations, he has been pictured mainly as a theorist whose knowledge interest was systems theory, distinct from politics in contemporary society. To name but a very few, *The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons* (1961) reconstructed and, in some of its contributions, criticized his then innovative schemes of systems analysis; *Sociological Analysis and Politics: The Theories of Talcott Parsons* (1967) reconstructed his general theory of action and systems strictly from the standpoint of political science (not allowing for anything but the sociology of an "incurable theorist"); *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons* (1983) recognized phases of his oeuvre leading up to the "later period" featuring "multidimensional theory," but could not see contemporary connotations in the paradigm, when four out of ten chapters discussed what allegedly were Parsons's errors.

That Parsons was far from apolitical when he proclaimed social theory was recognized, in the late 1980s, in the much-undervalued *The Theory and Scholarship of Talcott Parsons to 1951* (1989), an account of how value-neutrality and political consciousness constituted the Weberian heritage in structural-functional theory-building. Also, *Talcott Parsons on Economy and Society* (1986) recollected the Weberian side as well as various accomplishments in special fields such as medical sociology. Eventually, *Talcott Parsons: The Early Essays* (1991) and *Talcott Parsons on National Socialism* (1993) proved the depth and breadth of some of his hitherto unpublished or little known texts on economic and political themes in the 1930s and 1940s.

My book links Parsons's scholarship and his politics. The endeavor can be reconciled as it should, for one, with Max Weber's principle of *Wertfreiheit* ("ethical neutrality"), in the light of American intellectual history. However, another perspective may also apply in my understanding that relates politics with scholarship. In his seminal *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, cultural historian Fritz Stern elucidated an often-neglected aspect of intellectual criticism. This aspect may be applicable for social-science approaches as well. German religionist, popular philosophical, etc., writings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of their culture as declining in an age

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of ever-more-accelerating modernization, Stern argues, promoted nationalism as it foreshadowed acquiescence with the charismatic authoritarianism of Nazism. Cultural pessimism, in this vein, meant politics implicit in quasi-scientific manifestations of *Zeitgeist*. As the opposite end in a continuum of thought, no doubt, negating such politics of cultural despair must also be a route to take. A politics of societal progress must exist as well. Such politics would mean a pro-democracy stance, lodged with social-science analysis. Rejecting the antidemocratic message of skepticism as implied in the world view à la “Germanic ideology,” such politics must favor an understanding of evolution of democracy in the history of modern society. Such politics carry the torch of democracy, even in sociological theory. Such politics, for Parsons, I venture, showed in his scholarship. Furthermore, as will be amply documented, he never hesitated to defend the cause of democracy as an activist, if need be.

When he was in his twenties, still a student at Amherst, Parsons expressed this ambitious aim of reconciling scholarship and politics quite clearly. He opted for a relationship between theory and facts in sociology committed to the latter when the issue was to link behavior and morality. He wrote, in an essay for his philosophy class using terminology that mirrored his having read Charles Darwin and William Graham Sumner:

All theories have to explain facts, otherwise they are entirely useless. The theory is valuable just in so far as it explains facts which are comprehensive and significant. If new facts turn up which do not fit the theory, the theory must be modified, not the facts. It is the universal inertia of the mores which so often accomplishes the latter result. So it is with our theories of societal and moral evolution. Since the time of Morgan and Darwin a great many facts have come to light which have necessitated a radical revision of the then current theories of evolution in biology and in sociology and ethnology. We do not blame the earlier men for their mistakes and we recognize the value of their work, but we do not accept it as final. We know more than they did, hence our generalizations can be more comprehensive and more accurate than theirs, and it is our manifest duty to make them as much so as we can with the facts we have, and to get as many more facts as we can. It means painstaking research, but the end is worth while if anything is worth while and that is as much as we can say.²

In the published version of his doctoral dissertation, in the first of the two articles in the *Journal of Political Economy*, he had this to say about the conception of a society fitting theories strictly (if undogmatically) based on fact: “There seems to be little reason to believe that it is not possible on the basis which we now have to build by a continuous process something more nearly approaching an ideal society. . . . In the transition from capitalism to a different social system surely many elements of the present would be built into the new order.”³

² Talcott Parsons, “Philosophy III. Professor Ayres. March 27, 1923. A Behaviorist Conception of the Nature of Morals,” p. 23. See Harvard University Archives, Parsons papers, call number 42.8.2, box 2 (hereafter, archival material will be identified as “Parsons papers,” and call number).

³ Parsons, “‘Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber,” *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 36, 1928, p. 653.

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This book elucidates how Parsons followed these ideas all his life. The narrative is organized in four chapters, which contribute toward an intellectual biography of this greatest of American sociologists. Each of the four scenarios highlights one particularly innovative stage in the emergence and development of his social theory, spanning a time period of more than forty years.

The first scenario, Chapter 1, depicts his first world classic, *The Structure of Social Action*, in light of two developments which he opposed. One was positivism and utilitarianism in the development of (social) science, rejecting Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, which he contrasted with voluntarism derived from, among others, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. The other oppositional impetus targeted antidemocratic régimes in Europe (particularly Nazism in Germany) at the time, against which he endorsed both the theories of three (four) "recent European writers," and New Deal liberalism in the United States, which was a political reality countering Nazism.

The scenario in Chapter 2 epitomizes how Parsons opposed National Socialism, openly mainly in the years 1938–45, as both citizen and sociologist. He analyzed comparatively the régimes in Germany and the United States, highlighting their structural elements. He also explained the dynamics of how a rational-legal type society (in Weberian terms) turned charismatic-coercive, and how a charismatic-traditional became a *Rechtsstaat* democracy. Then, more than at any other time in his life, I argue, his predominant focus was totalitarian dictatorship. He analyzed how it functioned, and he held it against its obverse, integrated society (American democracy).

The third scenario, in Chapter 3, takes his second world classic, *The Social System*, as its anchor, elucidating how it related to two concrete settings of American history. One was the war effort of social science at Harvard University, and the other was a Social Science Research Council initiative in connection with the emergent National Science Foundation, through the memoranda "Social Science – A Basic National Resource," and "Social Science – A National Resource." In *The Social System*, Parsons discussed a broad range of topics undeniably related to issues of the war and its aftermath, including deployment of the atom bomb – a topic which he addressed in the guise of the role of science (symbolization) for modern society. In this phase of his life, he was clearly oriented to make understood how the democratic system functioned, if only as a model for the transformation of former dictatorships, as he saw it, as had occurred in the 1940s in Germany and Italy and might one day be likely for Soviet Russia.

The fourth scenario, Chapter 4, deals with another transformation which Parsons diagnosed – the 1960s, when American society became a full-fledged democracy offering full citizenship to all classes, races (ethnic groups), and so on. His new theory started entirely fresh, taking into account what he deemed seminal achievements in the most recent past. He developed two theoretical models explaining democracy. One was through generalized symbolic interaction media whose cumulative-expansive nature necessitated that a novel concept of power be coined – together with that of three other generalized symbolization media. The other model focused on the societal community, a formation epitomizing

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democracy in fully developed modern societies. He felt that this new approach required the theory to adopt a new name – “evolutionary-cybernetic.” It was the culmination of his concern for democracy.

In all four phases of this oeuvre, starting from *Structure* and extending into the 1960s and beyond, Parsons’s defense of democracy implied that he saw two opposite possibilities of societal development: anomie was the one extreme, integration the other. Only the latter meant democracy, to be sure, although it was permanently threatened by relapse into some kind of anomie (such as McCarthyism). This double focus rendered the integration–anomie divide a variable. The theme that emerged in the four phases in his intellectual biography signaled loss and (re)gain of democratization, which spurred his dynamic theory of modern society.

This book uses some previously published material that has been thoroughly reworked. Chapter 1 is a reformulation of the argument made in my contribution to *Agenda for Sociology: Classic Sources and Current Uses of Talcott Parsons’s Work* (1999). Chapter 2 is based on the introductory essay in *Talcott Parsons on National Socialism* (1993). Chapter 3 extends the argument made in “From Brave to New: Talcott Parsons and the War Effort at Harvard University” (1999). Chapter 4 is entirely original. All four chapters were replenished with archival material that welds them together into a new unity of interpretation, though three of them resume an argument previously published in one way or another.

This book has benefited greatly from help from many quarters. For one, staff at the Harvard University Archives and the Harvard Imaging Services have been of memorable help. Harvard’s Center for European Studies granted me successive visits as a research associate, which were invaluable for the completion of the study. I particularly wish to thank Abby Collins and Charles Maier for their support. I owe thanks for discussion, comment, criticism, and encouragement to Jeffrey Alexander, Daniel Bell, Guenter Endruweit, Thomas Ertman, Mark Gould, Dieter Henrich, Susannah Herschel, Barbara Heyl, Alex Inkeles, Eva Kahana, Klaus-Peter Koepping, Edward Lehman, Christiane Lemke, Donald Levine, Victor Lidz, Renate Mayntz, Robert K. Merton, Sven Papcke, Charles Parsons, Anne Rawls, Neil Smelser, Justin Stagl, Edward Tiryakian, Xavier Trevino, Bryan Turner, and Bruce Wearne, among many others.

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This book is dedicated to him with gratitude.