# CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Steven Loyal & Siniša Malešević

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Production editor: Katherine Haw
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# 1

# Parsons and Merton

## Introduction

‘Structural functionalism’ is an academic label that has experienced a similar fate to that of ‘post-modernism’ or ‘social Darwinism’. Very few, if any, academics are comfortable with having these labels applied to characterise their approaches. However, while ‘social Darwinism’ and ‘post-modernism’ became ‘terms of abuse’ only after these perspectives lost their influence in the academic world, the label ‘structural functionalism’ was always contested by the scholars who were deemed to be the key representatives of that perspective – Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. While this particular label certainly does not cover the wide range of their work, it does capture well what is distinct about this sociological paradigm which centres on the functional interdependency of systems and the role human beings play in the wider social networks. There is no doubt that Parsons and Merton developed distinct and, in some respects, very different sociological theories. Nevertheless, their approaches share the same epistemological foundations.

This chapter explores the key themes of structural functionalism. As in other chapters we start from biographies and the wider intellectual and historical contexts and then move on to the core ideas of Parsons’ and Merton’s work. The last two sections provide a brief analysis of the recent developments and applications within this tradition or research and zoom in on the key criticisms of structural-functionalist approaches.

## Life and Intellectual Context

### Talcott Parsons

Parsons was born in 1902 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He grew up in an affluent and intellectual household. Both of his parents came from well-established patrician families that could trace their origins to colonisation from seventeenth-century England. His father was an ordained Congregationalist minister, who later became a professor of English and the President of Marietta College in Ohio. Parsons' family were well disposed towards the Social Gospel movement, which applied Protestant teachings and Christian ethics to social issues ranging from poverty, crime and racial conflicts to economic inequality, lack of education, alcoholism and war. This religious movement was particularly influential among the clergy and its leadership who tended to be theologically liberal and socially progressive. It seems that young Talcott was influenced by his family's religious ethos.

Following in his father's footsteps, Talcott completed his undergraduate studies at Amherst, a private liberal arts college in Massachusetts, in 1924. At first, he intended to study medicine but changed his mind and pursued biology, sociology and philosophy. At Amherst, he soon became involved in various social activities and established himself as one of the student leaders. He was also a diligent student who early on showed a strong interest in multidisciplinary connections. As an undergraduate, Parsons was exposed to a variety of philosophical and social science traditions of analysis and had shown a marked sympathy for the theory of evolution. After graduation, he moved to the London School of Economics, where he spent a year studying under leading British scholars including L. T. Hobhouse, R. H. Tawney and B. Malinowski. He also befriended a number of fellow students who went on to become world-leading anthropologists, such as Raymond Firth, Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard.

## European Influences

In some ways Parsons was enchanted by European intellectual life and decided to pursue his PhD studies in Germany, at the University of Heidelberg. He studied sociology and economics and had the opportunity to work with and attend lectures of leading German social thinkers including Karl Jaspers, Karl Mannheim, Alfred Weber and Emil Lederer. His PhD project was deeply influenced by Max Weber's work on the Protestant ethic and capitalism and he graduated in 1927 with the thesis entitled '"Capitalism" in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber'.

The encounter with Weber's work was a defining moment in Parsons' academic development. In growing up in a religious environment Parsons was always convinced that culture and beliefs play a decisive role in the social world. Hence he found in Weber the conceptual and analytical tools for the study of long-term social change. He also decided to translate Weber's key works. In addition, he established a good working relationship with Weber's widow Marianne Weber.

Parsons started his academic career at Amherst, where he taught briefly from 1926 to 1927. After this he became an instructor at Harvard's economics department where he had the opportunity to work with Joseph Schumpeter and other eminent scholars. However, Parsons had little interest in economic issues and was eager to help establish a sociology department at Harvard.

In 1930 Harvard established a sociology department led by the Russian émigré Pitirim Sorokin and which Parsons joined. However, Sorokin and Parsons never got along partly because Parsons preferred to be active in the numerous informal study groups at Harvard rather than activities organised by the sociology department.

Parsons was also very active in anti-Nazi campaigns. He visited Germany on a few occasions before the Second World War and warned the American public of the dangers that the Nazi movement represented. In 1944 he was promoted to a full professorship and also appointed the chairperson of the department. This was followed by the reorganisation and establishment of the new, multidisciplinary, Department of Social Relations, which aimed to integrate the work of sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists into a unified social science. The new department quickly attracted talented scholars including Allport, Kluckhohn, Stouffer, Murry and Homans among others, and also created a new generation of highly influential social scientists – from Harold Garfinkel, Marian Johnson, Norman Birnbaum, Robert Bellah and Renée Fox to Clifford Geertz, Robert Merton, Neil Smelser and Randall Collins. Parsons was at Harvard until his official retirement in 1973. He had a stroke during a trip to Munich, where he celebrated the 50th anniversary of his Heidelberg degree, and died in 1979.

## Robert Merton

Merton was arguably the most influential student of Parsons. He was born in 1910 as Meyer Robert Schkolnick, a son of immigrant Russian Jews. Merton's parents were educated, but impoverished. His father, Aaron, owned a dairy-product shop that burned down and the family subsequently lost their main source of income. To survive [his father] Aaron became a carpenter's assistant and a truck driver. Merton's mother was a free-thinking socialist highly sympathetic to radical and anti-clerical ideas. The young Meyer attended South Philadelphia High School but acquired much of his vast knowledge from recurrent visits to nearby libraries and other cultural institutions. Since he lived in the slums of Philadelphia he was exposed early on to violence and was also involved with juvenile gangs and street fighting. As a teenager Meyer was also fascinated by magic and initially conceived of 'Robert K. Merton' as a stage pseudonym for his magic acts. Eventually his stage name became his real name, as he registered as Robert King Merton at Philadelphia's Temple University where he received a full scholarship to study sociology (between 1927 and 31).

Upon graduation at Temple Merton applied to continue his studies at Harvard and was accepted to work with Sorokin. At Harvard he also studied with Parsons, George Sarton and L. J. Henderson. As a graduate student Merton had already published a number of influential articles ranging from 'Recent French Sociology' to 'Fluctuations in the Rate of Industrial Invention' to (with Sorokin) 'The Course of Arabian Intellectual Development, 700–1300 A.D.'. His first book, *Science, Technology & Society in Seventeenth Century England*, was published in 1938 and was one of the pioneering works in the sociology of science.

Merton's academic career started at Tulane University where he was appointed professor and chair in 1938. After three years he moved to Columbia University where he remained for over 40 years until his retirement, in 1979. In 1963 Merton was appointed Giddings Professor of Sociology, and the university later bestowed on him its highest academic rank, university professor, in 1974. During this period he also attained a degree of public visibility. His brainchild 'focus group research' was used on a mass scale by political associations, marketing agencies and other non-academic institutions, and he was soon recognised as the 'father of the focus group'. Furthermore, he devoted a great deal of energy to making sociology institutionally recognisable and publicly visible. On becoming President of the American Sociological Association in 1957 he oversaw the unprecedented institutional growth of the discipline and its expanding impact on public policy in the United States. He was the first sociologist to win the US National Medal of Science in 1994. Robert Merton died in New York in 2003.

## Historical, Social and Political Context

Although Parsons and Merton had already made their intellectual mark before the Second World War, their legacy is firmly linked with the post-war world. The end of the most devastating war ever fought on this planet generated a substantial degree of optimism throughout the world and this was also reflected in the social sciences.

### The Rise of the Middle Class

In addition, the late 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, were periods of intense economic development involving large-scale rebuilding projects in Europe and increased prosperity in the United States. The 1950s were characterised by sustained economic growth and the unparalleled rise of the middle classes. However, it should not be assumed that increased growth rates simply translated into society-wide affluence. Instead, the rise of the middle classes owed a great deal to the legacies of the Second World War. For one thing the development of the war industries stimulated greater spatial and social mobility as it fostered movement from impoverished regions to the 'war-boom communities' (Malešević, 2010: 261). As the US government had to invest heavily in mass-scale military production during the war it offered highly advantageous working conditions for people prepared to move and work in the military factories.

The well-documented case of the Willow Run community in Detroit shows how the government's financial incentives generated new social dynamics. Hence, what before the war was a very small farming community, became home to over 250,000 people who settled in Willow Run to work in the nearby bomber aircraft factory. During the war such new cities provided the opportunity for thousands of Americans to climb the social ladder and become middle class in a very short period of time (Carr and Stermer, 1952). Thus, the new war-related military and civilian industries were crucial in creating the conditions for greater social mobility. After the war, the military industries in part converted to the civilian sector and focused on producing cars, manufacturing goods and other industries which were vital in maintaining full employment.

For another thing, the degree of a society-wide sense of solidarity built during the war was important for preserving stable relationships between the unionised workers and their employers. The United States, in the 1950s, had strong trade unions that boasted huge memberships. The presence of powerful unions provided greater job security and periodic wage increases, both of which contributed towards a decrease in industrial action and wide support for the status quo. This economic prosperity, coupled with a substantial degree of cross-class accord, generated a degree of stability, moderation and conservatism.

Another important feature of this period in US history was the rise of consumerism. The economic growth together with new technological inventions and ever-increasing disposable income allowed ordinary Americans to purchase large houses in new suburbs, big cars and a variety of novel household appliances. The 1950s also witnessed the rise of targeted advertising and marketing and the availability of affordable bank loans, which further stimulated consumerist practices. This combination of cross-class consensus and rampant consumerism fostered the dominance of social conservatism in the United States. Hence it is no accident that structural functionalism emerged and intellectually prospered in this type of social environment focused on consensus. Parsons' and Merton's key ideas reflected well the social realities of their world and also tapped into the widely shared aspirations of the United States in the1950s and early 1960s – the focus on social stability, a shared normative universe, the functionality of social mores and institutions, and generational social mobility.

## Cold War Ideology

However, the United States was not just any economically prosperous society that operated with a high degree of social consensus. It was also a superpower involved in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Although the United States has already become an important geopolitical factor after the First World War, it was really victory in the Second World War that made both the United States and the Soviet Union global superpowers. As the Cold War (1947–91) unfolded it created a hostile environment between the capitalist liberal democracies and state socialist countries. This protracted ideological conflict intensified political conservatism on both sides. The rulers of Soviet-type societies dealt harshly with any form of dissent, often imprisoning or killing dissenters.

While the US liberal democratic political system did not allow for such extreme measures, the 1950s were characterised by the pervasive intolerance of left-wing ideas and organisations. Not only were many socialist and social democratic groups harassed and delegitimised as traitors and Soviet spies, but the government was also involved in the persecution of individuals deemed to be associated with left-wing politics. This was particularly pronounced during the period of the 'Second Red Scare' (1947–57) when US government officials and the mass media were obsessed with the idea that domestic and foreign communists had infiltrated the federal government, universities, the film industry and civil society. This anti-communist hysteria was spearheaded by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Much of this campaign, involving the infamous congressional hearings in both houses of Congress and accusations against prominent individuals from academia and politics to Hollywood, was based on hearsay and smear tactics. Furthermore 'McCarthyism' was also associated with organised hostility against homosexuality, which in that period was still criminalised. These political campaigns contributed even further to the social conformity and conservatism that dominated the United States during this period. The onset of the Korean War (1950–3), together with Soviet military and technological triumphs (including successful atomic bomb tests in 1949 and 1951 and the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957), generated society-wide fear of the 'Red Menace' and imminent Soviet invasion of the United States.

None of this is to say that Parsons or Merton personally sympathised in any way with McCarthyism or political conservatism. In fact, Parsons was a firm opponent of 'Red Scare' politics and vigorously defended university colleagues accused of having communist views. He argued for the expansion of democracy and saw social and moral integration as a means of achieving this, while simultaneously understanding anomie as denoting the danger of authoritarianism (Gerhardt, 2002: ix–x). He also defended Robert Oppenheimer when he was denounced as a communist supporter in a 1954 security hearing. This prompted McCarthyite officials in the State Department to consider confiscating Parsons' passport (Hamilton, 1983: 45). The point is not that individual scholars, such as Parsons or Merton, were close to specific political positions, but rather that their sociological approaches were deeply influenced by the social and political realities of the post-war United States. Parsons' and Merton's work was generally well received within, and to some extent outside of, academia precisely because it tapped well into the existing zeitgeist. Their evolutionary understanding of social change with the focus on shared normative patterns and the intrinsic functionality of different social roles was largely based on their observations of the 1950s and early 1960s.

## Arguments and Ideas

Structural functionalism was never a unified theoretical approach. This was already visible within the works of early functionalist sociologists and anthropologists such as Durkheim, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown or Kroeber, all of whom developed a different understanding of social structure, functional patterns or social change. This equally applies to Parsons and Merton, who articulated different theories and who also focused on different sociological questions. However, all structural functionalists share similar epistemological foundations that prioritise societal values and ideas over material and political factors, and look for social structural and functional explanations beyond the motivations and behaviours of individuals.

## Talcott Parsons and Social Systems

Although Parsons had already published a number of influential journal articles throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, it was his first book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), that established his reputation as a leading American social theorist. Drawing on his extensive intellectual encounters and education in Europe, Parsons aimed to challenge the well-established utilitarian and narrow positivist interpretations of social change that dominated much of American social science. In contrast to the highly individualised, self-interest-based, 'positivistic theory of action', Parsons builds what he terms a 'voluntaristic theory of action'. At the centre of this theory is the 'unit act' composed of an actor, an end, a situation over which the actor has variable control, and the means of action. The voluntaristic theory of action argues that the actions of individuals are not determined by their material conditions, or their social environment, but by the voluntary choices they make. However, this is not to say that human beings are atomised individualists who make random choices. On the contrary, Parsons argues that individual actions are regularly based on, but not determined by, the values that have been attained and developed during one's primary and secondary socialisation. In other words, individual actors always face a variety of alternative modes of action and they tend to make particular choices on the basis of their cultural upbringing and shared value systems.

Building on the classical contributions of Durkheim, Pareto, Marshall and, most of all, Weber, Parsons articulates a synthetic theory of social action that emphasises the centrality of cultural values. According to Parsons the writings of all these thinkers implicitly converge – what was later dubbed a 'the convergence thesis'. A synthesis of the work produced by these four theorists is a step towards formulating a new 'grand theory' of social action. Hence, in contrast to positivist utilitarian accounts that cannot explain the 'Hobbesian problem of order', Parsons insists that social order exists because individuals are socialised into specific systems of cultural values. The presence of these shared value systems contributes towards the establishment and reproduction of the shared social institutions, while the social institutions themselves reinforce a shared normative universe that ultimately helps regulate individual action.

For Parsons, sociology is a study of meaningful action, an attempt to understand how social agents make sense of the world they inhabit. Drawing on the neo-Kantian theory of knowledge, Parsons sees social reality through the prism of what he calls analytical realism: 'an epistemology which stressed that "facts" are statements about experience in terms of specific conceptual scheme which provides a meaningful ordering of that experience' (Hamilton, 1983: 64). In this context, a voluntaristic concept of action stands for the subjective and meaning-oriented views of the world. However, unlike Kant or Whitehead, another major influence, who focus on individual meanings, Parsons shifts attention towards wider social dynamics. Hence, in his approach, voluntaristic action is patterned into specific interactions and social relationships. What make these relationships and interactions hold together, thus also making social order possible, are the shared normative orientations of social actors.

To sum up, the key points of Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action are the following: (1) actors are capable of making choices and engaging in voluntary action; (2) these actions are made in relation to the specific goals, and the available choices, actors aim to achieve; (3) these goals and choices depend upon particular norms, beliefs and values that position such choices and goals; and (4) social action takes place within already existing environmental and biological constraints which limit the choices and the actual realisation of desired ends (Hamilton, 1983: 78).

## Social Systems

*The Structure of Social Action* provided a stepping stone for a more comprehensive structural-functionalist theory that emerges in Parsons' *The Social System* (1951). While the early work was an attempt to make the case for a non-instrumentalist understanding of social action, *The Social System* was a much more ambitious publication that aimed to provide a novel general sociological theory capable of explaining a variety of social phenomena. In this book Parsons establishes the foundations of structural functionalism which he understood not as a particular approach, but as a stage in the development of universal social science. The guiding principle of the structural-functionalist approach is that society is not a conglomerate of self-interested individuals, but a complex system of mutually interdependent parts.

The notion of social systems refers to the patterned interdependence and interrelationships that exist between individuals, groups, institutions, organisations and other social structures and as such operate as a relatively coherent whole. More specifically, Parsons perceives social systems as networks involving interaction processes between two or more actors. In his view they entail the presence of culture and systems of language which allow for the communication and interaction of actors. The aim of *The Social System* was to create a generalised conceptual model which could analyse 'the structure and processes of social systems' by focusing on 'the delineation of the system of institutionalised roles and the motivational processes organised about them' (Parsons, 1951: vii).

Moreover, the task of sociology is to explore social systems through the prism of 'the institutionalisation of patterns of value orientation in roles' (Parsons, 1951: vii). For Parsons, social systems exist independently of any specific individuals as social institutions preserve their forms even when specific actors have been changed. However, this is not to say that individual actions do not matter. Parsons is adamant that social systems exist and operate only in so far as individual actors are motivated by their own personality systems. In this scheme, heavily influenced by Freudian ideas, personality systems involve three different aspects: (1) cognitive, relating to actors understanding of the situation 'in which his [their] needs-dispositions are actuated'; (2) cathectic, involving actors' gratification or deprivation that they receive from the situation; and (3) evaluative, concerning actors' interpretation of the meanings associated with the specific situation (Hamilton, 1983: 100).

In addition to the personality system, which addresses the needs, motivation and orientations of individual actors, and the social system which refers to patterned interdependence of individual actors, institutions and organisations, Parsons also identifies another key component of action theory – the cultural system. The cultural system, often referred to as culture or cultural patterns, binds other aspects of the social world together. The cultural system makes interactions between personality and social systems possible as culture underpins most social action. More specifically, the personality system is imbued with the particular norms and cultural values that shape the behaviour and value orientations of individual actors.

Similarly, social systems entail shared cultural mores that make the operation of everyday actions more functional. In addition to these three-action systems, Parsons later identifies the behavioural organism as another subsystem which provides the source of energy for other subsystems. To explain how these four subsystems operate and interact, he devised a complex model focusing on the four functional imperatives of the system – the AGIL schema.

As we noted above, Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action emphasises that actors make individual choices and also that such choices are shaped by shared cultural norms. To account for the variations in the way choices are made, Parsons introduced the notion of 'pattern variables' – an analytical category that identifies elements present in an individual choice of action and explores whether variables are adaptive or integrative. He distinguishes between four main pattern variables: (1) affectivity vs. affective neutrality; (2) specificity vs. diffuseness; (3) universalism vs. particularism; and (4) ascription vs. achievement. These variables allow for identifying whether particular choices are made in terms of actors' emotional or rational commitments, whether they are more concerned with specific issues or are diffuse, whether they are oriented towards more universalist or particularist goals and whether they involve ascriptive or achieved status.

Nevertheless, since this dichotomous typology proved too restrictive in accommodating the complexity of social action, Parsons developed a more elaborate scheme which zooms in on the four functional problems that every system has to address – adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latent pattern maintenance. He argues that complex societies are characterised by ever-increasing differentiation along functional lines, which leads towards greater specialisation. For example, as societies develop and expand, their economic systems become more complex and more specialised into different organisations, institutions and roles that emerge within different areas of the economy – production, resource allocation, distribution of goods and services, banking, and so on. Hence complexity brings greater differentiation and specialisation and the key issue becomes how large systems maintain a functioning social order.

Parsons explains this through his AGIL schema where the four 'functional imperatives' are related to the specific functional demands they need to face and resolve: (1) Adaptation stands for the system's need to obtain enough resources and to adapt to its environment, as well as to ability of the system to transform its environment so as to fulfil the requirements of the system.

(2) Goal attainment denotes a need of the system to formulate specific goals and to motivate and mobilise energy to achieve such goals. (3) Integration indicates the system's need to co-ordinate the inter-unit rapport between its component parts, in order to preserve coherence and solidarity and avoid any substantive disruptions in the system. (4) Latent pattern maintenance refers to the system's need to generate and maintain cultural patterns that foster, sustain and store the motivational energy of individuals; this functional imperative includes two linked issues: tension management that helps resolve actors' internal tensions and strains; and pattern maintenance involving the provision of ideas, values, symbols, judgements and tastes from the cultural system.

In addition, these four functional imperatives also differ in terms of whether they are external or internal, and whether they are consummatory or instrumental. The first dichotomy refers to the system's inner organisational requirements (internal function) or the system's relationship with its environment (external function). The second dichotomy stands for the system's attainment of desired goals (consummatory function) or the system's acquisition and incorporation of specific means (instrumental function).

These highly abstract categories can be simplified with the use of a specific example – the traditional lifestyle of Hopi Native Americans. In order to survive the tribe needs to interact with the external world by hunting animals, tending livestock, ploughing fields and acquiring other resources (adaptation). The tribe requires a relatively coherent set of short-term and long-term goals (i.e. taking part in tribal conflicts, moving hunting grounds, etc.), which involves a developed mechanism of rule and decision making (goal attainment).

The Hopi possess shared cultural values centred on reverence and respect for all things in nature and their common belief system is built around an idea that one should be at peace with Nature and live in harmony in line with the teachings of Maasaw, the Creator of Earth (integration). The tribe also maintains a system of primary socialisation which teaches key skills and cultural values to the younger members of society and also operates well-established practices and rituals for conflict management and resolution (latent pattern maintenance). Parsons considers these four functional imperatives universal and necessary for the existence of any social system – from the largest, such as the nation-state, to the smallest, such as the face-to-face interaction.

## Evolutionary Theory

In his later works including *Societies* (1966), Parsons develops a structural-functionalist evolutionary theory of change. This approach, heavily influenced by Durkheim, analyses social change through the prism of the increasing differentiation of social systems. Parsons (1966: 21–2) identifies three key evolutionary processes: (1) the ever-increasing differentiation of the system's elements into patterns of functional interdependence; (2) the development of new means and structural devices for integration into differentiating systems; and (3) the augmented survival capacity of differentiated systems within their environments.

For Parsons differentiation involves the enhancement of the adaptive capacity of social subsystems, which takes place in an evolutionary fashion. Simply put, in this view social systems resemble organisms as they adapt to ever-changing environments. Hence, as the old subsystems prove inadequate for handling new complexities, evolution fosters the creation of new, more specialised and more differentiated subsystems. In the Parsonian structural-functionalist account social change takes place on four levels: (1) increasing differentiation of social systems from each other; (2) increasing differentiation within the subsystems; (3) the emergence of crises and their resolutions within the differentiated subsystems; and (4) the adaptive upgrading of the survival capacity of subsystems within their environments. Parsons argues that the differentiation process generates new problems including the co-ordination and integration of the new subsystems.

In this context, the evolutionary process entails changes in skills and abilities as well as the presence of a more generalised system of shared values which could accommodate the increased diversity of functions and goals caused by the process of differentiation. In *Societies* (1966), Parsons applies this theoretical model to a variety of social orders through time, arguing that as evolution advances, societies become more differentiated and more functionally interdependent. He explores this evolutionary trajectory starting from what he terms primitive societies of aborigines, to the archaic social orders possessing written language (i.e. Egypt and Mesopotamia), to the 'historic intermediate empires' such as China, India, the Islamic and Roman Empires, to ancient Greece and Israel, which in his view represent the 'seed-bed' societies providing the foundations of the modern social order.

The same evolutionary argument is advanced in *The System of Modern Societies* (1971: 1) where Parsons identifies the West as the cradle of modernity:

> the modern type of society has emerged in a single evolutionary arena, the West, which is essentially the area of Europe that fell heir to the western half of the Roman Empire north of the Mediterranean. The Society of Western Christendom, then, provided the base from which what we shall call the 'system' of modern society 'took off'.

Although Parsons was adamant that societies rise up the evolutionary ladder (from primitive to intermediate to modern), he recognised that evolution was not a unilinear process and that some social orders experience downwards trajectories, collapse or stagnation.

## Robert Merton and the Middle-Range Theory

Even though both Parsons and Merton belong to the same theoretical tradition of structural functionalism, their focus, approach and even their writing styles are very different. While Parsons was preoccupied with developing a grand sociological theory that would be applicable to all times and places, Merton preferred to develop new concepts and ideas that would help explain a more specific sociological phenomena – from crime and deviance to science and ideologies.

## The Sociology of Science and Middle-Range Theories

Merton was one of the pioneers of the sociology of science. His first book *Science, Technology & Society in Seventeenth-Century England* (1938), based on his PhD project, focused on the relationship between science and religion. More specifically, drawing on Weber's Protestant thesis, Merton argues that there is a strong historical connection between the rise of Protestant Pietism and Puritanism and the birth of experimental science. The book makes a case that science develops with the gradual accumulation of observations, improvements in methodology and experimental technique. In this context, according to Merton, one could identify striking parallels between the religious backgrounds of the leading scientists and the popularity of science in seventeenth-century England.

Merton attempts to show how the leading inventors and scientists involved with the Royal Society were mostly Puritans and other Protestants. He argues that their Puritan ethos was not necessary for triggering a scientific revolution, but it did contribute towards making scientific and religious values compatible. He finds synergy between Puritan and Pietist ascetic ethics and corresponding lifestyles with the self-discipline, rationality and the long-term ideational commitment that underpins scientific endeavours. Thus, for Merton, Puritan religion gave an impetus to, and justification for, science: science was linked to God's influence on the world, which freed scientific research from previous religious restrictions. However, once science became institutionalised it was gradually decoupled from religion and even became an enemy of religious belief.

Another important contribution in this area was Merton's (1942) analysis of the social norms and social organisation of science. He identified the four key ideals that underpin the actions of scientists and their goals (often referred to as CUDOS): (1) Communism – the shared ownership of scientific discoveries whereby scientists receive esteem and recognition in exchange for giving up their intellectual property. (2) Universalism – the shared principle where truth claims are assessed through the universal and impersonal criteria that have no bearing on issues of group membership (i.e. class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc.). (3) Disinterestedness – the perception that scientists find their fulfilment in scientific activity and as such their rewards are mostly immaterial. (4) Organised scepticism – all ideas and truth claims require testing and are subject to meticulous scrutiny by the scientific community.

Merton also created a number of highly influential concepts to describe and explain a variety of phenomena that often accompany scientific undertakings. For example, together with Harriet Zuckerman (1968) he identified a common practice, which he termed the Matthew effect, whereby well-known scientists often receive substantially more recognition for their work while lesser known scientists receive much less recognition, even for their path-breaking contributions. The persistence of the Matthew effect undermines the universalist and disinterested ambition of science as leading scientists tend to accumulate disproportionally awards, grants and prestigious titles, at the expense of other scientists. Other idioms coined by Merton include 'multiples', referring to independent discoveries of the same phenomena, and 'obliteration by incorporation', when a concept becomes well established in everyday discourse and its creator is forgotten (i.e. charisma, paradigm or self-fulfilling prophecy).

With regard to the latter, Merton begins his justly celebrated paper 'The Self-fulfilling Prophecy' (1968b) by citing the Thomas theorem according to which, 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. For Merton this illustrates, that 'men respond not only to the objective features of the situation, but also, and at times primarily, to the meaning this situation has for them' (1957: 475). Merton goes onto to expound a parable concerning the collapse of The Last National Bank. On Black Wednesday 1932, the bank, heretofore a flourishing institution, is beset by a crisis as a result of a false rumour of its insolvency. As a result of this rumour, a belief in its financial viability is replaced with a view that it is insolvent, starting a run on the bank and ultimately its collapse. The introduction of a false or 'unreal definition' for Merton, invariably causes discordant and chaotic conequences: 'The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true' (1968b: 477). Such a process can be extended, he argues, to explain the racism geared towards Jews and African Americans.

Drawing on the examples of classical sociologists, and in particular Durkheim's *Suicide*, Merton argues that any attempt to build an overarching grand sociological theory of everything is largely a futile exercise as such theories become too abstract and too distant from the concrete observations that take place in specific social settings. Hence, instead of theorising about abstract entities such as society, culture or politics in general, Merton suggests developing middle-range theories that zoom in on specific sociological phenomena which allow for the fruitful combination of theoretical analysis with in-depth empirical observation.

Middle-range theory involves a sociological enquiry that utilises a limited range of data in order to provide a generalisable and theoretically informed analysis. As Merton (1967: 39) emphasises middle range theory is positioned 'between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organisation, and social change'. In his view, middle-range theories start from the level of empirical observation which then would lead towards generating more general statements that could be verified by data. However, while Merton was critical of total theoretical systems, he was still committed to the gradual development of a universal theory. He perceived middle-range theories as a stepping stone towards building a more complex and elaborate sociological explanation. For Merton, sociology was not as ‘mature’ as physics and other sciences and as such it could not generate universal theories. Nevertheless, with the development of more comprehensive middle-range theories sociology would eventually reach the level of other sciences and produce a system of universal laws.

## Functional Analysis

Unlike Parsons, who focused on building highly abstract grand systems, Merton’s structural functionalism was therefore less systemic, and more amenable to empirical research. For Merton functionalism stood for the analytical attempt to interpret data by identifying the consequences for the larger structures that underpin the data. This type of functional analysis aimed to avoid the inflexibility and static system modelling that characterised traditional functionalism. Hence, Merton agrees with Parsons that functional interdependence is necessary for the existence of the social order and that shared values make such order possible. However, he also argues that not all social action fosters social integration. In this context, he distinguishes between social functions and social dysfunctions. While functions contribute towards social unity, dysfunctions generate tension and conflict. In contrast to Parsons, who understood society as a giant equilibrium, Merton makes clear that disorder and disorganisation are also part of social life. For example, he identified civil wars and the marginalised position of African Americans in the 1950s as examples of dysfunctional social order.

Merton also differentiates between manifest and latent functions. By manifest functions he means the outcomes that one expects to occur, an action that was intended and was perceived exactly as intended. In contrast, latent functions stand for actions that were not intended and often not even perceived to have taken place. For example, traditional societies use the rain dance rituals to generate rain for their crops (manifest function), but these rain dances also foster greater social integration of the tribe engaged in a shared ritual practice (latent function). The strong functional element of latency is also present in Merton’s (1936) notion of the unanticipated consequences of social action. This refers to paradoxical situations that are triggered by actions that originally were not intended. For example, the Marxist idea that as capitalism grows and expands it will concentrate wealth in a small number of corporations, and as such would ultimately become its own gravedigger has, according to Merton, generated unanticipated consequences resulting in the development of anti-capitalist movements that reformed ruthless forms of nineteenth-century capitalism into the more humane welfare capitalism of the twentieth century. The unintended consequences of social action can again lead towards a self-defeating prophecy – an announced prediction that ultimately prevents what it predicts from occurring. Typical examples are announcing future price reductions which then hinder current sales. This is the opposite of the self-fulfilling prophecy, which as we noted is achieved because people believe and act according to what they believe is bound to happen.

## Theory of Deviance

In addition, Merton made highly influential contributions to the study of crime and deviance. The starting point of his analysis is the functionalist strain theory of deviant behaviour. According to this approach, crime and deviance are by-products of the mismatch between one's expectations and goals on the one hand, and the legitimate opportunities societies provide, on the other. Thus, social progress and reduction in crime levels are achieved in societies where the individual goals match social opportunities. However, when there are no opportunities and individual goals and expectations are blocked, this generates a situation whereby some individuals turn to crime to attain the financial and other material means in order to fulfil socially desirable goals.

For Merton the rising levels of crime and deviance often reflect an anomic social condition. Drawing on Durkheim's idea, Merton (1968) describes anomie as a situation of normlessness that emerges when there is 'an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them'. However, Merton recognised that anomie does not automatically lead to crime. Instead, the disconnection between cultural expectations and actual structural conditions often generates a variety of social responses, some of which lead to deviant behaviour. Merton differentiates between five different social responses to anomie: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. The most common social response is conformity with the rules, where individuals aim to attain cultural goals within the system by utilising the socially accepted means.

In contrast, innovation stands for reaching cultural goals in socially unacceptable ways, such as turning to deviant or criminal behaviour. The inventiveness indicates behaviour that goes outside of dominant social norms as individuals invent new ways to achieve specific societal goals. The third response, ritualism, includes acceptance of structural means with the realisation that the stated cultural goals cannot be attained. This ritualist behaviour usually does not lead to crime, but it is likely to generate deviant behaviour such as drug abuse, alcoholism, suicidal behaviour, etc. The individuals who pursue this course of action stay within the acceptable structural means while giving up on the idea of reaching the ever-elusive societal goals. The next social response refers to the rejection of both the cultural goals and structural means – retreatism. This type of social behaviour is also less likely to lead to crime as retreaters focus on finding a way to escape societal goals and the prescribed structural means. The final model of social response is rebellion, which is usually a temporary phenomenon associated with youthful reaction to established norms and structures. This type of behaviour also rejects both the cultural goals and structural means, but in contrast to retreaters who tend to withdraw from action, rebels aim to replace the dominant norms and structures with an alternative system of social order. Thus, for Merton, crime is most likely to emerge among the innovators while ritualism tends to accompany deviant behaviour.

In addition to his substantial conceptual and theoretical contributions Merton also invented a number of methodological techniques which are still used among social science researchers, including the notion of the focus group, role models, status sets and role sets, reference group behaviour and the serendipity pattern in research.

## Contemporary Relevance and Applications

Although Parsons was one of the most influential sociologists for decades his influence has largely diminished in significance. Merton's legacy appears stronger in the sense that his methodological and conceptual creations such as the focus group or middle-range theory are still widely referred to and used in empirical contexts, but his functionalist approach has also lost much of its global influence. With the rise of anti-foundational perspectives such as post-structuralism, post-Marxism and post-modernism in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, functionalism found itself under stern critique, or was just ignored. Nevertheless, a number of influential sociologists from Jeffrey Alexander and Neil Smelser in the United States, Piotr Sztompka in Poland, to Niklas Luhmann in Germany have revitalised the structural-functionalist tradition of analysis.

### THE RENEWAL OF PARSONS

The standing of Parsonian social theory within sociology has been subject to great fluctuation. Having dominated the discipline during the 1950s, it came under increasing attack during the 1960s, before being virtually dismissed in the 1970s. Yet, despite this rejection, the shadow of Parsons continued to loom large in the plurality of emerging, largely micro-sociological approaches. It was not long, therefore, before Parsons made a return in the 1980s, notably in German sociology. This renewal of Parsons continues today, with an identifiable revisionist interpretation of the theory and theorist at present. Whether Parsons may yet again come to be rejected remains open. What is certain, however, is his central role in consolidating the sociological frame of reference.

However, the most influential and innovative reworking of structural functionalism has taken place in the works of Jeffrey Alexander. Initially Alexander (1985) developed a neo-functionalist theory which attempted to address some shortcomings of the classical functionalist approach. Hence, Alexander argued that neo-functionalism can address the micro as well as the macro level of analysis; that social systems are not rigid and fixed but involve historical contingencies and interactional creativity; that social conflict is also part of social order; and that functionalism can calibrate its analytical tools to understand historical change as dynamic and unpredictable. In contrast to Parsons, who devotes little attention to actors, Alexander emphasises individual actions and argues that social action depends on the will of concrete individuals who operate in complex social networks. This neo-functionalist refinement of Parsons developed further into what Alexander (2004) termed 'a strong programme in cultural sociology'.

The main ambition of the strong programme was to uncouple culture from social structure and emphasise the cultural autonomy of the social. In this view, values, ideas and symbols are not dependent variables but autonomous forces that shape social institutions, politics and the economy. As Alexander's closest collaborator Philip Smith (2005: 4) puts it in his analysis of war narratives: 'war is not just about culture, but it is all about culture'. Alexander and his collaborators draw on the functionalist tradition, including the works of later Durkheim, Weber, Geertz and Parsons and combine these insights with structuralism and hermeneutics, in order to develop a culture-centred explanatory model. In this context, Parsons is criticised as lacking a 'hermeneutic dimension' and therefore could not explain the dynamics of social values. To illustrate the analytical value of the strong programme, Alexander explores a variety of social phenomena – from cultural traumas and social performance to iconic consciousness and further afield. For example, in his studies of collective traumas, Alexander argues that catastrophic events do not create social traumas by themselves but have to undergo a relatively protracted period of narration and signification to be popularly understood as shared traumas.

He deploys the examples of the Holocaust and Watergate, among others, to argue that 'only if the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves' (Alexander, 2004: 10). Hence, the strong programme in culture maintains the structural-functionalist emphasis on ideas, values and symbolic action, but unlike Parsons, it sees culture as a fully autonomous and historically dynamic force.

Robert Merton's work has also been developed further by several contemporary scholars. Thus, Piotr Sztompka (1986, 1993, 2007) has explored Merton's ethos of science in the contemporary context pointing to difficulties in maintaining trust in the scientific enterprise which characterised the world after the Second World War. While Merton identified the trustworthiness of scholarship as the key principle of science, Sztompka demonstrates that with the privatisation of science, commodification of research results and ever-increasing bureaucratisation of scientific institutions, one can identify a decrease of trust in science. Robert Agnew (2006) has also revised and expanded Merton's strain theory to explain different types of deviance and crime. Agnew argues that the focus on social class or specific cultural attributes cannot capture the variety of deviant behaviours.

Instead, he pushes structural functionalism further and insists that individual norms shape social behaviour. In his general strain theory, the emphasis is on one's immediate social environment, and in particular, on one's emotional responses. Hence, Agnew insists that one's anticipated or actual failure to attain positively valued goals is likely to generate an emotional strain. In addition, the strain can also result from the anticipated or actual presentation of negative stimuli or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli. In this context, the recurrent episodes of frustration and anger are likely to foster negative self-perceptions which foster one's alienation from society. The continuous experiences of rejection are likely to develop and feed into the further development of negative emotions, which ultimately may push individuals towards deviance and crime.

## Criticisms

Parsons' and Merton's work remained highly influential throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. However, the rise of civil rights movements and the protracted Vietnam War had profound impacts on undermining the consensus-oriented social science of the period, which was reflected in increased criticism of the structural-functionalist paradigm. Early critics such as C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner focused on the verbose, jargon-filled, Parsonian terminology, the functionalist inability to explain social conflicts and class polarisation. Mills was also highly critical of Parsons' positivist ambition to build a grand theory, arguing that much of Parsons theory building was not grounded in any actual analysis of data, while his positivism could not account for the contingent character of social life. Moreover, within the changed social environment of the post-1960s, the new criticisms challenged the entire epistemological and political foundations of structural functionalism. Hence Parsons, Merton and other representatives of this approach have been criticised for their epistemological idealism. Structural-functionalist accounts of social order overemphasise the role that ideas, values and norms play in social life. In this approach individuals and groups are rarely understood as autonomous creatures defined by their diverse free wills, emotions and rationality and much more as the by-products of the cultural worlds they inhabit – a form of normative determinism.

Furthermore, the overemphasis on the cultural patterns and internalisation of social values prevents one from seeing how central the coercive, political and economic factors are in the formation and maintenance of specific social orders. For example, Parsons' analysis of family relationships indicates the limits of culture-centred analysis. For Parsons, the nuclear family is conducive to the social and emotional stability of individuals and as such it is a cornerstone of primary socialisation. In this view the division of gender roles with men undertaking 'instrumental roles' (going to work and providing financial support) and women assuming 'expressive roles' (taking care of children and the home) helps maintain the social stability of the family and the wider social system (Parsons and Bales, 1956).

However, this approach remains utterly blind to the power dynamics that operate within patriarchal families and wider patriarchal societies. Hence, this culture-centred view cannot account for the economic and political inequalities within the household or for the presence of domestic violence and other power-related aspects of everyday social life in patriarchy. This criticism also applies to the neo-functionalists' approaches including Alexander's strong programme in cultural studies and Luhmann's system theory, both of which overemphasise cultural factors.

Other criticisms of structural functionalism focus on its present-centric and teleological understanding of social change. For one thing, most structural-functionalist accounts shy away from analysis of large-scale processes, yet when they do undertake them, the emphasis is more on recent historical transformations. In his later publications, Parsons attempted to address this problem by developing an evolutionary theory of system differentiation. However, this evolutionary modernisation theory of change is very static, and rather teleological, in its organisation. Even when he makes clear that his model is not unilinear, the central assumption that underpins this theory – the notion of ever-increasing functional interdependence and complexity – is highly problematic as it leaves little room for historical contingencies and multidirectional change.

For example, Parsons' (1975) explanation of the 'ethnic revival' that took place in the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States, emphasises its temporary and unexpected character. Thus for Parsons, the resurgence of ethnic politics is a historical aberration reflected in the transitory de-differentiation which itself was caused by the intensity of dramatic social changes. In this view such temporary processes cannot stop the evolutionary path towards the greater differentiation of social systems. This type of analysis wrongly assumes that the salience of ethnic identification represents a return to 'the atavistic past' rather than what it actually is – the product of inter-group competition in a modernising social environment. For another thing, Parsons' modernisation theory is deeply Eurocentric as it assumes that all social orders develop according to a similar historical logic.

Thus, his system determinism establishes rigid hierarchies between societies with the West at the helm of this social pyramid. However, as much of recent scholarship has documented well, rather than representing a historically continuous entity that has experienced uninterrupted rise and development, 'the West' is a modern ideological construction that has no historical reality, as the centres of political power have shifted through time and space (GoGwilt, 1995).

Merton's functionalist analysis has also faced similar criticisms, pointing to its overemphasis on culture over economic and political power, its static understanding of the social order and its one-dimensional evolutionary understanding of modernity. Furthermore his early work linking Puritanism and Pietism with the rise of science has been empirically challenged by several scholars, who argue that many major scientific breakthroughs took place outside of Protestant Europe (i.e. Galileo, Descartes, Copernicus, da Vinci, etc.) and that many Protestant leaders were hostile to science (Becker, 1992; Ferngren, 2002). Some scholars have also criticised Merton for ignoring the role philosophy and mathematics have played in the birth of experimental science. Merton's work on crime and deviance has also been put under the spotlight and contemporary criminologists find some of his ideas inadequate to explain the variety of motivations involved in crime. For example, Brym and Lie (2007) argue that the strain theory developed by Merton focuses mostly on the street crime traditionally associated with the working classes that have no resources, while ignoring the white-collar crime prominent among middle- and upper-class individuals.

## Conclusion

Structural functionalism has lost much of the appeal and influence it had in the twentieth century. Once a dominant sociological paradigm throughout the world, the classical structural-functionalist theories have now either become relatively marginal or evolved into much more complex system theories. However, Parsons' and Merton's intellectual legacies have been much wider than their original functionalist theories. For one thing, Parsons initiated the ongoing debate on the role that structure and agency play in the organisation of social order. His ideas have also contributed to recent links between cybernetics and social theory, and his studies of cultural systems have influenced a variety of new approaches within and beyond sociology. Merton's work has also left a lasting legacy. The idea of the middle-range theory has become a norm in much of social science. His methodological inventions including the focus group, the reference group, role models and role sets, have become a staple of contemporary research techniques across different disciplines. Even his strain theory of deviance is still influencing new generations of criminologists. Thus structural functionalism is not dead; its intellectual legacies are still shaping much of the contemporary world.

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