



Once Again: The Case For Parsons's Voluntarism

Author(s): Jeffrey C. Alexander

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substantive voluntarism is evaluative. More than this, the implicit value placed on individual autonomy is inconsistent with a significant portion of the sociological tradition. However much Marx and Durkheim would seem to be poles apart on other sociological issues, an argument could easily be made that they "converge" in their negative assessment of individualism in modern society. And contrary to Alexander, Marx's image of man hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, and criticizing after dinner could be seen as representing significant dedifferentiation.

John W. Heeren
*California State College,
 San Bernardino*

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ONCE AGAIN: THE CASE FOR PARSONS'S VOLUNTARISM*

Mr. Heeren has reiterated criticisms which have become the stock-in-trade of Parsons interpretation. Far from being unaware of the points he raises, I directed much of my reinterpretive efforts precisely to such objections. After years of partial misinterpretation and often misleading debate, the process of incorporating the important breakthroughs that Parsons achieved will, evidently, be a difficult and uneven one. Old myths die slowly.

Let me make four points:

(1) Voluntarism is not antithetical to systems analysis, nor, certainly, is it antithetical to normative control. One of the primary reasons for distinguishing, as I did in my article,

between the formal and substantive elements in Parsons's work is to point to the multilevel character of any social theory. There is a wide range of diverse components in any theory; these components may be viewed as forming a continuum from the most general kinds of commitments to the most specific (Alexander, 1980, Vol. 1, Pt. 1). Every theory contains general presuppositional commitments (what I called theoretic-epistemic, or formal elements), as well as very specific propositional statements which are much more directly derived from empirical observation. In between these two poles of the continuum, there are a number of other kinds of commitments. Ideological assumptions, for example, derive neither from presuppositions nor from empirical observation; combined with empirical propositions, however, they form the substantive elements of a sociological theory.

Another kind of intermediate element, and here we come to the issue of systems, is the kind of model a theorist chooses. The fundamental point here is that commitments to models and commitments to presuppositions vary independently. A multidimensional, voluntaristic approach on the theoretic-epistemic level can be combined with systemic models, and the result will be a voluntaristic model of social systems. On the other hand, an instrumentalist, deterministic approach at the presuppositional level, which disallows the resort to transcendent values upon which voluntarism must be based, also may be combined with a systemic model. In this case, the system theory in question will, indeed, be antivoluntaristic and deterministic. Far from his system model pushing him into an overly rigid determinism, there is, in fact, the danger that Parsons's model will slip into an overly voluntaristic position. Insofar as his presuppositional synthesis of idealism and materialism falters, this slippage frequently occurs.

To respond to a related point, voluntarism does not depend on whether an "actor's choice" is preserved, nor does it depend on whether or not an actor is described as a "member" of a normative system. In the first place, every concrete actor has a choice in every concrete situation. Parsons has never denied free will in this limited sense; he has spoken, rather, of the probability that norms will be followed in a given instance (Parsons and Shils, 1951:155-6). These norms, of course, might be, in substantive terms, highly individualistic and critical ones, so that the conformity to norms cannot be confused with conformity in the pejorative, common sense use of the term. This observation leads to my second point: it is a nominalist error, associ-

*Address all communications to: Jeffrey C. Alexander; Department of Sociology; University of California; Los Angeles, CA 90024.

ated with classical liberalism and neo-Kantian theory, to identify voluntarism with free will in the strong sense, that is, with the actions of a completely nonconstrained and nonsocialized actor. There is a long tradition in social thought, most recently exhibited by Durkheim, Freud, and Piaget, which believes, correctly in my opinion, that freedom depends, in part, on certain distinctive internal qualities which are produced only through association and internalization.

(2) As this last point helps to clarify, Parsons certainly does not advocate individualism in the laissez-faire sense of the term, but rather the socially-constrained exercise of individual choice. This intention, of course, is the reason for his characterization of the modern situation as one of "institutionalized individualism" (Parsons, 1967). As I tried to demonstrate in my article, Parsons's individualism is rooted, first of all, in an epistemological critique of individualistic theories like utilitarianism. His substantive theory, furthermore, tries to synthesize, with the classical liberal commitment to the individual, the approaches to individual freedom imbedded in more collectivist theories in both the materialist and idealist traditions (Alexander, 1978a:183-6). To argue that individual freedom rests upon universalistic values and upon strong bureaucratic and legal controls on the unfettered market does not impress me as an endorsement of individualism, nor as substantially different from the general positions proffered by Durkheim and Marx.

On the other hand, as I also mentioned in my article, Parsons does often exhibit an overly optimistic attitude toward the institution of private property, and often accepts with equanimity the psychological consequences of a cultural emphasis on individualism. Insofar as Parsons veers towards such an individualism, it is fair to say that he has abandoned his synthesizing impulse on the substantive—empirical and ideological—level of his theory.

(3) Parsons does not consider differentiation to be inevitable, as Mr. Heeren's own example from *The Systems of Modern Societies* demonstrates very well. Parsons does indeed describe feudalism as a "drastic regression" in western history, and he spends a good deal of time analyzing the social structure of this period (Parsons, 1971:33-45). Does this imply that differentiation is inevitable or, indeed, that Parsons believes precisely the opposite? Developmental theorists, like Freud and Piaget, outline the mental structures necessary for psychic health and cognitive maturity; does this mean that Freud and Piaget believe that every individual will grow up to be healthy and

perceptive? In the same monograph, Parsons also analyzes the countries of the Counter-Reformation, specifically, how their less differentiated, more ascribed structures prevented them from capitalizing on the opportunities for development presented by the Renaissance, as western European nations were able to do (Parsons, 1971: 40-3, 49-54, 71-4). This does not sound like inevitable differentiation to me.

I would agree, however, that Parsons is often overly optimistic about the emergence of differentiated structures. One of the primary justifications for this optimism is his insistence that differentiation is produced by a system's need for "functional adaptation" to structured, long-term disequilibrium. Less optimistic than Parsons, I wonder whether a bureaucratic state, less differentiated from the legal and religious systems, might not be more adaptive, in many respects, than a democratic, more differentiated system. It was this question which prompted me to make one of the distinctions I emphasize in my article, namely, that an ideological commitment to individual emancipation has affected, and perhaps made less realistic, Parsons's understanding of the actual course which societal differentiation takes.

(4) Finally, I would certainly not argue that Parsons's theory is internally consistent, nor did I do so in my article (Alexander, 1978a:192-4). Like many other great theorists (see, for example, my discussion of Weber in Alexander, 1978b), Parsons's work is deeply ambiguous, about both formal and substantive issues. As I think I made clear, I wrote this article in order to emphasize the positive elements in Parsons's contribution.

Jeffrey C. Alexander
University of California, Los Angeles

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1970 CENSUS FIGURES ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE INCOME: SOME COMPARATIVE FIGURES FROM ALTERNATE SOURCES*

(COMMENT ON LONG, ASR FEBRUARY, 1974)

The conclusions drawn in the Long (1974) article about the propensity of black and white migrants to six large American cities (New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.) to be poor (cf. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973a:x, for definition) or to be receiving welfare during the year 1969 as compared with persons born in these cities, for the same year, were based on information obtained from the 1970 census.

In this connection, the writer wishes to mention two studies published in 1972 which reviewed data reported in the 1970 census on public assistance income, or welfare. The first is a RAND study entitled "Two Counts of Welfare in New York City: A Comparison of City and Census Data for 1969," by C. Peter Rydell (1972). This study, as its title indicates, compared official statistics published by the New York City (1969) Department of Social Services on the total number of welfare cases receiving assistance and total cash disbursements for the year 1969 with the same figures which were published in the 1970 census.

The study concluded that "the 1970 census of population underestimated the number of welfare cases and the amount of welfare income in New York City during 1969. In both instances the census estimate was essentially 40 percent below the city's estimate" (Rydell, 1972:7). The exact figures were a 41.1% underestimation of total cash grants and a 39% underestimation of total cases.

This study compensated for the different time frames used in the census statistics (yearly totals) and the city figures (monthly totals) and also for the fact that the census counted a single family which included two or more cases as a single case, while the city counted it as two or more cases. The latter

disparity was compensated for by preparing estimates of the duplication of cases in the census figures and adding this figure to the original census total.

The writer is not currently in possession of similar studies of official figures for other large cities as compared with those published in the 1970 census. The second study to be mentioned, however, "Preliminary Evaluation of 1969 Money Income Data Collected in the 1970 Census of Population and Housing," by Mitsuo Ono (1972), does provide information about money income statistics for each state in the Union, although not for individual cities. This study is referred to by the Census Bureau (1973a) in its introduction to the 1970 census subject report on "Low Income Areas in Large Cities." However, it is not referred to in the introduction to "Mobility for Metropolitan Areas" (1973b), wherein the statistics on which the Long paper is based are located. Also the studies' specific conclusions are not noted in the introduction where it is mentioned; however, it is given as a reference in which "estimates of income underreporting in the 1970 census" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973a:xi) may be found.

The Ono study compares the aggregate incomes from various sources as reported in the 1970 census (wage or salary income, self-employment income, social security, public assistance income) with benchmark estimates of the same figures which have been compiled by the Bureau of Economic Analysis. The benchmark figures are independent estimates of the above income aggregates obtained by analysing "administrative data sources" (Ono, 1972:391). The Ono study does not indicate exactly what administrative sources were used; however, the Bureau of Economic Analysis (1976:35) itself in a later publication entitled "Local Area Personal Income, 1969-1974," states that its sources for information on public assistance during this period were based on county information on the amount of benefit payments made. The information was available annually from State Departments of Welfare and/or the National Center for Social Statistics of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

The benchmark figures for public assistance income in the 1970 census as reported in the Ono paper range from 55% for Iowa to 101% for Indiana. The average for the United States is 69%. The averages for the states where the cities mentioned in the Long article are located are: New York, 61%; Pennsylvania, 71%; Illinois, 69%; Michigan, 72%; California, 64%; and Washington, D.C., 73%.

* Address all communications to: Christopher B. Norton; 102 W. 80th St., Apt. 63; New York, NY 10024.