



Paradigm Revision and "Parsonianism"

Author(s): Jeffrey C. Alexander

Source: *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 343-358

Published by: Canadian Journal of Sociology

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3340258>

Accessed: 26/05/2010 15:17

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cjs>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Canadian Journal of Sociology is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Paradigm revision and “Parsonianism”

Jeffrey C. Alexander
University of California
Los Angeles

Abstract. This essay begins from a critical issue in the sociology of science: how do scientific theories change, if, contrary to empiricism, they are not simply falsified? An alternative to Kuhn's position is proposed, and in the substance of the essay I apply this alternative to the sociological theory of Talcott Parsons. After discussing its profound impact and some historical reasons for this fact, I trace the often unconscious changes which successive generations of Parsons' students and followers have introduced in order to save the theory from being disproved. It is these paradigm revisions which have come to be called “Parsonianism.”

Résumé. Cette étude aborde une question controversée de la sociologie des sciences, par le biais de laquelle on s'interroge de quelle façon les théories scientifiques subissent des modifications à moins qu'opposées à l'empirisme, elles ne soient tout simplement faussées? On propose ici une autre solution à la thèse de Kuhn et dans l'essentiel de cette étude, j'applique cette alternative à la théorie sociologique de Talcott Parsons. Après avoir discuté de son impact profond et des quelques raisons historiques qui militent en faveur de cette influence, je retrace les changements souvent inconscients qu'on apportés les générations successives d'étudiants et de disciples de Parsons afin de protéger sa théorie de ses détracteurs. Ce sont ces révisions paradigmatiques qui ont avec le temps créé le terme de “Parsonianisme.”

Crucial figures in the history of social thought establish “schools.” These schools are taken to represent their thought to following generations, and it is by these followers that they are remembered. Or are they? It is our position in the following essay that the members of a sociological school change the founder’s thought as much as they faithfully articulate it, and that they change it, moreover, in a manner that can be systematically related to the analytic tensions in the original theoretical position. If Engels reified Marx’s positivism and determinism, it is because of the systematic ambiguity in Marx’s own writings. If Mauss “cognitivized” Durkheimian theory, it was perhaps to make up for Durkheim’s emphasis on moral over cognitive codes. The same is true of the tradition that must be called “Parsonianism,” and we shall concentrate here on Parsons’ ambiguous legacy to the school that takes his name.¹

If a founding theory is, indeed, systematically revised in relation to its own internal contradictions — a revision that is, of course, always strenuously denied by the very parties who are committing it — this raises certain critical questions for the recent sociology of science. Particularly since the publication of Kuhn’s work on scientific revolutions (1962), it has been widely assumed that scientific theories are tightly integrated paradigms, that if one important part of a theory is disproved the entire paradigm will soon be relegated to the dustbin of intellectual history. The corollary to this position, which Kuhn has made explicit only in his later work, is that the carrier group for the paradigm is highly consensual (1970: Postscript). Finally, Kuhn argues that the scientific change produced by such disproof is revolutionary, that one theory succeeds another in a linear progression. In the following essay, we will contend that each of these Kuhnian postulates — which have gained wide acceptance in contemporary social thought — is, at least for social science, false. Even the most “mature” paradigms are not tightly integrated, nor carrier groups as consensual, as Kuhn claims. Consequently, theoretical shifts are more piecemeal and scientific change less linear than Kuhn proposes.

Indeed, rather than tightly integrated, scientific theories must be seen as composed of a number of different components, each of which is concerned with certain distinctive theoretical problems and each of which, therefore, has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the other parts of the theory. The most general level is concerned with presuppositions that formulate epistemological positions. Ideological orientations present a cross-cutting dimension oriented to political-evaluational questions. Methodological assumptions — both general and specific — present another independent level of theoretical decision-making, one oriented to empirical practice and toward issues like induction versus deduction. Propositional elements are the most specific level of analysis, summarizing empirical observation without, at the same time, being identified with the empirical world itself; propositions reveal, for example, the

1. There is some controversy over what precisely constitutes a school in science as compared, for example, to a tradition or simply a theoretical tendency. With our use of the term we do not intend to enter into this controversy, for we use it as synonymous with tradition generally defined. Compared to Durkheim, Parsons has not established a school, both because he did not exercise the kind of administrative control over appointments that Durkheim commanded and because he never established a powerful journal to carry on his ideas. On the other hand, by contrast to Weber, Parsons definitely established a coherent group of sociological followers.

theorist's vision of the world as in fundamental equilibrium or conflict. Every theory commits itself to a position on each of these levels of sociological analysis, and the theory's position on any of these levels may be changed independently of its other commitments. It is because of the complexity and relative autonomy of the different levels and components of any scientific theory that neither paradigms nor the groups that carry them are as tightly integrated as Kuhn proposed and, further, that theoretical change is much more uneven and piecemeal than linear and revolutionary.²

Great theories are, in almost every case, fundamentally ambiguous (cf. Alexander, 1980b). The opposition which they generate — insofar as it is serious rather than trivial — occurs precisely in relationship to the contradictions that these ambiguities create. In championing a part of social reality that a dominant theory has ignored or downplayed, opponents are, unknowingly, setting the theory against itself. With these criticisms in mind, followers revise their theory in order to save it, and they do so by emphasizing aspects of reality that were slighted in the earlier effort. In this way, the original theory is broadened, and it is argued that such revision is perfectly consistent with the founder's own intention. Whether or not it is actually considered to be so consistent by those outside the tradition, is, however, a matter that only intellectual history can decide.

The historical basis for Parsons' synthesis and its permeation of sociological tradition

In 1961, Parsons wrote that the “war of the schools” was coming to an end. Between the period of the turn-of-the-century theorists, about whom he had written his first book, and 1935 — shortly before its publication — the “action frame of reference,” Parsons believed, had gained an increasingly wide acceptance. The ensuing one-quarter century, during which Parsons had developed his own theory, was a period of “institutionalization and crystallization” of this “action” perspective. What remained for the future of sociology — now that the basic elaboration of “action theory” had been completed — was the codification of available empirical knowledge and the closer integration of general propositions (Parsons, 1961).

From the standpoint of the current situation, this declaration of scientific self-satisfaction seems decidedly premature, if not positively antiquarian. “Action theory,” though far from dead, has been on the defensive since the mid-1960s, and the sociological tradition has never been subject to more conflict and fragmentation. It is ironic that this situation has been generated, in part, because Parsons was himself unsure about what precisely constituted his own theoretical framework. Much more important, however, is a factor that Parsons had always shown a strong tendency to overlook. Insofar as sociology relies heavily upon generalized, non-empirical assumptions, theoretical conflation and division is endemic to the enterprise itself. Still, if unanimity is

2. This model of science and scientific change is elaborated in much more detail in Part I of *Contemporary Crisis and Classical Foundations*, which is Vol. 1 of my forthcoming book, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (Alexander, 1980a). The criticisms I am making of Kuhn's position amplify and, I believe, systematize, the reservations that have been expressed by a number of others. See, for example, Lakatos and Musgrave (1970) and Toulmin (1972).

impossible, objectivity is not. We shall try here to assess the nature of Parsons' contribution and the fate of his theory in contemporary sociology.

None of the classical theorists of sociology were able to achieve the kind of analytic synthesis which characterizes Parsons' work at its best. Of course, Parsons had the great advantage of hindsight, and he was determined to capitalize upon what he viewed as the critical problems of classical thought. Parsons took the false starts and partial achievements of his classical predecessors with the utmost seriousness; he utilized them to construct a new analytic framework of his own.

Parsons' new synthesis, however, was stimulated by more than a clear-sighted reading of classical thought. It was rooted also in the course of twentieth-century history itself. As Marxists have long claimed, Marx's theory could have emerged only after economic class conflict actually began to affect the social life of the nineteenth century, a new development that was certainly more visible in the English society of Marx's maturity than in any other nation. Durkheim's focus on the independent importance of the moral community and of social solidarity, similarly, was undoubtedly linked to the way these problems emerged not just in France but throughout Western society, where societal integration became increasingly problematic in the face of rapid industrialization and secularization. Finally, though most peculiar to the German situation, the emergence of powerful, purely political bureaucracies, and the manner in which bureaucratic and party systems helped triangulate the stratification of modern societies were social developments that clearly lay in the background of Weber's thought.³

Parsons' theoretical synthesis, his analytic differentiation and interrelation of independent systems and levels of action, corresponds to similar deep-rooted historical developments, movements which Parsons well described as growing social differentiation. Moreover, the growing pluralization of the modern social order and the increasing challenge of demands for greater integration and regulation particularly reflect the situation in mid-twentieth century America, the nation where Parsons had spent practically his entire life and which had so often been the subject of his sociological concern. The intensity of this differentiation, indeed, is reflected in the very range of the mutually exclusive characterizations which have been offered for "modern society." Pointing to the *economic* sphere, theorists find the "affluent society," or, the "industrial society" par excellence (Galbraith, 1958). Keying to *political* developments, writers have christened the modern West the "organizational society," the first bureaucratically regulated social life in human history (Prethuis, 1962). To the *culturally* concerned, the West is the "active society," or the cybernetic society, the first collectivity in which culture, particularly cognitive culture, is not only widely dispersed but systematically incorporated into institutional life (Etzioni, 1968). Finally, there is the "welfare state," the society which has done away with class conflict and fragmentation by creating the universalistic *solidarity* of

3. For the argument about the emergence of class conflict in general, see Roger Garaudy (1967: 16-18). For the argument relating Marx to the specifically English context of economic class struggle, see Giddens (1971:185-90). For the relation between Durkheim's moral analysis and the climate of the French Third Republic, see Lewis Coser (1971:156-163). For this aspect of the social background for Weber's analytic theory, see Ringer (1969:176-177).

citizenship (Marshall, 1965). Each of these theoretical formulae assumes the dominance in modern society of a different independent social sphere. Yet the very plausibility of each of them also lays the basis for an alternative theory, which, like Parsons', takes each dimension as an autonomous yet interrelated unit. The most famous analytic expression of this alternative, of course, is Parsons' A-G-I-L theory.

It is precisely such social developments, however, which have created the great strains which critics of modernity have so despaired. With pluralization and secularization, there is the increasing isolation of the *self* and the emergence of "psychological man," who can respond to his predicament only by retiring to the comfort of the therapeutic (Rieff, 1959; 1966). Other critics focus on the way modernization has set the *social* adrift from its moorings in the self, decrying the over-socialized, other directed individual (Riesman, 1950; Whyte, 1956; Marcuse, 1964). There is, in addition, the *cultural* critique of the modern condition, whose spokesmen forecast the death of meaning and the vulgarization of culture by mass society (Rosenberg and Manning, 1957). In the face of these mutually exclusive claims for the significance of psychological, social, or cultural strain, it seems likely, once again, that these critical currents should be read more as responses to the tensions produced by a general process of differentiation than taken at face value as evidence of the destructiveness of any single feature of modern life. It is because of the strains introduced by the increasing separation of culture, society, and personality that Parsons' approach to the analytic autonomy of these general action systems — the differentiation of personality, social system, and culture — has struck such a responsive cord. It is the historical meaning of Parsons' synthesis, the way it has captured something of the precarious newness of twentieth-century life, that largely explains its powerful impact on postwar social science, why, despite the vast criticism to which his work has been subject, so much of what he has said has been incorporated into the common sense of contemporary sociology.⁴

4. I have tried to analyze in some detail what I believe to be the nature of Parsons' fundamental contributions in Alexander (1978). For a more elaborate discussion, see *Talcott Parsons and the Search for Multidimensionality*, Volume II of Alexander, (1980a).

Eisenstadt and Curelaru's assessment of the impact of Parsonian structural-functionalism in the 1950s and 1960s is worth quoting here:

[T]he impact of the broad structural-functional paradigm and its analytic concepts and orientations impinged on many areas of research. Hardly an area of research remained unaffected. . . . In almost all fields of sociology, the structural-functional approach not only provided a general view, image, or map of the social system, but gave hints about more analytic specifications that could become foci of research. In such areas of research as stratification, political organization, educational sociology, and the study of deviance, many specific paradigms and research programs were related to or derived from the structural-functional framework. In other substantive fields, as in studies of public opinion and voting behavior, which had developed strong concentrations on middle-range theories, not only were the concepts those that had been developed in the structural-functional models [sic]. This model also provided the basis for a broader analytic orientation The influence of this model also spread to other disciplines. (1976:185)

On the extent of the incorporation of Parsons' work into contemporary thought, see also the comments by Dick Atkinson:

[While] [t]here is still considerable debate about the validity, even the morality of his contribution . . . [w]hat is clear is that followers and critics alike have accepted portions of his work. Thus such concepts which he develops as role, institution, social structure, social system are not the subject of violent disagreement. Indeed, they are used by his critics to attack other concepts . . . which are alleged to form the [actual] substance of Parsons' world. (1971:9)

Any serious attempt to break through the increasingly closed schools of sociological debate, indeed, any determined attempt to expand the explanatory power of any particular theoretical tradition, must pass through the fructifying lens of the Parsonian vision. No modern Durkheimian theory can do without the clarification provided by Parsons' sophisticated marriage of Durkheim with Freud. No Weberian analysis can advance without incorporating the analytic matrix by which Parsons interrelates individual, political, and cultural action. Contemporary exchange theory must acknowledge the insight into emergent properties which Parsons develops in his theory of value. Even conflict theory is forced, eventually, to acknowledge that the polarized factions upon which revolutionary conflict depends present "systems," which are integrated in affective and moral, e.g., "Parsonian" ways.⁵

But perhaps the most striking illustration of Parsons' theoretical achievement can be seen in his influence on contemporary Marxism. No movement, surely, has been more radically dissociated from functionalism by Parsons' critics. Yet, even within Marxism, there are strong indications that while some of Parsons' ideological and empirical commitments are rejected, many of his most important analytic achievements have been incorporated, indeed, have been instrumental in the effort of contemporary Marxists to transcend the limitations of Marx's original theory. Structuralist Marxists, like Poulantzas, Godelier, and Althusser himself have taken over Parsons' functional-system model. More importantly, they have adopted Parsons' notion of the analytic division of social systems into relatively autonomous economic, political, and ideological levels, the actual relation of which must, in any particular instance, be decided upon by empirical calculations.⁶

Parsons' analytic influence is also effectively illustrated by his similar impact on the work of Jürgen Habermas, leading spokesman for the Frankfurt

5. Perhaps partly because of the very influence of Parsons' work, there is not a distinctively Durkheimian tradition in modern American or English sociology, although the tradition of symbolic anthropology represents a Durkheimian school in a neighboring discipline (see, for example, the works of Victor Turner, viz., *The Ritual Process* (1969)). The work in symbolic anthropology would be enormously clarified by the kind of analytic insights Parsons has generated about the analytic differentiation of personality, society, and culture (Geertz's work is directed precisely in this direction: *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973). Without a doubt the most interesting attempt to create a less dichotomized, more continuous Weberian theory of society through the incorporation of Parsonian conceptualization is Eisenstadt's essay, "Charisma and Institution Building: Max Weber and Modern Sociology" (1968:ix-lvi). For a good illustration of the movement within exchange theory toward the inclusion of a more Parsonian emphasis, see Blau (1964:253-282). For the overlap that develops between "conflict theory" and Parsons' conceptualization when the former is forced to consider problems of intra-group cohesion, see, for example, Rex (1968) and Dahrendorf (1968:19-87; 1959:206-299). Atkinson's commentary on this phenomenon is relevant here.

[The conflict theorists'] explanation of the structure of relations within any one class, or of the structure of orderly Western industrial societies, implied either rejection of the analysis of conflict (Dahrendorf), or a static view of conflict (Rex and Marcuse). . . . The analysis of any one class taken separately or of a total, integrated or bourgeois society specifically assumes the need for concepts which are equivalent to those required by Parsons for the analysis of the whole of society. They include role, status, status structure, authority, and, finally, their relation together in a social system of unintended consequences. Marcuse, Dahrendorf, and Rex all converged towards this Parsonian position. . . . [T]heir analysis involved a view of the normative integration of institutions, of dominant values, their voluntary acceptance by actors, and integration of all three levels of analysis in the concept of the 'social system' (1971:113 and 115).

school, a branch of Marxism in most other respects inimical to the Althusserian one. From the juxtaposition of normative and instrumental kinds of action, Habermas (1970:92-93) follows Parsons in developing the distinction between activities with a goal-attainment orientation and those governed by role internalizations and socialization. From here, Habermas (1970:93, 114) moves to the Parsonian model of society as composed of interacting subsystems which differentially specialize in adaptive and symbolic activity, a conceptualization which he finds superior to Marx's base-superstructure model. In his later work, Habermas adopts a much more explicitly functional and evolutionary approach, relying on the tension between social system, culture, and personality to locate major contradictions in contemporary capitalist societies (1975).

The elaboration of “Parsonian sociology”: revision as response to internal strain

Nonetheless, despite the permanent contributions to theoretical logic that Parsons has established, no final evaluation of the “fate” of his work can be concluded on this exclusively positive note. In the first place, Parsons' synthetic approach to action and order is not a consistent one: his work evidences a significant, cross-cutting idealist slant. In this respect, Parsons' debate with Marx is crucial. Insofar as Parsons is able to address instrumental order — which means, for Parsons, addressing the Marxian elements in Weber's work — his resolution of the classical problematic remains truly a multidimensional one. However, insofar as Parsons tries simply to ignore Marx, to write him off the rolls of the “serious” sociological tradition, he avoids the instrumental elements of Weber's writing and moves inexorably toward an exclusive Durkheimian position, however refined. But Parsons' generalized ambivalence is only part of the problem, for these presuppositional resolutions are not carried out in a manner that is consistently sensitive to the autonomy of different levels of science, particularly to the specifically empirical elements in sociology and to the possibilities for multiple ideological commitments. Taken together, these problems have limited the impact of Parsons' work; the products of his sectarian ambition, they have certainly thwarted his ecumenical ambition as well.

Just as the generalized strains in the theories of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber have provided the motor for earlier theoretical progress and clarification — and, to some extent, continue to do so — it is the strains toward reduction and conflation in Parsons' writing which have spurred the theoretical movement

6. These three levels, of course, represent Althusser's, not Parsons', rendering of the analytic divisions of social life (see Althusser, pp. 96-100, 104-105, and 107-108 and “Marx's Critique” in Althusser and Balibar, 1970, and “Contradiction and Over-Determination,” in Althusser, 1966). Althusser himself traces his innovation to Mao and to Freud. His actual reliance on Parsons, however, is visibly apparent, as the critics of such structuralist Marxism are quick to point out. (See, for example, George Lichteim's argument about Althusser's reliance on Parsons in *The New York Review of Books*, Jan. 30, 1969.) The Parsonian reference of structuralism is more clearly revealed in the work of Althusser's students, for example in Poulantzas (1972) and Godelier (1971), particularly the latter's introductory essay “Functionalism, Structuralism, and Marxism,” and the later section in “The Idea of a ‘System’”).

Of course, this discussion of the reliance on Parsons by the structuralists and by Habermas must not be taken as an indication that such an incorporation is totally effective. The continued commitment of these and other writers to the presuppositional framework of Marx himself pushes their theoretical revision in the direction of some compromise with instrumental rationality and anti-voluntarist determinism.

to extend the range and elaboration of his work. It is these very tensions, in fact, which have structured the course of "Parsonianism." Indeed, as with the major theoretical figures in classical thought, the most effective proof of these strains in Parsons' work is that his followers have tried to revise his theory along the very fault lines we have described. From Parsons' first students to his last, the most creative Parsonians, regardless of personal idiosyncrasy or empirical prediction, have tried to push Parsons' theory in the same directions. First, they have consistently moved to open up the closed, or conflated, aspects of Parsons' theoretical vision, in part merely to establish their own disciplinary expertise in a particular field but in part also to encompass the realistic variations of empirical phenomena. Second, and just as consistently, these students have tried to resolve the ambiguities in Parsons' presuppositional synthesis.

The first generation of Parsonian functionalists came to maturity during the early or middle phases of his work, before his theoretical system was fully developed. As a result, the permutations they introduced cannot be as systematically related to Parsons' theorizing as those of the later generation. The general direction of the revisions is, nonetheless, strikingly apparent. In terms of conflation, Merton (1967:73-138), more than any other student of Parsons, self-consciously set out to separate the functional model from an overly determinate relation to more general or more specific commitments, emphasizing particularly the openness of a functional model to diverse empirical and ideological positions. As for the autonomy of the propositional level of analysis, this position, once again, was stated most self-consciously by Merton (1967:39-72), whose argument for middle range theories reacted against Parsons' deductivist tendencies, though the argument contains, in addition, a strand of unacceptably empiricist thinking as well. The insistence on limiting the impact of generalized commitments also strikingly informed the work of Davis (1949), Levy (1952), and Williams (1951), whose writings emphasized the variety of empirical outcomes and, while remaining systematic, resisted Parsons' tendency toward formalism (cf. Davis, Levy, Breidemer, 1946: Introduction). Among these theorists it was Williams (1960: chapters 10, 11, 13) who most self-consciously rejected Parsons' conflation of empirical equilibrium with model and presuppositional position, emphasizing the conflicts within American society not only among diverse social values but also among concrete social groups.

These first generation theorists also emphasized the instrumental elements in Parsons' multidimensional synthesis, avoiding much more successfully than Parsons himself the idealist dangers of the Durkheim-Freud solution. This strategy emerges quite clearly, for example, in Merton's writings on deviance (1938), where the maldistribution of means is an important element in producing anomie. In *Human Society* (1949:120-146, 364-391, 435-506, 175-184), Davis begins with a restatement of Parsons' means-ends schema and maintains the tension between these elements throughout, emphasizing the rational-intrinsic aspects of stratification and power, and the Hobbesian dimensions of instinctual life. While Levy more explicitly follows Parsons' conceptualization of interdependent societal subsystems, in contrast to Parsons' thrust in *The Social System* he devotes *The Structure Of Society* (1952:389-504) as much to processes of economic and political allocation as to those of solidarity, value integration, and emotional expression.

The second generation of Parsons' students emerged in the context of the later writing; their revisions, as a consequence, can be related to the elements of Parsonian theory in a more systematic way. In terms of the conflationary problem, Smelser has addressed the deductive and overgeneralized tendencies in Parsons' work most directly. In regard to collective behavior, for example, Smelser (1962:383) writes that while Parsons' general conceptualization provides "a language for describing and classifying action, [i]t is . . . not a direct source of explanatory hypotheses." Increasingly committed to independent conceptualization at intermediate levels of the scientific continuum, Smelser has focussed on "explanation," not general theory, and on the means of bringing empirical, propositional evidence directly to bear on more general formulations.⁸ Thus, he criticizes Parsons' deviance theory because it "failed to specify the conditions under which empirical associations should be expected and on the canons for testing such relationships" (Smelser and Warner, 1976:204). Smelser also concurred with Merton in another way, by arguing, more directly than any other second generation theorist, that the structural-functional model must be separated from prior commitments to presuppositional positions, ideological perspectives, and empirical outcomes. He demonstrates this position most effectively in an essay on the latent functional model that undergirds Marx's social theory (Smelser, 1972; cf. Lipset, 1975).

Parsons' second generation students also disputed his attempt to conflate empirical equilibrium with more general commitments to models and presuppositions. The most serious Parsonian students of culture carried through, much more consistently than Parsons himself, their teacher's injunction that values constitute a continual source of strain and conflict, emphasizing, in the process, not only culture-society conflicts but conflicts within the cultural and pattern maintenance systems themselves. Pitts (1964), for example, focussed on the strains generated by the French Catholic formulation of grace. Bellah (1970:53-189; 1973; 1975) explicated the tensions within American, European, and Japanese civil religion. Lipset (1967) emphasized the conflicts between different pattern variable combinations in European and American national cultures. And Baum (1968) discussed the disintegrative tensions among the functional values of nineteenth-century Germany. Such intra-systemic conflicts, of course, were precisely the kind of

7. Smelser (1969:163) refers to his first recognition of this problem in Parsons' theory in an autobiographical discussion of his theoretical development:

As I began my work on the theoretical aspects of collective behavior, I wanted to make my account of the field not only 'consistent with' but also more nearly 'derived from' the theoretical framework [i.e., Parsons' theory] within I was working. To explore this possibility, I undertook to refine some of the ingredients of the theory of action — in particular the 'resource table' — and to attempt to derive from it some empirical propositions concerning the causes underlying collective outbursts and collective movements. I spent several months trying systematically to exploit these ingredients of the theory of action. [While] [m]uch of this work was rewarding, . . . that framework was [still] not helpful in providing variables that might identify the determinants of these kinds of episodes. The lack of success — and the accompanying frustration — of this search led me to develop the value-added model.

8. The contrast between the titles of Smelser's and Parsons' collections of essays is instructive, viz., Parsons' *Essays in Sociological Theory* (1954) versus Smelser's *Essays in Sociological Explanation* (1968). For Smelser's increasing concentration on the relation between empirical evidence and theory, see his *Comparative Methods in Social Science* (1976).

strain which Parsons' conflationary tendency caused him to overlook.

Several students of the personality system, the other social system boundary to which Parsons devoted attention, pushed his logic in a similar direction. Slater (1961a; 1961b; 1963; 1966), for example, emphasized the disruptions which are inherent in the organization of symbolic internalizations by such a directly affective and organic unit as the personality; it is not surprising, therefore, that Slater approaches the socialized individual as a continuous source of socially-structured strain. Weinstein and Platt (1969; 1973), similarly, take up Parsons' references to the alienative effects of affective denial, developing the psychological dimension of strain, polarization, and differentiation in a way that Parsons himself never contemplated.

Parsons' students also attacked his tendency to conflate commitment to the interchange model with social equilibrium. Arguing that the completeness of differentiation cannot simply be deduced from the relevance of interchange, students emphasized, increasingly, the "leads and lags" among societal sectors that such uneven development can produce (Vallier, 1971; Smelser, 1971). Such dislocations have, in fact, been the major focus of most of Eisenstadt's work, and he formulates a series of potential system "contradictions" which are produced, at each stage of historical development, by the possibilities for uneven differentiation among institutional spheres.⁹

It is particularly in the process of separating the issue of empirical conflict from more general commitments that Parsons' students have, increasingly, focussed on the actions of actual social groups and the ways in which group self-interest both structures and articulates functional exigencies. This attempt to achieve a more group-oriented focus motivated Eisenstadt's theory of "institutionalization," where he argues, for example, that "[t]he institutionalization of any system usually creates new collectivities and organizations . . . [which] necessarily develop needs, actions, and orientations of their own which impinge on various other groups and institutional spheres" (1964a:246; cf. Reuschmeyer, 1977).¹⁰ The same anti-conflationary intention led Keller to self-consciously articulate her notion of "strategic elites."¹¹ This connection between the focus on empirical conflict and social groups is also clearly manifest in Smelser's critical epilogue (1973:394) to Parsons' and Platt's *The American University*, where he chides them for ignoring "the problems that arise in the concrete social structuring of functional activities" and it is also behind Smelser's later attempt to develop a theory of conflicting "functional estates" (1974). Lipset and Rokkan (1967) have self-consciously modified Parsons' abstract functional model in a similar way, by incorporating competing group interests into a theory of differentiating functional spheres (cf. Rokkan, 1972; 1975). And since his own early work with Parsons on some of action theory's most esoteric abstractions, Shils (1972; 1975) has also

9. It is the same empirical specificity, we might add, that leads Eisenstadt to emphasize much more than Parsons the variable outcomes of national paths toward modernization. See, for example, Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change, and Modernity* (1973), *Modernization: Protest and Change* (1966), and Eisenstadt and Azmon, *Socialism and Tradition* (1973).

10. Eisenstadt was influenced in this more group-oriented approach by the work of Shils, with whom he has been closely associated. Eisenstadt's term for members of groups that institutionalize functional exigencies is "institutional entrepreneurs" (Eisenstadt, 1964b).

maintained a much more concrete, group-oriented approach to the issue of functional exchange and systematic conflict.

This movement away from formalism and deduction has, finally, been manifest by an increasing tendency to open up Parsons' scheme of historical differentiation to more critical ideological perspectives. A number of second generation students emphasize, in contrast to Parsons himself, the extent to which differentiation has yet to be completed, the drawbacks as well as the benefits of the differentiation already achieved, and the ways in which newly differentiated positions often become the objects of manipulation or the basis for new forms of exploitation. This ambiguous relation of increased efficiency and freedom is most clearly articulated in Eisenstadt's analysis of the first great bureaucratic empires (1963), an argument which has significant implications for any perspective on the differentiation of the modern state. Mayhew (1971), in an analogous way, focusses on the potential corruption that is generated by independent agencies of social control, particularly the police. Similarly, Lipset (Lipset and Raab, 1970) has focussed, much more consistently than Parsons himself, on the way in which differentiation and rationalization generates strong right-wing opposition, a perspective that closely parallels Smelser's (1974) discussion of how privileged groups can organize to protect undifferentiated functional relationships. Bellah (1970: part II) has utilized the pattern variable dichotomies to provide critical perspectives on anti-democratic strains in the political cultures of advanced societies and, more recently, he and Eisenstadt both have decried the dangers of increasing cultural universalization (Bellah, 1975; Eisenstadt, 1973:237-257). On the psychological plane, Slater (1961a; 1961b) and Platt and Weinstein (1969: chapter 7) have focussed on the dangers of passive regression and aggressive fantasy which are opened up by the processes of differentiation.¹²

This movement away from conflation has only been partially accompanied by a thorough-going critique of Parsons' idealist reduction. For Eisenstadt (1963; 1973; Eisenstadt and Curelaru, 1976), a strong emphasis on instrumental action and order has grown out of his group focus, and his work

11. In terms of the problems we have discovered in Parsons' work, Keller's explanation for her focus on groups is particularly instructive:

[A] problem which arises in applying Parsons' analytical categories to current institutions stems from the fact that institutions themselves are abstractions. Institutions never act or deliberate or have crises of conscience or hostile impulses. The assignment to them of functional responsibilities therefore leads to reification of the social order. The normative order becomes confounded with the factual order. Unwittingly, the implication that the state or the economy or the family ought to do such and such leads to the assertion that they do such and such. . . .

In the absence of such a correspondence, some individuals must assume responsibility for translating functional prescriptions into workable rules. The individuals who do this for the social system, are, in our view, the strategic elites. . . . By shifting the level of analysis from norms and institutions to elites, the problem of reification disappears. These elites never act solely in accordance with the functional requirements of their status. The moral and personal imperfections of men, the temptations of their surroundings, and also the characteristics of the social structure in which men participate prevent them from doing so (1963:94-95).

Although this rationale conflates the problems of empirical representation with the problem of presuppositional idealism, it illustrates the kind of frustrations that have led to the increasing emphasis on groups among certain representatives of the Parsonian tradition.

12. For other discussions and utilizations of the differentiation concept that are self-consciously more critical than Parsons', see Reuschmeyer (1971); also, Alexander (1978; 1979a; 1979b).

consistently discusses the relationship of economic classes and political coercion to broader systemic tendencies. In the process, he includes the instrumental elements of Weber's theory much more consistently than does Parsons himself. The other major exponent of a consistently multidimensional approach, Smelser, has emphasized the role of instrumental conditions simply by remaining faithful to the multidimensionality of the interchange model itself. Thus, in *Social Change and the Industrial Revolution*, Smelser (1959) analyzes the enormous impact of early industrial capitalism on family structure as a disbalance in the adaptation-pattern maintenance exchange. As his work developed, Smelser (1974) underlined this commitment to multidimensionality by trying to integrate Tocqueville's analysis of group power and privileged estates with Parsons' analysis of functional systems.

Other writers, highly influenced by Parsons if not his actual students, have also sought to maintain a more consistently multidimensional Parsonian perspective. Dreeben (1968), though discussing the socialization of pattern variable orientations in schools, views this learning process as initiated more by new ecological arrangements than by value cathexis. Similarly, Lipset (1967:237-283) combines his pattern variable analysis of national political cultures with a structural analysis of the different class positions of national elites. David Schneider draws upon Parsons' general conceptualization for his analysis of American kinship patterns, but follows this work with a discussion of the way these cultural designs are refracted by class divisions (Schneider and Smith, 1973). Barber (1978) accepts Parsons' emphasis on the need for professional self-management but argues that this must be complemented by instrumental sanctions from extra-professional agencies. Still others, like Bellah (1970:114-145) and Geertz (1973:87-125, 142-169, 193-233), who focus principally on the cultural dimension, have been much more careful than Parsons to emphasize the differentiated nature of their contributions and have self-consciously distinguished the multidimensional logic involved in the study of value institutionalization from a more purely hermeneutic approach to cultural patterns.

Conclusion: paradigm revision as breakdown or revivification?

As these revisions and permutations of "Parsonianism" have developed, Parsons' original theoretical synthesis has, in an important sense, certainly been strengthened. Yet, paradoxically, these progressive developments have also broken the synthesis down. Inevitably, Parsons' students have tried to cope with the strains in his work on the basis of their scholarly expertise in particular areas. As they specialize, however, they begin to champion certain elements of the Parsonian synthesis over others. As each action level and societal subsystem is given increased autonomy — to protect it from Parsons' tendency for conflationary and reductionistic closure — the drive for overall synthesis and integration is, correspondingly, sharply reduced. In his emphasis on groups and more conditional exigencies, Smelser devotes much less attention to the social system's cultural environment than to its interpenetration with personality. On the other hand, Eisenstadt, while focussing in a similar way on groups and instrumental action, discusses culture at greater length, but refers to personality variables scarcely at all. Similarly, while differentiating the problem of concrete group solidarity and its tension with the political powers much more sharply

than Parsons himself, Shils blurs the divisions between cultural and social systems; he also relies on overly static assumptions about personality. Geertz and Bellah, while providing a much sharper analytic differentiation of culture and social systems than Parsons, only occasionally trace the interrelation of cultural patterns with concrete social and psychological processes.¹³ Weinstein and Platt (1973:30-33), for their part, emphasize the independence of personality, arguing that evolving psychological needs provide an impetus for change overlooked by others in the Parsonian tradition.

Each of these arguments, of course, is made from a position within Parsons' overall synthetic framework; indeed, the innovations introduced by each emphasis stem as much from the way they interpenetrate their analysis with some other functional environment as from the way they allow an element increased autonomy. Still, this process of revision threatens Parsons' synthesis. In the process of these theoretical permutations, new fissures develop. Intra-Parsonian conflicts, like intra-Marxist ones, become as significant as those between Parsonians and those in other theoretical traditions. In fact, these fissures provide opportunities not only for continued internal development and expansion but for new cross-cuttings with other theoretical traditions as well.¹⁴

Despite Parsons' enduring impression on the sociological tradition, it is too early to determine the ultimate fate of his theoretical legacy. Perhaps the Parsonian synthesis will break down completely. If so, it will leave a rich inheritance for some future effort at theoretical reconstruction. On the other hand, the openings we have described may lead to the development of a more loosely-defined, less sectarian version of functionalist theory. If paradigms are not tightly integrated and their carrier groups only weakly consensual, theoretical revision will inevitably be an open-ended process.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C.

- 1978 "Formal and substantive voluntarism in the work of Talcott Parsons: a theoretical and ideological reinterpretation." *American Sociological Review*, 43:177-198.
- 1979a "Core solidarity, ethnic outgroup, and social differentiation: a multidimensional model of inclusion in modern societies." Jacques Dofny, ed., London: Sage Publications in World Sociology, forthcoming.
- 1979b "The mass news media in systemic, historical, and comparative perspective." In Elihu Katz and Tomas Szecsko, eds., London: Sage Publications in World Sociology, forthcoming.
- 1980a *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, Two Volumes.
- 1980b "Formal and substantive contradictions in Max Weber's historical theory." *Theory and Society*, forthcoming.

Althusser, Louis

- 1966 *For Marx*. London: New Left Review Books.

Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar

- 1970 *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Review Books.

13. When Geertz does talk about non-cultural processes, as in his monograph *Agricultural Involvement* (1963), he does so in a manner which does not make an attempt at direct material-ideal synthesis.

14. Eisenstadt and Curelaru (1976:245-375) emphasize the cross-cuttings between these internal dynamics of the functionalist tradition and recent developments in non-Parsonian theoretical traditions.

- Atkinson, Dick
1971 *Orthodox Consensus and Radical Alternative*. New York: Basic Books.
- Barber, Bernard
1978 "Control and responsibility in the powerful professions." Prepared for the *Annual Review of Sociology* 4.
- Baum, Rainer C.
1968 "Values and democracy in imperial Germany." *Sociological Inquiry* 38:179-196.
- Bellah, Robert N.
1970 *Beyond Belief*. New York: Random House.
1973 "The five civil religions of Italy." Unpublished manuscript.
1975 *The Broken Covenant*. New York: Seabury.
- Blau, Peter M.
1964 *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New York: Wiley.
- Coser, Lewis
1971 *Masters of Sociological Thought*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Dahrendorf, Ralph
1959 *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
1968 *Essays in the Theory of Society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Davis, Kingsley
1949 *Human Society*. New York: Macmillan.
- Davis, Kingsley, Marion J. Levy, and Harry C. Breidemier, eds.
1946 *Modern American Society*. New York: Rinehart.
- Dreeben, Robert
1968 *On What is Learned in School*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Eisenstadt, S.N.
1963 *The Political System of Empires*. New York: Free Press.
1964a "Institutionalization and change." *American Sociological Review* 29:235-247.
1964b "Social change, differentiation, and evolution." *American Sociological Review* 29:375-376.
1966 *Modernization: Protest and Change*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
1968 "Charisma and institution building: Max Weber and modern sociology." In *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, edited by S.N. Eisenstadt, pp. ix-lvi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1973 *Tradition, Change, and Modernity*. New York: Wiley.
1978 *Revolution and the Transformation of Societies*. New York: Free Press.
- Eisenstadt, S.N. and Yael Azmon, eds.
1973 *Socialism and Tradition*. New York: Humanities Press.
- Eisenstadt, S.N. and M. Curelaru
1976 *The Forms of Sociology: Paradigms and Crises*. New York: Wiley.
- Etzioni, Amitai
1968 *The Active Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Galbraith, John Kenneth
1958 *The Affluent Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Garaudy, Roger
1967 *Karl Marx: The Evolution of his Thought*. New York: International Publishers.
- Geertz, Clifford
1963 *Agricultural Involution*. Berkeley: University of California.
1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens, Anthony
1971 *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Godelier, Maurice
1971 *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*. London: New Left Review Books.
- Habermas, Jürgen
1970 *Toward a Rational Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
1975 *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Keller, Suzanne
1963 *Beyond the Ruling Class*. New York: Random House.

- Kuhn, Thomas
 1963 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 1970 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Second Edition.
- Lakatos, Imre and Alan Musgrave
 1970 *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Levy, Marion J., Jr.
 1952 *The Structure of Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin
 1967 *The First New Nation*. New York: Anchor Doubleday.
 1975 "Social structure and social change." In *Approaches to the Study of Social Structure*, edited by Peter M. Blau, pp. 172-209. New York: Free Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Earl Raab
 1970 *The Politics of Unreason*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Stein Rokkan
 1967 "Cleavage structures, party systems and voter alignments," In *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, edited by Lipset and Rokkan, pp. 1-64. New York: Free Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert
 1964 *One Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marshall, T.H.
 1965 *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Doubleday.
- Mayhew, Leon
 1971 "Stability and change in legal systems." In *Stability and Change*, edited by Bernard Barber and Alex Inkeles, pp. 187-210. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Merton, Robert K.
 1938 "Social structure and anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3:677-682.
 1967 *On Theoretical Sociology*. New York: Free Press.
- Parsons, Talcott
 1954 *Essays in Sociological Explanation*. New York: Free Press.
 1961 "Comment" on Lewellyn Gross, "Preface to a metatheoretical framework for sociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 67(2):136-140.
- Pitts, Jesse R.
 1964 "Continuity and change in bourgeois France." In *In Search of France*, edited by Stanley Hoffman, pp. 249-304. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Poulantzas, Nicholas
 1972 *Political Power and Social Classes*. London: New Left Review.
- Presthus, Robert V.
 1962 *The Organizational Society*. New York: Random House.
- Reuschmeyer, Dietrich
 1977 "Structural differentiation, efficiency, and power." *American Journal of Sociology* 83(1):1-25.
- Rex, John
 1968 *Race, Community, and Conflict*. London: Routledge, and Kegan Paul.
- Rieff, Philip
 1959 *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Doubleday.
 1966 *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Riesman, David
 1950 *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ringer, Fritz K.
 1969 *The Decline of the German Mandarins*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rokkan, Stein
 1972 "Models and methods in the comparative study of nation-building." In *Imagination and Precision in the Social Sciences*, edited by T.J. Nossiter and A.H. Hansen, pp. 121-156. New York: Humanities Press.
 1975 "Dimensions of state formation and nation-building: a possible paradigm for research on variations within Europe." In *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, edited by Charles Tilly, pp. 562-600. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rosenberg, Bernard, and David Manning White, eds.
 1957 *Mass Culture*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

- Schneider, David M. and Raymond T. Smith
 1973 *Class Differences and Sex Roles in American Kinship*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Shils, Edward
 1972 *The Intellectuals and the Powers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 1975 *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Slater, Philip
 1961a "Parental role differentiation." *American Journal of Sociology* 67:269-308.
 1961b "Towards a dualistic theory of identification." *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 7:113-126.
 1963 "On social regression." *American Sociological Review* 28:339-363.
 1966 *Microcosm*. New York: Wiley.
- Smelser, Neil J.
 1959 *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 1962 *Theory of Collective Behavior*. New York: Free Press.
 1968 *Essays in Sociological Explanation*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
 1969 "Some personal thoughts on the pursuit of sociological problems." *Sociological Inquiry*, 39(2):155-167.
 1971 "Stability, instability, and the analysis of political corruption." In *Stability and Change*, edited by Alex Inkeles and Bernard Barber, pp. 7-29. Boston: Little, Brown.
 1972 "Introduction." In *Karl Marx on Society and Social Change*, edited by Neil J. Smelser, pp. vii-xxxviii. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 1973 "Epilogue: social structural dimensions of higher education." In *The American University*, edited by Talcott Parsons and Gerald M. Platt, pp. 389-422. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
 1974 "Growth, structural change, and conflict in California public higher education, 1950-1970." In *Public Higher Education in California*, edited by Neil J. Smelser and Gabriel Almond, pp. 9-141. Berkeley: University of California Press.
 1976 *Comparative Methods in Social Science*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Smelser, Neil J. and Stephen R. Warner
 1976 *Sociological Theory*. Morristown, New Jersey: General Learning Press.
- Toulmin, Stephen
 1972 *Human Understanding*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Turner, Victor
 1969 *The Ritual Process*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Vallier, Ivan
 1971 "Empirical comparisons of social structure: leads and lags." In *Comparative Methods in Sociology*, edited by Ivan Vallier, pp. 203-263. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Weinstein, Fred and Gerald Platt
 1969 *The Wish to be Free*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
 1973 *Psychoanalytic Sociology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Whyte, William H.
 1956 *The Organization Man*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Doubleday.
- Williams, Robert W., Jr.
 1951 *American Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
 1960 *American Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Second Edition.