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COMMENTARY: STRUCTURE, VALUE, ACTION

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Every sociologist leaves manuscripts unpublished. It is only classical figures whose unpublished manuscripts will eventually be published again. Historical interest is often the pretext. Perhaps this once-hidden or forgotten text can finally tell us what this important person was thinking at a crucial time, and why. In our discipline, however, historical interest is always a Trojan horse. It camouflages and promotes contemporary concerns — theoretical, empirical, ideological. This, after all, is why we make certain theorists classical (Alexander 1989). We have decided that they can help us out. By interpreting their works, we find that what they "really said" clarifies what we ourselves would or would not like to say today. Finding an early, unpublished work might be a way for us to say something new.

This is not to deny that historical or properly hermeneutical questions are involved. We do not read an earlier text simply in terms of today's theoretical questions. Contemporary questions are often mediated by debates about the historical development of a thinker's corpus and by complex discussions about the character of this or that dimension of his or her work. For these reasons, I begin my commentary on Parsons's "Prolegomena" by examining what light it sheds on the historical disputes over his work. Next, I look at the text to see how it confirms or denies current interpretive versions of this work. While the contemporary theoretical and empirical relevance of these discussions will be apparent, it is only in the third and concluding section of this essay that I address my own basic interest, the text as a contribution to sociological theory today.

HISTORICIST CLAIMS

When historical approaches to canonical work demarcate an "early" period, they do so either to make invidious contrasts with the classical figure's "later" material, or to suggest that from this initial seed the problems or achievements of later work have grown.

The first strategy has been exemplified in the claim — which has stretched from Scott (1963) to Habermas (1988) via Menzies (1976) — that Parsons's early work emphasized individual autonomy and individual interaction, in contrast to the functionalist and systemic emphases of the later work which stressed socialization and institutional control. The point has been to suggest an antipathy between these two modes of explanation, not only in Parsons's oeuvre but in the conceptual construction of reality itself. However, this historical interpretation fails to recognize that the "unit act" in Parsons's early work was an analytical scheme, not an empirical generalization about the actions of real individuals. In "Prolegomena", for example, Parsons utilizes an analytic conception of action to describe it as a process that involves various dimensions of rationality. By doing so, Parsons can describe complexes of "means-ends chains" of wealth, power, and esteem — complexes that are regulated, in the ideal-typical case, by value complexes of meaning. Given this purely analytical status of "action," it should not be surprising that this early essay is permeated by concepts like *system* and *function*, and that one can even find here the language of ultimate ends and ultimate conditions that was to reappear in cybernetic form 30 years later. With the publi-

cation of "Prolegomena", it is difficult to believe that historical arguments about an action/system axis in Parsons's work can be sustained any longer.

The second strategic reason for demarcating an early period, what might be called the "original sin" argument, has been exemplified recently by Camic's (1987, 1989) contention that the specificities of Parsons's theory — e.g., his failure to emphasize conflict and power, his lack of concern with institutional forces — can be traced back to the decisive influence on his early work of the analytical, antihistoricist approach advocated by his Harvard economics colleagues. "Prolegomena" suggests, however, that Camic may have emphasized concrete networks at the expense of more fundamental intellectual influences. After all, before he came under the influence of Harvard economists, Parsons had translated *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, introducing it with an essay that emphasized its antieconomic character and praising Weber for his insight into the nonrational — spiritual and emotional — quality of human motivation. One of the most striking emphases in the "Prolegomena" is Parsons's insistence that people have "transcendental" interests, that there are nonempirical, invisible ends that material and instrumental explanations of motivation overlook (p. 321). To preserve the transcendental and metaphysical reference of human action, to theorize the faith in systems of value and meaning that such reference implies, is the very point of the institutional theory he tries to develop. If Parsons *did* adopt an analytic approach, he did so not to extend the economic style of social theorizing, but to explode the economic theory of society at its roots (cf. Gould 1989).

INTERPRETIVE DISPUTES

While historicists try to resolve interpretive disputes by looking at social and intellectual contexts, most scholars try to understand the meaning of a classical canon by entering into the thicket of interpretation itself. In the debate over Parsons, two issues have long been disputed.

One is the question of "functionalism." Habermas (1988) is the most recent and influential example of critics who have argued that Parsons's references to system and function reveal a mechanistic tendency that negates his self-proclaimed concern with meaning, voluntary action, and the interpenetration of material and

organizational structures by cultural codes. "Prolegomena" provides direct evidence against this interpretation. Its treatment of "system" is direct and unequivocal. Parsons introduces the term to emphasize that the subjective ends of individual actors are socially organized in a nonrandom way. For Parsons a system of ends is a value pattern. Indeed, rather than implying mechanism and coercion, Parsons thinks that the concept of system is necessary to preserve the morality of free will. He insists that "a choice of ends [is] involved" only if one can conceive of "an organized *system* of ends" (p. 323, original italics). If some system were not organizing ends, ends would be random. This would negate the very notion of a reasoned and conscientious choice.

While "Prolegomena" contains contradictory treatments of "function," the most important discussion occurs in Parsons's justification for a functional approach to institutional classification over what he calls a structural or relational one. Parsons believes that the functional approach is the only one consistent with the "subjective" point of view — it allows sociologists to make fine-grained distinctions not simply between different kinds of institutions and concrete actions, but among the "rather different elements *in* concrete action" (p. 331, italics in original). Parsons makes this kind of intra-action distinction so he can point out that within any concrete action there are elements, like means and conditions, that promote efficiency and practicality, and other elements, like ends and norms, that are more subjective. Using this distinction in a metaphorical way, Parsons suggests four different kinds of "functions" for institutions, the technological-economic-political, the symbolic, the artistic and expressive, and the educational (p. 330). Resorting to "functionalism" in this early work, then, hardly betrays a mechanistic bent.

"Prolegomena" sheds light on a second major interpretive issue — Parsons's idealism. In the four decades of debate over Parsons's work, his supporters have generally defended the anti-idealist or synthetic character of his work, while most of his critics, from Dahrendorf (1959) to Gouldner (1970), have attacked what they view as his exclusive emphasis on normative control. There is a clear sense in which "Prolegomena" supports the former interpretation. After all, this is an essay about institutionalization, not about values or ideas in themselves. In fact, Parsons spends a great deal of time elaborating upon

what he calls "the intermediate sector" that lies between the "system of ends" on the purely normative side, and the "system of means" on the technological (p. 323). This intermediate sector is one of means-ends interrelations — a sphere composed of technology, economy, and power in which ideals are continuously mediated by practical concerns. Whereas an idealist approach would deny the existence of this intermediate sector, Parsons sees it as presenting the major challenge for social organization. It is precisely the remoteness of this world of concrete ends from the idealized, transcendent values of a society's "system of ends" that creates the need for what Parsons calls institutionalization. Parsons insists that congruence between the intermediate sector and the more idealized system of ends cannot be guaranteed by the direct involvement of ultimate ends in individual acts. He resists this "solution," perhaps, because it would lead to the kind of conceptual dichotomy Weber introduced between a purely pragmatic "purposive-rationality" (*Zweckrationalität*) and an extremely idealistic rationality of absolute values (*Wertrationalität*).

On the basis of this dichotomy, Weber argued that values rarely intrude on the mundane activity of modern society, which he understood as assuming a purely purposive, instrumental form. Parsons thinks about everyday life in a different way, as typically occupying an intermediate zone where the pursuit of wealth, power, technology, and prestige is neither entirely self-interested nor entirely altruistic. It is to conceptualize this gray zone that he introduces the "system of normative regulation." Parsons insists that norms are "related to . . . specific actions [but] not in the form of ends" (p. 324). This is a crucial point, for it indicates that Parsons does not conceptualize norms as entering directly into the process by which actors form their own, self-interested and individualized ends. What norms do, rather, is present "regulatory" standards that define "limits within which the choice both of immediate ends and of means to their attainment is permissible" (p. 324). Norms, then, are intermediate — between ultimate ends and concrete situations of interest. It is within this intermediate zone that Parsons chooses to define institutions.

This first approach to institutionalization might be called a nesting theory; it is derived from the conception of norms as vertically integrated with ultimate values on the one hand, and with immediate situational interests on the other.

However, after going to great lengths to establish this intermediate zone for institutions, Parsons proceeds to negate it. First, he introduces an asymmetry between what he calls the primary ("disinterested") and secondary ("calculation of advantage") motives for institutional conformity, a distinction that gives priority to cultural rather than practical motives (p. 326). Moreover, Parsons also suggests that norms are not only integrated upward and downward with more general values and more specific interests, but that they are integrated horizontally with the norms of most other actors. Thus, there is not only nesting but intertwining as well. However, it is one thing to say that because institutional norms are not horizontally shared there will be social conflict; it is quite another to *define* norms as shared by the entire community. While the goals of most conflict groups are nested, they are not intertwined. They are structured by the normative mediation of practical and ideal interests — i.e. they are quite integrated in the vertical sense — but they are *not* consensual. This is only to say that, in Parsons's multidimensional rather than idealistic sense, social conflict is often highly institutionalized.

"Prolegomena" demonstrates that, once again, in their interpretation of Parsons's idealism, neither his fervent sympathizers nor his harshest critics are right. Indeed, it is a mistake to see Parsons's theory, or the "theory" of any other classical canon, as exhibiting a particularly high degree of internal consistency. Parsons articulates a multidimensional position and also an idealist one. The challenge of interpretive criticism is to tease these strands apart. The more fully this is accomplished, the better contemporary theory will be able to maintain the multidimensional view. We arrive in this manner to the issue of contemporary relevance.

THEORY TODAY

In pursuing the interpretive disputes about Parsons's functionalism and idealism we have obviously abutted issues of contemporary theoretical concern, for in trying to understand how Parsons actually formulated such issues we must draw upon and articulate our own conceptual understanding of what these issues entail. This understanding, in turn, can be rooted nowhere other than within the disputes over social theory as it is practiced today. What makes these discussions "interpretive," then, is not their lack of contemporary theoretical relevance, but the

fact that relevance is pursued in reference to some canonical text. If one brackets interpretive disputes, one can treat the theoretical relevance of a text more directly, as, in a sense, a theoretical contemporary in its own right.

What does "Prolegomena" have to teach us today? While I could compose a rather long list of relevant topics, I will concentrate on two areas: the morality of human action, and what this implies for any sociological theory of institutional life on the one hand, and the complex interrelationship of the rational and nonrational in social action on the other.

In the opening paragraphs of "Prolegomena," Parsons suggests that "modes of behavior and forms of relationship [do] not merely exist, but are held by the individuals concerned as those which *ought* to exist — there is a normative element involved" (p. 320, original italics). There is a profound moralism at the heart of Parsons's theory. His actors are imbued with a desire to be good, and they are understood as trying to conform with principles that express this moral aspiration. Because moral principles are reference points for human action, human beings want their institutions to bear an appropriate relation to them. The fact that human beings make choices is essential here. It is because they have the ability to make choices that normative standards of evaluation become essential. In an intellectual world in which social theorists increasingly place their emphasis on the banal instrumentality of action (e.g., Coleman 1990) or on the equally mundane practicality of pre-discursive consciousness (e.g., Giddens 1984), I find this emphasis on the centrality of morality and the respect for human dignity that this emphasis implies, extremely refreshing. It is also, in my opinion, a more accurate description of the empirical world.

Moral standards are essential — they are continuously referenced during the course of action. Because of this, the strength of actors' commitments to common norms — what I have called the question of horizontal integration — becomes central to the study of social conflict and integration. Indeed, alongside the more idealistic strand of Parsons's work stands an important discussion in "Prolegomena" in which he acknowledges that control by institutional norms is always imperfect. Because there is "always . . . divergence of value-attitudes" (p. 326), organizational and material sanctions and rewards — the secondary types of social control — are omnipresent. The result is what Parsons

calls "an interlocking of interests" that can sustain patterned sanctions and rewards even when "moral attachment may dissolve away" (p. 327).

What follows from this acknowledgment is interesting, for Parsons does not assume that the disarticulation of moral and material sanctions simply allows power to be routinely maintained through coercion and manipulation. Insisting that "there would seem to be a limit to how far this process can go without breaking down the system" (p. 327), Parsons outlines this limit in a rather subtle way. One limitation on routine and unchallenged coercion is set by the fact that, even in a system in which the connection between systemic rewards and institutionalized values is virtually dissolved, personal esteem, if not social status, will still be allocated to individuals who act in accordance with strongly-held values and norms. "It is not to be supposed," Parsons argues, "that the fact that it is to the personal advantage of the members of a community to conform to its institutional norms is proof that these norms depend primarily or exclusively on interest and sanctions for their effective enforcement" (p. 326). To the contrary, "the principal personal rewards, above all in social esteem, will tend to go to those who do conform with them" (p. 326).¹

While what might be called the continuity of individual esteem allocation represents a permanent drag on the coercive maintenance of conformity, Parsons offers a more dynamic and systemic kind of limitation as well. Because, he suggests, action *does* have a moral dimension, it is unlikely that even coercive authority will be able to sustain an amoral and illegitimate order in a consistent way. Parsons does not offer here the obvious illustration. Because people who submit to coercion remain committed to moral values, when these values do not control the exercise of socially legitimate force such people will eventually rebel and try to institutionalize

¹ Although I think my account here is consistent with the somewhat less than systematic discussion in the text, I am exercising a fair amount of interpretive discretion. Parsons himself does not explicitly make the distinction between esteem as personal recognition for value-congruent behavior on the one hand, and subjective rewards for more institutional conformity — that is, status — on the other. Nor does he directly suggest that the continuity of esteem processes presents a brake on the routine coercive imposition of control. In making the former point, my analysis rests upon Jacob and Bershad's (1985) important essay.

		Types of Ends	
Types of Means	Empirical	Transcendent	
Logical/practical	<p style="text-align: center;">1 Rational action</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">2 <i>Economic consumption</i> <i>Political campaigns</i> <i>Organizational interaction</i></p>	
Symbolic	<p style="text-align: center;">3 Magic <i>Conversation</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4 Religion Tradition <i>Secular Rituals</i></p>	

Figure 1. The Ideal Types of Action

Note: Parsons's examples appear in bold-face type; other examples appear in italics.

these values. What Parsons stresses is that those who wield coercive sanctions are themselves eventually subject to moral limits. "The strength of sanctions and the willingness to apply them," Parsons observes, "is to a large, though not exclusive, extent an expression of moral attitudes" (p. 327). This is particularly important because "the application of sanctions on a large scale depends upon organization" (p. 327). Parsons is doubtful that organizations can be successfully maintained without some relation to organized values.

I turn now to the second theoretical issue that "Prolegomena" raises in what seem to be surprisingly contemporary terms — the relative rationality and nonrationality of action. In recent developments in the social sciences, there has been an increased tendency to depict social action as a "rational choice." Harnessed to network analysis, exchange theory seems well on its way to becoming the dominant paradigm in social psychology. Political theorists and class analysts emphasize the rationality of structural actors and groups. Social movements are depicted in a profit-maximizing way. Proto-economic models are applied even to intimate and private spheres like marriage.

What Parsons suggests early in "Prolegomena" is that rational choice is too often identified with the logical, "proto-scientific" character of the actor's reasoning process itself. He points

out that this reasoning process, no matter how empirically sound, is only a means. Whether an action as such is rational can only be determined by comparing this reasoning process to the desired end. For only if the end is, in fact, rationally and "efficiently" achieved can the process by which an end is chosen, much less the action itself, be seen as rational. This evaluation cannot be made unless one can observe the end the actor has chosen. The problem, however, is that only some of the possible ends that actors choose are visible; there is a very large category of ends that is not. Parsons calls these transcendent ends, since they refer to the actor's desire to achieve an inner state of mind or a certain relationship to ultimate values.

If rational action is defined as the achievement of an end through the efficient choice of means, then an observer can label as rational only the application of rational means to empirical ends. Because there is simply no certain method by which the achievement of an unobservable end can be confirmed, the rationality of a wide range of what might be called "rationally-reasoned" actions is impossible to evaluate.

Finally, not only are ends not all observable, but means are not all rational. Parsons points out that thought processes may not be logical or pragmatic. Offering a linguistic example, he demonstrates that reasoning may also be sym-

bolic, arbitrary, and conventional. This is a fundamentally important point.

We end up with four ideal-types of action, which can be represented in Figure 1 as a cross-tabulation between types of ends and types of means.

Parsons's argument is that, far from being universally applicable, the concept of "rational action" applies only to cell 1. Parsons calls this kind of action intrinsically rational. In cell 4, Parsons places religious action, which involves transcendent ends and stereotyped, ritualized means. Here he also places the impact of tradition. In cell 3 Parsons places magic, the prototype of action that uses symbolic means to achieve practical ends.

This discussion demonstrates the relatively narrow relevance of rational choice theory and directs us to other important types of action. I would suggest, however, that in neither respect does Parsons go far enough. He has underestimated the symbolic, conventional penetration of practical reason, and the penetration of the symbolic by practical reason, in turn. The most important source of this underestimation is that Parsons proposes a "type" rather than "analytical" approach. Yet, even if we maintain the ideal-typical approach, Parsons identifies only three prototypical categories of action when, even according to his own typology, there should be four. *Parsons fails to discuss cell 2*, actions in which logical and practical reasoning serves the achievement of transcendent ends. Even if the means of action are not conventionalized — "arbitrary" in the Saussurian or semiotic sense — the ends of action certainly may be. Therefore, the conventional or symbolic should not be limited to overtly "nonrational" phenomenon like magic and religion, but be extended to the worlds of politics and economics. If consumer goods are symbolically rather than practically constituted (e.g., Zelizer 1985), if the goals pursued by politicians and organizations are not simply mundane but defined by myth, narrative, or semiotic code (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell 1983), then neither economic action nor political maneuvering can be considered simply as "rational action."

But even for the modes of action that Parsons identifies as significant departures from rationality, his understanding — from our contemporary point of view — seems limited and rather stereotyped. Is not language, rather than magic, the prototype for action that combines conventional means with practical ends? Linguisti-

cally-mediated action is not the yellow brick road to higher rationality that Habermas describes. It is, quite to the contrary, a guarantee that no human interaction can escape an element of arbitrary form. Nor should Parsons limit cell 4 to religion and ritual with capital "R's." Actors who employ conventionalized means to achieve transcendent ends are not only voodoo chiefs, priests, or prophets. The most secular actors often exhibit the same kind of doubly conventionalized behavior. In his "religious sociology," the later Durkheim began to provide a theory to study rituals in their secular form (Alexander 1988c).

This discussion indicates that the ideal-typical approach that Parsons applies to the rationality question in this early essay is misleading. For example, Parsons's analysis gives the distinct impression that actions represented in cell 1 are quite common: logical means and empirical ends. Of course, Parsons does not simply leave this intrinsically rational means-ends combination alone. To the contrary, he insists that such action is typically bounded by a normative rule that sets moral limits on the means and ends which a rational actor can choose. This "add on" approach, however, seems mechanistic. It leaves intact easy assumptions about practical reasoning and empiricist notions about the observability of ends. Phenomenology has allowed us, however, to understand that normative evaluation occurs from the *inside* of action, as typification. Semiotics and structuralism have allowed us to see that it is scarcely possible for the ends of an actor to fall outside of a conventionally established code. Action is not a means-ends black box surrounded by culture, personality, and structural position. Because it is a typifying movement, it is permeated, not just regulated by, symbolic codes. Because it continuously weighs costs and benefits in a strategic way, it is not just calculated in relation to objective conditions, but permeated by them. If action is always typifying and strategic, moreover, it is continuously inventive as well. It is through the ongoing processes of typification, invention, and strategization that personality, social structure, and culture become embedded and externalized in action (Alexander 1988a).

By showing that there is much more complexity to the relationship between ends and means than rational actor models allow, Parsons makes a general case in "Prolegomena" for this multidimensional position. When he stipulates that norms and conditions regulate means-ends ra-

tionality, he is groping for a model of action and its environments that can demonstrate this position in an empirical way.

CONCLUSION

While I have argued in this brief essay for the interpretive and contemporary relevance of "Prolegomena", there is much in this early unpublished work that seems to have a thoroughly archaic form. The latter half of the essay digresses into discussions of law and concepts raised by Henry Maine. In Parsons's more mature work, moreover, he redressed some of "Prolegomena's" most glaring deficiencies. He left the typological approach more thoroughly behind, and he employed linguistic analogies to great effect in his essays on the generalized media of exchange.

I believe, nonetheless, that the problems revealed in this early and still extremely interesting work remained central to Parsons's thought. His idealist strain and conflation of culture with consensus stimulated a reaction that issued in the call for a conflict sociology. His difficulties in conceptualizing the process of action engendered reactions that emerged as the new micro-sociologies. His tendency to conceptualize culture as regulatory norms inspired the dissatisfaction that helped lead to more hermeneutical forms of cultural sociology. In reacting against the dominance of Parsons's functionalism, these new movements constituted the second phase of postwar sociology. However, as they moved from a challenging to a dominant and legitimate position, these movements became routinized and less influential. We are now beginning a third phase of postwar sociology. This new theoretical movement (Alexander 1988b) stresses synthesis and reintegration. It is this new climate that has facilitated the "discovery" and publication of Parsons's early work.

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