

ANTI-UTILITARIAN THEORIZING FROM PARSONS TO DURKHEIM AND CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY TODAY¹

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A conference devoted to anti-utilitarian theory would not be complete without considering Talcott Parsons, especially his 1937 masterpiece *The Structure of Social Action*. The present essay commences by revisiting *Structure*. I do so as a theorist whose intellectual life has been devoted to developing an alternative to utilitarian theory – in the 1970s and 1980s as a student of Parsons’ own work; in the 1980s and 1990s an interpreter of Durkheim’s later “religious” sociology; in the 1990s until today as one of the creators of cultural sociology in the United States. From discussing Parsons, I go back to the late Durkheim and forward to cultural sociology today.

In 1937, Parsons published what remains the most analytically precise and theoretically ambitious anti-utilitarian work in the history of sociological thought. Utilitarianism, Parsons argued, should not be considered only as a philosophical movement, inaugurated by Bentham and Mill father and *fiils*, but as a generalized mode of thinking, one that has permeated, not only Anglo-American theorizing, but modernity itself. Broadly defining utilitarianism as an instrumental view of action, Parsons argued that such a theory emphasizes the external, objective situation at the expense of subjective, normative interpretation. From an instrumental perspective, all that matters, theoretically, is the external situation, *vis-à-vis* which actors calculate costs and benefits. As long as instrumental action is considered at the individual level, the implications of such a normless view of action are invisible; indeed, in modernity purely calculative action seems commonsensical. From a market perspective, moreover, ordering individual actions seems no problem at all. An invisible hand, Smith and other *laissez-faire* economists believed, coordinates the economic relations of individuals.

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Elie Halévy's great early work *La Formation du Radicalisme Philosophique* (1901-1904) was critical for Parsons' understanding. Halévy dismissed the invisible hand as a just-so story that posited a "natural identity of interests," a misleading impression that utilitarian individualism could easily resolve the problem of social order. When utilitarianism explicitly addressed the collective level, Parsons' argued, its latent anti-humanism was revealed. As an individualistic utilitarian, for example, Locke assumed the natural identity of interests. When Hobbes refused such illusory solace, recognizing the possibility of a war of all against all, he was led ineluctably to the conclusion that collective order could be achieved only if a Leviathan ruled. Parsons called the Hobbesian solution "anti-individualistic positivism," suggesting that the coercive, anti-normative qualities of such collective theorizing made the dangers of utilitarianism clear for all to see. As an alternative to utilitarian theory, Parsons argued for a "voluntaristic" theory of action, emphasizing the connection between individual autonomy and the theoretical acknowledgment of values and norms. Only if such binding but non-rational elements are maintained, Parsons reasoned, is it clear that external, objective conditions do not determine action by themselves. Only if the normative is referenced can it be theoretically acknowledged that external conditions are always interpreted, a subjectivity that is required for an autonomous, moral self to be sustained.

Parsons' voluntaristic "solution" to the problem of order had an extraordinary influence on American sociology in the optimistic and relatively consensual decades after World War II. What gradually became evident, however, was that, while *Structure* provided a devastating critique of utilitarianism, a debilitating slippage marred in the logic of Parsons' alternative. Retaining normativity does allow subjectivity to be maintained presuppositionally – in epistemological terms – but it does not provide an alternative to the Hobbesian understanding of order in an empirical sense. Volunteerism can reign, but society may also be deeply fragmented and conflicted; economic interests may not align; social values may be antithetical. Interpretation can lead to polarization rather than coordination, and values can fuel such agonizing social conflicts that coercive dictatorship often results.

Parsons conflated presuppositional and empirical normativity, identifying the theoretical evocation of values and norms with the empirical condition of cooperation and reciprocity. What followed from such conflation was the argument that, if conflict were present, then norms and values were absent. Challengers to structural-functionalism drew precisely this conclusion in the 1960s, creating an

alternative that came to be known as “conflict theory.” Social conflicts, radical movements for reform, and backlash movements against it had riven American society. A new generation of theorists suggested that none of this could be explained by reference to norms and values. Conflict followed upon the absence of normativity. As Parsonianism gave way to conflict theory, sociological reference to social meanings disappeared; theorists turned their attention to external, material conditions. Utilitarianism was back in the saddle.

This theoretical revolution had significant repercussions not only for functionalism but for the contemporary understanding of classical theory as well. Parsons had legitimated his voluntaristic theory with complementary readings of Durkheim and Weber. Durkheim’s early and middle writings were held up as paradigms of value-sociology, as arguments for the centrality of normatively ordered social consensus. Weber’s theory of modernity was similarly bowdlerized, with the religious origins of capitalism identified as providing a model for the role of values inside modernity itself. With such tendentious readings, Parsons yoked the religious theorizing of Durkheim and Weber to the functionalist project. So when conflict sociology prevailed, it seemed necessary to reject normative elements in classical theory. Charles Tilly wrote about “useless Durkheim,” and Theda Skocpol and Michael Mann read Weber as an instrumental theorist of state power.

What then ensued was an unexpected paradox, one demonstrating the cunning of history. At the very height of the new utilitarianism, new anti-utilitarian theoretical movements emerged that placed social meanings, interpretive action, collective consciousness, and solidarity back on the table. In the 1980s, a new generation of American sociologists began creating what came eventually to be called “cultural sociology.” What’s in a name? The very definition of sociology itself!

Cultural sociology depended on finding and creating resources for conceptualizing thickly interpretive action and meaningful, but not necessarily consensual, social order. This involved rereading the classics, on the one hand, and systematic theory building, on the other. *Vis-à-vis* Weber, the rereading meant going back to the *Geisteswissenschaft* strain of his work, exploring the nature and social effects of religious meanings without the *fin de siècle*, Nietzsche-influenced fillip that industrialization eliminated meaning and replaced it with debilitating rationalization. Dilthey’s hermeneutic philosophy was recovered along with the narrative theory of deep language structures that Paul Ricoeur built on top of it. Taylor’s early hermeneutic method was incorporated along with Walzer’s idea of

justice as interpretation. Wittgenstein's language theory was critical, especially as the linguistic turn was "pragmatized" with Austin's performative turn. These rivulets all fed into the mighty river of semiotics and post-structuralism, the movement from Saussure and Jakobson to Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes that demonstrated how, in Ricœur's telling phrase, meaningful social action might be considered – for the purposes of interpretation – as a text.

For this whole cultural-theoretical stream to become sociologized, however, it was necessary to find a post-hoc sociological home for it inside the discipline's classics. In the 1980s, I discovered the existence of a "late Durkheim," who had turned against his more instrumental, binary, post-traditional texts of the 1890s and moved toward a symbolic social world referenced by the religious sociology of post-1898. Following Durkheim's own injunctions, I suggested that *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1911), far from merely an anthropological study of ancient societies, should be treated as a systematic treatise about symbolic classification, ritual, collective effervescence, and ritual in the life of contemporary societies, a book written for the "religious man of today."

Still, all this new thinking would have remained hortatory and merely "pointing to" – rather than "showing" – but for the explosion of the new cultural anthropology in the two decades preceding cultural sociology's creation. Victor Turner showed how ritual could be conflictual and developed procreative, if nascent, theorizing about social dramas. Mary Douglas generalized Durkheim's religious ideas about sacred/profane into secular, broadly moral ideas about purity and danger. But it was above all Clifford Geertz whose exemplary cultural theorizing about social life spurred cultural sociology into being. Drawing on aesthetic theorizing about how meanings are made, Geertz not only conceptualized symbolic action and social performance but provided exemplary empirical essays that showed how a cultural social science might be done.

Refashioning these classical and contemporary resources over the last three decades, cultural sociology has turned the tables on conflict theory, pushing it into a backward looking corner, and becoming one of the most influential theoretical and empirical streams of contemporary sociology. At first primarily an American development, cultural sociology has become a new reference in the broader Anglophone world of the UK and Australia and an increasing reference for discussions in Scandinavia and central, eastern, and southern Europe as well. While resolutely anti-utilitarian, it provides a thoroughly non-Parsonian understanding of individual interpretation and collective normativity. Meaning

is achieved through the construction of difference. Solidarity is central to on modernity, but it is a collective consciousness that excludes and not only includes, fragments and not only unites. Collective representations remain crucial for modernity, but they may be symbols of darkness and not only light. Culture remains powerful, but by no means necessarily consensus-making. Cultural codes and narratives can generate resistance and civil repair. If the discourse of civil society and its institutions lay the foundations for a global civil sphere, they function today more as a resource for imminent critique, as a trigger for justice-seeking social conflict, than as a source for empirical equilibrium.

A VERY SHORT GUIDE TO CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

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