

**Social Action and Social Structure: Summary and Commentary of
Contemporary Sociological Theories with Special Emphasis to
Talcott Parsons's Book**

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Abstract

This paper constitutes a collection of essays that deal with works of contemporary sociological theorist with particular emphasis on works of Talcott Parsons. Obviously the paper dedicates to conduct analysis and deep understanding of contemporary structural functionalist. In view of that, structure of social action is key contemporary sociological theory that written by Talcott Parsons which rigorously reviewed.

1. Introduction

The paper is organized in terms of theorists' school of sociological orientation. Accordingly, the discussion focused on structural functionalist or Talcott Parsons. In fact, the paper includes the summary of their works, commentary for author on his work discussed in in terms of concepts he developed, methodology he followed and his theoretical orientation as well as his level of analysis.

2. Talcott Parsons

a. Structure of social action

A study in social theory with special references to a group of recent European writers

Parson (1937) believes that while theories attempt to understand facts it should be verified by empirical research unless it will be sterile theory and works that lack empiricism also possibly loss

its scientific status. In this monograph parson stresses that the facts do not tell their own story. Facts must be cross-examined, carefully analyzed, systematized, compared and interpreted. He states that observation and theoretical analysis have stood in close relations of interdependence. In view of that theories are expected to be verified. But, Parson does not show us his proof.

In his analysis Parson (1937) scrutinizes that rationalist and utilitarian proponents emphasize on historical and logical of intrinsic rationality of action. This involves ends, means and conditions of rational action. For example, Pareto says action is rational and means employed enable actor to anticipate his end. In view of that social action relates to utilitarian branch of positivistic tradition. In this school Pareto emphasizes structural element and system of thought. The Utilitarian theory emphasizes on means and ends relationship but left the character of ends on the whole uninvestigated. Hedonism, natural selection, etc are typical examples. On the other hand, Positivistic theoretical framework includes norm of intrinsic rationality itself and its main relations to heredity and environment. This involves extra positivistic metaphysical proposition and extra scientific metaphysical assumption. In fact, Parson reviewed that radical theoretical reconstruction has three stages.

First stage by Marshal who inherited utilitarian tradition. This tradition involves in utility. The conceptions of utility, marginal utility and the principle of substitution are associates with means and end schema, rational choice and the analytical independence of ends. Of course, utilitarian and facts of economic life are related. In this school of thought activities are considered as empirical element of economic order. The issue of rationality goes with empirical knowledge for social evolution

Second stage by Pareto which is voluntaristic theory of action. Pareto states theory should be methodologically acceptable and had to be positivistic. He dogged the footsteps of positivistic social theory. In fact, Pareto is economist and developed utility theory. In his work Pareto defined logical action as concrete action in so far as it consists of operations logically united to their end. On the other hand, non-logical action is definitely a residual category action in so far as it fails for whatever reason to meet the logical criteria. Of course, the concept of logical action is explicitly broader than the economic but there is no positive systematic treatment of the non-economic logical elements. Logical action includes subsector like technological, economic and political.

Third stages by Durkheim. Of course, Durkheim has a little similarity with Pareto except sociologist. He does not deal with economic theory in technical sense. But, he concerned economic individualism. Durkheim rejects utilitarian and focus on radical positivistic alternative. Durkheim focuses on exteriority and constraints which are social facts. He emphasizes on distinction between social constraint and natural facts. According to him, the social reality has ceased to be merely a residual category. Durkheim more focuses on hereditary and environments.

Fourth stages by Weber who more concerns with attacking Marxian position. Weber pays attention to concepts such as value, attitude, religious element and metaphysical idea. For Weber voluntaristic theory of action does not imply idealistic. Weber states that empirical study of religious and economic life has relation. This leads to heredity and environment which goes with means and end sector. In his work Weber indicate that whole group of elements clustering about ultimate value system.

Parson derived five Conclusions from the study or from the above monograph. Firstly, even though those writers have differences in terminology, way of structural analysis and mode of statement yet they agree on the same system of generalized social theory. Secondly, theory is total system built via critical re-examination and modification. Thirdly, theory has closeness to principal empirical generalization. Fourthly, the emergence of voluntaristic theory of action and correct observation of empirical facts of social life. Fifthly, the above four theses lead to empirical verification and scientific theory.

In this argument Parson (1937) mentioned tentative methodological implications the discourse may produce. In this discussion methodological issue raised associated with economic theory and its social science status. Furthermore, Parsons concerns Empiricism and Analytical Theory in which he discussed scientific status of social theory and philosophical problems associated with theoretical development as well as epistemological position in relation to empiricism. He further examines scientific concepts and reality related problems. Parson derived three epistemological positions: Positivistic empiricism which emphasizes on concrete phenomenon those theories can be applied. Particularistic empiricism which concerns with objectivity and Intuitionist empiricism that deals with intuition and aspirations. Of course, Parson identified the epistemological disputes yet he did not indicate which position misses what and how theory can be guided. According to Parson stated that Analytical realism is scientific concepts that are not fictional at least grasp

aspects of external objective world which constitutes analytical elements. He asserts that epistemological position of analytical realism is realistic that leads to empirical realism. It seems sound but remains at philosophical stage.

Parsons (1937) proposed that the Action Frame of Reference is crucial to understand structure of social action that entails system of action which has sub-system and unit act. In view of that concrete phenomenon is reference of action system. Thus, he concerns relation of nature of science and theoretical system. For example, for social scientist suicide is act but for natural science, suicide is an event: e.g. suicide by jumping into water. In this regard, four structural elements are essential to describe an act that is means, ends, conditions and norms. Parson assumes in social action its teleological character involves normative. Parson mentioned two orders of elements that are normative and conditional. In this regard, Parson states that elimination of norm leads to radical positive position whereas elimination of conditions lead to idealistic emanation. Parson stresses that Data is a given structural elements or schema.

Furthermore, Parsons (1937) dealt with Systems of Action and Their Units in which he elaborates that action has a system which extends from part / unity then form complex structure of frame of reference. Action has a phenomenological status. This facilitates nature of data of science and theoretical system. This involves descriptive aspects of concrete action system and relations between unit act and other acts. Furthermore, Parson stresses the role of Analytical Elements for element analysis and unit analysis and scientific abstraction. Parsons postulates about system of action and its unit without testifying them empirically,

Yet, in the General Status of the theory of Action Parsons says that analytical realism is his epistemological position which implies methodological position as well as philosophical status of action or ontological issue. This implies his realistic position which has epistemological sense confirms empirical reality. He confirms that scientific theory is not mean reality and is not representation but functional relation to reality. So, scientific theory is an ideal representation of empirical reality or entity. This is narratives which not supported by concrete evidence.

Moreover, in the Classification of the sciences of Action Parsons argues the general position regarding the relation of theoretical concepts to concrete phenomenon which is implied in the findings of this study has been called analytical realism. This is concrete and external object or symbols are in minds of individuals. Furthermore, Parson states that action system has power

relations which are political action elements. This implies there is common value of integration. Parsons argument is more of proposition but there is no practical proof. How all action has a power? What is the connection between social action and power? This is lacuna I observed in this work.

Parson (1937) searched the place of Sociology in his theoretical work. He stresses common value of integration. This is a clearly marked emergent property readily distinguishable from the economic and political. If this property is designated the sociological, sociology may then be defined as 'the science which attempts to develop an analytical theory of social action systems in so far as these systems can be understood in terms of the property of common-value integration. There is one sidedness of his idea of integration. Parson mentioned that science of action includes economic, politics, sociological, etc. As of Parson, sociologists deal with economics, politics, psychology just like as biologists works with physics and chemistry. Parson supports empiricist methodology and analytical thinking. Parson says sociology as special analytical science like economic theory. On the other hand, Pareto states economic theory is special analytical science. Furthermore, Simmel says sociology was the only abstract analytical science in the social field. Yet, Parson did not correctly identify identity of sociology. Is it action science or system science or special science is not clear.

In general, sociology is between empirical sciences which imply natural science that goes with positivistic and idealistic which goes voluntaristic action theory. Yet others believe sociology is synthetic science. Thus, sociologists need to come to converging position. Parsons states that Sociologists agreement far outweighs the differences that occur on the more superficial levels. What has happened in the minds of these men is not the appearance of an unorganized mass of arbitrary subjective judgments. It is part of great deep stream of the movement of scientific thought. It is not, therefore, possible to concur in the prevailing pessimistic judgment of the social sciences, particularly sociology. Parson concludes that if attention is centered not on the average achievement but as is fully justified in such a case, on the best, we certainly need not be ashamed of our science. But Parsons put sociology at crossroads which can complicate scientificness of sociology. Notable progress on both empirical and theoretical levels has been made within the short space of a generation. We have sound theoretical foundations on which to build.

b. Commentary on Talcott Parsons' work

Regardless of his strength Parson's work also has some weakness for example Parson tends to be empiricist and objectivist but he did not show us practically rather he emphasizes on analysis of others' works that he spent much time. Parsons furthermore tends to view things philosophically in which he attempts to master overall social system just by speculation rather than observation. Parsons' position is either deductivist that he preferred system theory or inductivist confined to action model. Yet Parsons examines Pareto's position but he did not clearly indicate his position whether he is rationalist or not is unclear or positivist or not. Parsons' study highly depends on secondary document research in relation to empirical research. So this likely makes validity of work questionable. Parson's methodology is not clear because he is between positivistic and idealistic in terms of conditions of action. Theory of action is not developed on the concrete fact that leads to its empirical doubt. Parson's analytical realism is the best work but yet his theory has no guarantee to be proved. Parsons sees society and sociology as integrated entity and study of this entity but certainty of common values are sometimes questioned. Parsons deals with analytical sociology as a science of action (new epistemological approach). Parsons also views sociology as synthetic science or special field is not fixed. Nevertheless, Parsons was critical of the idea that purports that sociology measured by intuition and aspiration. He is critical of idea that sociology does not pursue rigorous logic and empirical verification which deny scientific status of sociology. Parsons attempts to find debate between sound work on factual study without theory and idea which states sociology is art so intuition and aspiration is best approaches not logic and not empirical research. Even though Parsons indicated one side of such position is danger he did not underline which approach should be followed.

3. Comparison of contemporary Sociological Theorists' works with Parsons

To begin with **Parson and Dahrendorf**, Parson is integration theorist whereas Dahrendorf is coercion theorist. Parson tends to construct grand or all-embracing theory but Dahrendorf's theory is close to middle range because he tends to look at only industrial enterprise which is part of the whole but not all parts of society is industrialists. Both Parsons and Dahrendorf believes in social change that is evolutionary not revolutionary.

Parsons and Merton share divergence and convergences. Parsons and Merton had intimacy due to academic relationship developed as teacher and student. Both believe in integration of society. However, Parsons Focus on functions of social structure but Merton identifies function, dysfunction, nonfunctional and net balance issues. Parsons dealt with grand theory but Merton concerned with middle range theories.

Parsons and Mills developed different perspectives. For example, Parsons looks at stable aspects of society whereas Mills focus on conflicting aspects of society or Mills focus on classification but Parsons emphasizes on integration. Parsons use social action to understand society but Mills focuses on power structure which is one element of action system.

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