

Introduction

Renée C. Fox, Victor M. Lidz, and Harold J. Bershady

From the 1930s to the mid-1960s, Talcott Parsons was the leading contributor to the development of sociological theory, in the United States and internationally. More than any other contemporary figure, he shaped the conceptual schemes used in research, the bodies of theory taught to students, and thinking about the issues requiring investigation at the frontiers of sociological knowledge. In some dozen books and hundreds of essays, he elaborated an unfolding theoretical system that not only had a far-reaching, formative influence on sociological thought and research but also extended to other social sciences, including economics, political science, anthropology, psychology, and psychoanalysis. His writings were studied, discussed, critiqued, and applied in empirical research throughout the world. Parsons also had a pervasive influence as the teacher of several generations of students from an array of countries and disciplines, many of whom became notable in fields not confined to sociology or the social sciences. As Leon Mayhew wrote in his introduction to a volume of Parsons's selected writings, "Talcott Parsons is regarded, by admirers and critics alike, as a major creator of the sociological thought of our time" (Mayhew 1982, 1). In the view of Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher and social theorist, Parsons's work is "without parallel in its level of abstraction and differentiation, its social theoretical scope and systematic quality. . . . [N]o theory of society can be taken seriously today if it does not at least situate itself with respect to Parsons" (Habermas 1987, 199).

During the past four decades, interest in and acknowledgment of Parsons's enormous contributions to the framework of social-scientific thought and to programs of social inquiry has greatly diminished. In part, this development has been a consequence of ideological confrontations between radical and liberal thinkers that affected the social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s, and the polemical spin-offs from them in which Parsons has frequently been labeled, contrary to his own self-understanding, a conservative thinker, an apologist for American culture, institutions, and national power, and a defender of gender relationships as they existed before the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1970s. It has also been associated with the resurgence of positivistic or scientistic conceptions of sociological research, with the emergence of increasing numbers of topically defined areas of specialization as the foci of sociologists' interests and efforts, and with the fragmentation of the discipline into competing schools of thought that have been preoccupied more with what separates them than with what might bridge their conceptual and empirical differences, or integrate their understandings. The sheer complexity and abstract quality of Parsons's thought as well as the density of his writing are without doubt off-putting to many sociologists, especially now that he is no longer a personal presence in the leadership of the profession. As a result of these converging forces, sociology has largely turned

away from the conviction, basic to Parsons's theoretical efforts, that the development of a shared conceptual framework is not only a viable endeavor, but one essential to progress in sociology as in other intellectual disciplines.

Even before these developments, but more frequently in recent decades, Parsons has been labeled a "grand theorist" and compared to such methodologically outdated builders of comprehensive theories as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. However, such an interpretation mischaracterizes his undertaking as a theorist. He consistently sought to develop conceptual schemes or frames of reference to facilitate empirical investigation. Following the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1925), he viewed the establishment of frames of reference as a logically preliminary task for orienting empirical research, including the phase of empirical research that involves generating hypotheses to be tested (Parsons 1937). He saw his own distinctive contribution as clarifying frames of reference and explicating their implications for generating hypotheses and propositional theories to guide research, as well as interpreting empirical findings of research. Although he participated directly in only a small number of empirical studies himself, many of his most creative essays involved theory-based reinterpretations of the empirical studies of other social scientists, ranging from Max Weber to Paul Lazarsfeld (Parsons 1949, 1953, 1967, 1969, 1977, 1978). Moreover, many of his students and protégés, including authors of chapters in this volume, conducted important empirical studies framed by his concepts and propositions—studies that he read, acknowledged, and drew on.

Throughout his career, Parsons's central concern was to develop a comprehensive and coherent conceptual scheme for sociology that could be applied to every society and historical epoch, and address every aspect of human social organization. This concern provides unity to his extraordinarily diverse theoretical and empirical writings. Writings on specific empirical situations were also, for Parsons, means of applying, testing, and refining basic concepts. Whatever his substantive topic, his underlying interest was in the basic conceptual scheme that he called the "theory of social action."

Parsons's conceptual scheme was designed to be open and supple—to be progressively refined in response to advancing empirical knowledge. Parsons revised many of his formulations on the basis of insights gained from the empirical and theoretical reports of others. Even his most abstract theorizing was basically related to empirical situations and empirical studies. Parsons was also uniquely committed to technical elaboration of his conceptual scheme and to precision in formulating his ideas. However, this commitment to progressive development of theory has created difficulties for scholars who wish to understand, interpret, and critique his theories. The changes he made in major formulations at certain points in his career and the frequency with which he altered subordinate concepts have made mastery of his large body of work difficult.

Before introducing the chapters, written by social scientists who gathered to mark the centennial of Parsons's birth, we want to provide intellectual context for them by presenting an overview of Parsons's chief theoretical ideas and the major metamorphoses they underwent. Our focus is on ideas that we believe carry enduring importance for sociology and thus remain fundamental to the discipline, with a special emphasis on concepts that were utilized by the authors of the chapters in this volume.¹

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEORY OF ACTION

Parsons's expansive understanding of the mandate for theory in the development of a "scientific" sociology was based on sophisticated methodological views. These were rooted in seminars on Kant that he had taken during his undergraduate and graduate studies, and came to fruition under

the influence of Alfred North Whitehead (1925), whose philosophy of science he encountered during his early years on the Harvard faculty.

Calling his methodology “analytical realism,” he attributed its key ideas to Whitehead. In analytical realism, the frame of reference is the crucial theoretical element for the creation of knowledge. A frame of reference is the set of master categories, or concepts, that define the characteristics of a field of objects to be studied. In Parsons’s theory, the “action frame of reference” is a set of concepts that defines meaningful human behavior (or action) as a domain for methodical investigation and accumulation of knowledge (Parsons 1937). Parsons emphasized the logical priority of a frame of reference to empirical observation and procedures for validating factual knowledge, because the frame of reference sets the terms for integrating an understanding of objects and events. Without a well-defined conceptual scheme, empirical knowledge cannot integrate the reality it seeks to represent, but leaves that reality fragmented. The progress of a science toward more penetrating and comprehensive empirical understanding thus depends on methodical elaboration of a central frame of reference.

Parsons first proposed a general conceptual scheme for the analysis of social action in an early masterwork, *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons 1937), which presented a comprehensive, well-integrated, and yet elementary frame of reference that departed radically from the empiricist and positivist approaches that predominated in American sociology. He introduced his conceptual scheme by a critique of leading European economists and sociologists of the generation that bridged the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, and Alfred Marshall. The “action frame of reference” was proposed as a synthesis of core premises and categories that, Parsons argued, are fundamental to all sociological understanding. He did not suggest that the frame of reference was complete or that it constituted a precise theory. Rather, he justified it as a well-balanced framework of basic concepts essential to the future development of more technical theory. His bold claims for the action frame of reference and each of its categories were supported empirically by a methodical review of the evidence amassed in Weber’s studies in comparative civilization and religion, and in Durkheim’s major works.

The action frame of reference centered on the idea of the “unit act” as a hypothetical entity representing any and all instances of meaningful human social behavior. Parsons defined the essential elements of the unit act as ends, means, norms, and conditions. In his view, these four categories of elements (and in some statements a less clearly explained fifth element, a “principle” of effort) are essential to all social action, regardless of time, place, or socio-cultural context (Parsons 1937). Every instance of social action contains exemplars of each element.

In developing the notion of the unit act, Parsons emphasized treating the normative element (meaning the rules of conduct and underlying values that regulate human behavior) of social action with the same conceptual weight as the more familiar elements of ends and means. An emphasis on studying the normative elements of social action, and on understanding the ways in which values and norms, when institutionalized, become structural to society, characterized Parsons’s work throughout his career. Among the theorists of his own time, Parsons is distinctive in the degree to which he placed normative elements at the center of sociological phenomena.

Parsons limited the scheme of *The Structure of Social Action* to fundamental concepts in order to concentrate on justifying its underlying premises and each of its elements. The justification involved detailed critiques of the complete works, as then available, of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber, with a focus on implications for social-scientific premises and concepts. Parsons (1937) argued that his discussions of the four turn-of-the-century figures demonstrated that though each had written from a different intellectual background, they had “converged” on common concepts—concepts that coincide with the action frame of reference.

In particular, he demonstrated that each had emphasized normative elements as well as means, ends, and conditions.

Parsons's treatments of these four figures became touchstones for critical literature in the social sciences. Nearly seventy years later, they remain starting points for assessment of these theorists. The lengthy discussions of Weber and Durkheim remain particularly influential because of their analytical depth and rigor, even though much more is known today than was then about the two men's biographies, connections with other scholars, and ideological outlooks. The critical discussions of *The Structure of Social Action* have also played a major role in defining the core of the sociological tradition. The pairing of Weber and Durkheim as the predominant figures in the founding of modern sociological thought derives from the influence of *The Structure of Social Action* more than any other source.

Parsons argued that normative elements made it possible for ongoing social relationships to achieve a degree of social order. Social values (ideals for relationships and institutions) and norms (rules of conduct), insofar as they are shared by actors in specific institutions, serve to regulate their selections of goals and means to pursue goals. Values and norms thus constrain actors in their conduct in a sense not true of ends or means. His focus on shared elements of normative order enabled Parsons to probe the integration of social institutions in a manner not open to utilitarians, behaviorists, and other positivists who emphasize ends, means, and conditioning factors as the sole determinants of human behavior.

In 1951, Parsons published two major works, the essay "Values, Motives, and the Theory of Action," with Edward A. Shils (Parsons and Shils 1951), and *The Social System* (Parsons 1951) which together were revolutionary developments in his theory of action. The revolution began with a shift in the principal focus of the frame of reference from the unit act to interactive social relationships among actors and to the institutions that stabilize such relationships over space and time. With this conceptual shift, Parsons centered his sociological thought on the idea of social systems, where a social system is defined, simply, as a set of connected relationships maintained by social actors. At the same time Parsons sharpened his focus on the connections between social systems and other elements of human action. He placed the concept of social system in a broader context of two cross-cutting dimensions for analyzing patterns of differentiation among processes of action. The first dimension pertains to the tendency of ongoing systems of social action to differentiate into three independent but interdependent subsystems: culture, social systems, and personality. The idea of a threefold differentiation of action systems (later changed to a fourfold differentiation) became one of the most influential elements of Parsons's theory. The second dimension concerns a differentiation of elements of action among moral-normative, affective or cathectic, and cognitive gradients. Parsons proposed that cultural, social, and personality systems all differentiate along these three gradients (Parsons and Shils 1951; Parsons 1951). Moreover, they connect with each other along each of the three gradients, so that study of those connections is essential to understanding the general organization of action systems. Tracing out the two dimensions of differentiation and the relationships between them produced a far more detailed analytical scheme than Parsons had put forward in *The Structure of Social Action*. The new analytical scheme approached more closely a level of detail that would be practical for use in empirical studies.

The Social System was a major theoretical monograph that clarified basic issues of defining the concept of social system, introduced a general approach to functional analysis of social systems, and, in chapters that proved highly influential, discussed processes of socialization and personality development, the classic problems of deviance and social control, and the relations between social systems and cultural belief systems. Parsons illustrated the empirical significance of his theoretical arguments with a wide range of brief analyses that drew on his own prior writings as well as studies reported by other social scientists.

Analysis of differences between “traditional” and “modern” institutions and of the tensions involved in transitions from traditional to modern societies was a major empirical concern of *The Social System*. To help in relating his system concepts to this empirical interest, Parsons proposed what he called pattern variables. The pattern variables were a set of five dichotomies that are best understood as, together, breaking down the dichotomy between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, familiar from the works of Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, into distinct analytical dimensions. The five pairs are universalism versus particularism, affective neutrality versus affectivity, achievement versus ascription (later stated as performance versus quality), specificity versus diffuseness, and self-orientation versus collectivity orientation. In each of these pairs, the first item characterizes *Gesellschaft*-type institutions, the second, *Gemeinschaft*-type institutions. In the 1950s and '60s, the pattern variables were used in many empirical studies and were among the most widely discussed of Parsons's concepts. Now they are less often used in a formal way, but several of the component terms have become deeply engrained in social-scientific terminology.

With the changes in theory of 1951, Parsons's conceptual scheme for sociology came to focus on abstracting the dynamics of interaction from the more comprehensive processes of meaningful human action or conduct. Sociology became the study of factors of interaction that maintain relationships in stable states (equilibria) or force relationships to change. Parsons again identified shared normative standards as a principal basis of stability and continuity in social relationships, but he cast the normative emphasis in more dynamic terms than previously, emphasizing the importance of normative expectations for specific role relationships and conditions of interaction. As they interact, individuals hold expectations of each other that are based on the specific social roles—employer or employee, doctor or patient, parent or child—that each of them occupies. Actors also support the expectations they hold of one another by employing a variety of sanctioning tactics. The sanctioning tactics typically include, implicitly and explicitly, offering rewards for compliance with expectations and threatening punishments for noncompliance—as well as actually providing rewards or imposing punishments in response to the conduct of the other after it has occurred. Parsons emphasized that concrete sequences of interaction are outcomes of the expectations and sanctions introduced by each party. He argued that a “double contingency” applies to even the most elementary relationships due to the independence of decisionmaking by each party.

In his conceptual scheme, the personalities of individual social actors are not parts of social systems, but rather another type or class of system of action. He thus had to address himself to the question of how social systems and personality systems relate to each other in the ongoing processes of social action. His characteristic emphasis on normative elements led him to focus on a linkage between the institutional norms of a society and the superegos of personalities (Parsons 1951, 1964a). He argued that the normative structures of a society and the superegos of its individual actors are made up of the same cultural content, but incorporated by different mechanisms in the two types of system. The content is internalized in the personality and institutionalized in the society. This formulation drew on dynamic ideas from psychological and psychoanalytic as well as sociological studies and applied them to an understanding of the relationships between “social structure” and “personality.” Yet it avoided the temptation, to which others of the period had succumbed, to confound social dynamics with personality dynamics. By contrast, Parsons highlighted the notion of the “institutional integration of motivation,” maintaining that the motivational systems of individual personalities can be coherent and directed to specific goals only insofar as they are supported by specific social institutions and relationships (Parsons 1951).

He also emphasized a reciprocal and more dynamic consideration shaping the relations between social systems and personalities. Social institutions can be sustained over time only if the

individuals who take part in them are affectively invested in the social role relationships of which they are constituted. In brief, actors must be motivated to fulfill role expectations, or the underlying social institutions will be changed by “inadequate” role performances. Parsons’s writings on socialization and on deviance and social control dealt with a wide range of the conditions that strengthen or weaken individuals’ affective investments in the institutions in which they take part (Parsons 1951). Analysis of the flows of affect involved in interaction, role relationships, and institutions became one of his continuing theoretical and empirical concerns (Parsons 1964a; Parsons and Platt 1973; Parsons 1978).

The Social System also introduced Parsons’s initial formulations in functional analysis. Parsons proposed that all social systems, whether simple dyads, complex institutions, or whole societies, must manage the two problems of resource allocation and social integration. Resource allocation involves establishing processes to help actors in various roles to command the means for attaining the ends expected of them. The nature of the resources in question varies according to the types of roles in question. Specific kinds of tools, personnel trained in various skills, and financial means are among the types of resources that are crucial. Parsons noted that economic markets are the most generalized and efficient mechanisms for allocating resources across the diverse needs of the many units of a society. The need for social integration is in the long run as urgent for social systems as the need for appropriate resources. Mechanisms of social control are necessary to ensure that actors respond to one another’s expectations and fulfill role obligations in reciprocal, mutually reinforcing ways. Large-scale social systems require formal, in addition to informal, means of social control and dispute resolution, including courts, legal procedures, and modes of law enforcement.

Parsons recognized that processes of resource allocation and processes of social integration often operate in tension or conflict with each other. Resource allocations that advance industrial efficiency in the early stages of “modernization” have often engendered conflicts among social classes that threaten societal solidarity. In many historical settings, the solidarity of traditional family, kin, and community groupings has led to distributions of financial resources that disperse business capital and precipitate decline in family enterprises.

In the particularly noteworthy chapter 10 of *The Social System*, Parsons applied his new conception of the social system to “the case of modern medical practice.” One of his major intentions was to demonstrate the “empirical relevance of the abstract analysis” he had developed (428). To accomplish this he drew on an unpublished field study of medical practice that he had conducted (mainly in Boston) a decade earlier, and on the training in psychoanalysis that he had undertaken. Chapter 10 became a founding document in the emergence of the subfield of medical sociology. It illuminated the importance of health, illness, and medicine in the functioning of a society, their cultural meanings, and their relationships to the human life cycle and the human condition, including suffering and death. It set forth the path-making notion that being sick was not simply “a state of fact” but was also an institutionalized role. Moreover, this “sick role,” which exempted an ill person from normal social obligations, was a conditionally legitimized form of deviance that carried with it social control—relevant obligations to try to get well and to seek professionally competent help to do so. It framed the roles of the patient and the physician in relationship to one another. Noting that “it was in connection with [his] earlier study of medical practice that the beginnings of the pattern-variables scheme were first worked out” (429n.), Parsons invoked the pattern-variable pair of “affectivity” and “affective neutrality” to analyze the emotional evocativeness of the physician’s role, emphasizing the existential significance of illness and the physical and psychic-emotional intimacies of medical work. This chapter also laid a groundwork for treating “medical uncertainty” as a sociological phenomenon. Parsons argued that uncertainty and limitations are inherent to medical knowledge and practice, no mat-

ter what their stage of development, reflecting the frustrations and strains that they entail for both physicians and patients. Parsons identified “ritualized optimism,” which he viewed as a form of scientific magic, as a patterned way that doctors and patients mutually cope with situations of uncertainty and frustration, at least in American medical contexts.

The concepts of allocation and integration represented only a start in Parsons’s functional thinking. In the years after publication of *The Social System*, he worked to refine the idea of function in social systems, seeking to develop a more abstract, generalized, and multidimensional scheme. The outcome was a set of concepts that Parsons called the four-function paradigm, which evolved, over twenty-five years, into a scheme for integrating ever more diverse theoretical and empirical materials.

The four-function paradigm originated in Parsons’s collaboration with his Harvard colleague Robert F. Bales, who had conducted laboratory studies of interaction in small groups that had been assigned tasks that were to be carried out through open-ended discussion (Parsons, Bales, and Shils 1953). For these studies, Bales had devised sixteen coordinate categories to examine different types of contribution to group processes in relation to issues concerning leadership, authority, conflict, maintenance or loss of task focus, and coherence or solidarity of the group (Bales 1950). With these categories, Bales had shown that he could observe groups, rapidly record the predominant category of contribution made by each act of a group member, and later analyze shifting abstract patterns (which he called “phase movements”) in the group interaction. Bales argued that over time, phase movements enabled the interaction of group members to address a range of the varied “needs” of the groups—for example, the need for clear coordination to attain specific goals, or the need for mutual positive feelings among members to sustain group solidarity. In their collaboration, Parsons and Bales grouped the sixteen categories of interaction process into four categories that appeared to represent fundamental and enduring “needs,” or “functions,” of the groups.

In the initial discussion, the four “functional” categories were presented as results of empirical generalization—as an outcome of a series of empirical studies of groups, although groups that, by their design, were possibly representative of social systems generally (Parsons, Bales, and Shils 1953, chapter 3). The four categories were said to demarcate the dimensions of social “space” within which phase movements occur. The phase movements were conceived as responses to enduring needs of the groups as social systems.

A bolder claim soon emerged. This was that any and every social system needs to manage the same four general “system problems” in order to function. Parsons began to argue that social relationships and institutions—or, more precisely, *aspects* of them—could be classified by the ways in which they contribute to managing one or more of the four system problems, which Parsons soon called “functions” (Parsons, Bales, and Shils 1953, chapter 5). In his mature formulations of the 1960s and after, Parsons presented the notion of function less as a “system problem” than as an abstract dimension of social organization (Parsons 1969). The “four-function paradigm” became an explicit or implicit conceptual frame for virtually everything Parsons wrote after the mid-1950s. It approached more closely than earlier concepts, including the pattern variables, Parsons’s long-standing goal of developing an abstract, formal, and universal ground of analysis and explanation for sociology and related disciplines.

The four system problems or functions are:

1. Adaptation: The processes of gaining generalized control over conditions in the environment or situation of the acting unit. Typically, adaptive processes involve generating new resources for, or allocating available resources more efficiently among, individual or collective actors in order to secure new capabilities for the system.

2. Goal attainment: The processes of organizing the activities of social units into concerted efforts to achieve a desired change in a shared or collective relationship to the environment. For a given social unit, other social units, including collectivities or whole societies, may be major factors in the environment, and predominating over their interests may be a chief goal.
3. Integration: The processes of mutual adjustment among social units to encourage long-term interdependence, loyalty, and attachment. Typically, these processes involve setting priorities among units, as in systems of stratification, as well as institutionalizing common normative orders and means of social control.
4. Pattern maintenance: The processes of ensuring long-term attachment to the basic principles of action, including shared values, that distinguish the system of reference from other systems. Socialization and acculturation in the most inclusive and flexible senses are among the key processes involved here.

Because the four-function paradigm was so highly abstract, years of work were needed before Parsons's earlier formulations were thoroughly assimilated to it. In fact, Parsons never completed the task of recasting earlier ideas. However, the advantages of the four-function paradigm were fundamental. Earlier "functional" theories, including his own, appealed to indefinite lists of functions and had an essentially ad hoc quality, which limited their appeal as explanatory strategies. The theory of four system problems, however, constituted a closed a priori list of functions. Moreover, even its first statements included a richly heuristic set of hypotheses about how social relationships are differently organized in relation to the social functions they serve. These hypotheses became increasingly clarified as Parsons used the four-function idea in ever wider ranges of empirical analyses while treating their conceptual basis as one integral paradigm.

As early as 1953, Parsons tentatively suggested that the four functions might be used to represent major dimensions of structural differentiation in society as a whole. This speculation became a sort of charter for the next decade of his work (Parsons and Smelser 1956; Parsons 1966, 1969). During the 1950s and 1960s, he gradually produced a theory of four functionally specialized subsystems of society. Each of the four subsystems was treated as a complex set of dynamically interdependent institutions that, as itself a system, could in turn be analyzed by another application of the same four-function paradigm. The resulting theory of societal subsystems, although never completely worked out, remains a more comprehensive, clearly formatted, and analytically precise approach to macrosocial analysis than any alternative.

In outline, the four subsystems of society are:

1. Adaptive subsystem: The economy is the adaptive subsystem, structured around the development and allocation of basic resources for use by individual and collective units of a society. It consists of such institutions as markets for labor and capital, entrepreneurial roles, the legal complexes of ownership, contract, credit, and employment, and the organizational structure of business firms.
2. Goal-attainment subsystem: The "polity" is the subsystem of society that coordinates the attainment of collective goals. Governmental agencies at all levels, including the administrative, executive, legislative, and judicial arms of public authority, are the primary institutional components of the polity. Parsons also emphasized the role of the citizen in analyzing the dynamic relationships between the polity and the other three subsystems of a society, especially the integrative subsystem.
3. Integrative subsystem: The "societal community" is the subsystem that serves the integration of society. Social classes, status groups, ethnic groups, groups that share elements of

“life style,” and other groups that maintain enduring ties of solidarity mold a society’s pattern of social integration. Shared frameworks of law and informal normative orders, custom, and mores delimit the scope of action and influence of particular groups, establishing bases of trust, confidence, and solidarity among groups. Yet institutions of social control, class structure, status order, and structures of “primordial” solidarity such as kinship and ethnicity also shape and are shaped by phenomena of cleavage and conflict.

4. Pattern-maintenance subsystem: The “fiduciary system” is the subsystem serving the pattern-maintenance function. It is organized around the transmission (or reproduction), maintenance, and development of a society’s enduring values and shared culture. Institutions of religion, family and household, and socialization and education are its major constituents. Following Max Weber, Parsons emphasized that change in fiduciary systems, notably in religious ethics and forms of association, have historically been the most profound forces of social change.

Parsons retained his emphasis on normative order in formulating the functional theory of societal subsystems. Indeed, he extended it to a new level in analyzing the many forms that normative structures assume in functionally distinct settings, including economic exchange (Parsons and Smelser 1956), relationships of political authority (Parsons 1969), the solidary ties of status groups (Parsons 1953, 1969), and processes of socialization in family life (Parsons and Bales 1955). This analysis opened a new approach to understanding the many modes of articulation between normative orders and the practical institutions of societal functioning—for example, economic markets, political bureaucracies, class structures, or religious associations. The resulting synthesis transcended old conceptual dichotomies between normative and interest-driven, or ideal and material, factors in social causation. Parsons argued that every effective social institution is an integration of normative and interest-driven, ideal and material, factors. To be sure, the two dimensions can be divided, so that relationships are motivated solely by ideal or by material grounds, by the pursuit of self-interest without regard to normative rules, or by adherence to norms without regard to self-interest. Such circumstances emerge more often during periods of rapid change and intense conflict. Stable social institutions, however, depend upon both normative regulation and practical interests’ driving goal setting.

In striving to clarify his idea of four functionally defined subsystems of analysis, Parsons soon found it necessary to treat the subsystems in dynamic relationship with one another. His initial insight was that economists’ modeling of the twofold exchanges between the aggregate of business firms and the aggregate of households (wages for labor; goods and services for consumer spending) could be viewed as a boundary relationship between the adaptive and pattern-maintenance subsystems of society (Parsons and Smelser 1956).

Parsons then proposed that each of the four classic factors of economic production—labor, capital, entrepreneurship or organization, and land—might be treated as a form of input to the economy from an exogenous source. Just as labor (meaning a socialized ability to perform work of economic value) is an input from the pattern-maintenance system, so capital (financial means of controlling and allocating “real” economic resources) is an input from the polity, and organization (an ability to develop and sustain innovative relations of production) is an input from the system of social integration. All three of these factors—not only labor—enter the economy as parts of pairs of interdependent exchange relationships, which Parsons began to call “double interchanges.” When viewed as exchanges between specific units of the society, double interchanges involving labor, capital, and organization are mediated by highly differentiated market institutions. Parsons treated the factor of land as a special case, using the term to refer to the commitment of resources to economic production rather than to other possible uses—for example,

for consumption or political purposes. Land thus represents a factor generated within the economy, but also involves the position of economic values within more general cultural values that transcend the economy and concern allocations of resources to all kinds of social action.

Working out the economy's double interchanges with the other subsystems of society entailed an analysis of differences in function among economic institutions. Parsons again employed the four-function paradigm in this analysis—its first use at more than one level. In analyzing the economy into subsystems (and then sub-subsystems), Parsons also aligned each double interchange with a specific subsystem: the labor-wages, goods-and-services-consumer-spending interchange with the economy's goal-attainment subsystem; the capital-markets interchange with the adaptive subsystem; and the organization interchange with the integrative subsystem (Parsons and Smelser 1956). Markets involving "land" were discussed as a special boundary relation, not a double interchange, between the economy's pattern-maintenance function and the pattern-maintenance structures, principally value systems, of the whole society.

A further implication of Parsons's treatment of the economy's boundary relationships with the polity, societal community, and fiduciary system was that double interchanges constitute the flexible means by which all four subsystems of society adjust their respective internal homeostatic processes to one another. Parsons proposed that the general homeostatic processes of a society as a system could be analyzed in terms of six double interchanges—that is, one double interchange between each pair of societal subsystems. Each of the double interchanges was treated as a flexible, highly differentiated mechanism by which two subsystems adjust to one another's needs for resources (Parsons 1963). Each subsystem was hypothesized to be involved in three double interchanges—one with each of the other societal subsystems—and to obtain different kinds of essential resources through each of these boundary relationships. In addition, each subsystem was understood to regulate its internal operations with a factor that, like "land" in the economy, is a values-based commitment of resources to a general type of social process—economic, political, communal, or fiduciary. Thus, by combining four-function analysis of subsystems with the process-related concept of double interchange, adapted from economic theory, Parsons developed a general model for analyzing the ways in which specific social processes may be "mapped" within the functionally defined "space" of a whole society.

After his work on economic institutions, Parsons wrote several essays that together conceptualize the polity in terms parallel to his four-function analysis of the economy. One essay (Parsons 1969, chapter 9) reinterpreted the conclusions of *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954)—then the most sophisticated empirical study of the American electoral system—in terms of the part of electoral institutions and processes in the double interchange between the polity and societal community. Another included a four-function analysis of the primary subsystems of the polity (Parsons 1969, chapter 13). Parsons's essay "On the Concept of Political Power" (Parsons 1963) revised the double interchange between the polity and the societal community on the basis of a radically new concept of power. He proposed that in modern democracies, the polity receives a factor of "interest demands"—expressions of opinion about needed public policies—from the organized citizenry as a sector of the societal community, while producing "policy decisions" as a factor for adjusting the lives of the citizenry to contemporary circumstances. The polity then receives "political support" in the form of electoral votes that, when aggregated under election laws, determine holders of offices. In return, the societal community receives "leadership responsibility," assuring that the political process will address the well-being of citizens. Parsons's discussion of this double interchange drew parallels with the double interchange between business firms and households. As a homeostatic process, it contains capabilities to absorb and adjust to social change.

Like modern economies, the polity in this analysis is open to growth, as when new kinds of interest demands (often from newly included groups) enter the political arena and lead to

new courses of political action. Yet Parsons also noted that polities experience contractions and downward spirals that reduce the levels of effective political activity and the public's well-being. Contractions in public trust may restrict the scope of interest demands acceptable in the polity and in leadership responsibility acceptable to the citizenry, thereby precipitating "political depressions" (Parsons 1963; Parsons 1969, chapter 13). He cited the McCarthyism of the 1950s and, later, consequences of the "Watergate" events as examples of deflationary events, or depressions, in American politics (Parsons and Gerstein 1977).

In recognizing phenomena of both expansion and contraction in the polity, Parsons raised a question of whether political processes include an analogue of money's role in economic processes. The economist John Maynard Keynes had shown imbalances in the circulation of money as wages and as consumer spending to be sources of depression. Parsons hypothesized that imbalances in the boundary processes of the polity might also involve a symbolic medium. He proposed that political power is a medium that circulates in political relationships and provides a measure of political efficacy parallel to money's role in economic relationships. Power in this view represents capacity to make decisions that formally bind a political entity and is expended with every political decision, just as money is expended with every purchase. If public authorities expend power, then they need ways of gaining "incomes" of power. Parsons proposed that binding decisions issued by public authorities are a kind of calculated investment intended to bring renewed power in the form of support in future elections (Parsons 1963; Parsons 1969, chapter 13).

Parsons knew that this conception of power differs from the conventional view among political scientists. The conventional view emphasizes two basic qualities of power. First, authorities with power exercise it *over* others to frustrate their pursuit of conflicting goals. Power in this perspective is essentially a zero-sum game: if used by one actor, it comes at the cost of others. Second, power is a diffuse capability; the Hobbesian idea is that any means of attaining ends over the will of another becomes power. Parsons argued that both of these ideas are misleading. In his understanding, power is a specialized resource that enables duly authorized officials to make binding decisions for a collectivity, whether a nation, state, city, bureau, agency, business firm, or association. Power consists in the binding quality of the decision. The binding quality distinguishes power from other means of pursuing ends, such as expenditures of money or use of personal influence. Parsons acknowledged that power is often exercised over others: a binding court decision frustrates the aims of one party to a suit or a guilty defendant who goes to prison; a military order sends thousands of soldiers into the risks of battle. But, Parsons also noted, important forms of power are binding only through aggregate acts of many individuals, as when the votes of a majority elect one candidate rather than competitors to office. Properly regulated, power can also serve shared interests of the public and benefit an entire citizenry. Power is not intrinsically zero-sum, but zero-sum only in certain situations, especially in times of political contraction.

Parsons's key insight was that power, like money, is essentially symbolic. The literature has linked power closely with force, but Parsons argued that force is generally used when authorities lack the power to command or their power has been challenged (Parsons 1964b). As a quality of commands that renders them properly authorized and likely to be obeyed, power is linked to the procedures by which commands are issued. Power's symbolic form—as in court orders, legislative enactments, executive regulations, or military commands—is intrinsic to its efficacy, just as legitimate currency takes its value from its precise printed form or a check gains value from a particular authorized signature. Force is typically used when power on the symbolic level has proved ineffective. However, the use of force may be necessary, as in the suppressing of civil disturbances, to secure institutions of power by demonstrating that duly authorized commands cannot be violated with impunity.

With his discussion of power, Parsons concluded that money is not the only circulating symbolic medium, just an obvious member of a class of media. His general model of social process suggested that each subsystem of society must have its own specialized medium. He soon designated influence (or the capacity to persuade, typically by activating a solidary relationship) as the circulating medium of the societal community (Parsons 1969, chapter 15). His formulation built on the research on personal influence, mass media, and reference groups conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert K. Merton, and colleagues at Columbia University. It also linked the mechanisms of interpersonal influence uncovered by the Columbia studies to macrosocial processes of generating solidarity across the societal community—to be sure, in tension with cleavages, conflicts, and differences of social class, status, race, ethnicity, region, and occupational groupings. Parsons's discussion of influence as a symbolic medium added dynamic qualities to the understanding of how political leaders mobilize ties of solidarity in seeking support from electorates.

Parsons suggested that value commitments constitute a circulating medium for the fiduciary subsystem. By value commitments he meant the generalized promises that actors make to one another to carry out significant projects cooperatively. Actors rely upon others to implement all manner of activities that involve divisions of labor. Although cooperative relations are often coordinated at multiple levels and involve uses of money, power, and influence as well, they depend most basically on the commitments of participants that each will do his or her part. The commitments circulate in the sense that one actor's promise to cooperate with another becomes a condition of participation by third parties. Parsons noted that commitments are often highly generalized: an individual's commitment to perform labor for a business firm, made at the time of employment, may leave open to future decisions just what work he or she will do, in cooperation with whom, through what procedures, and when and where. Yet, the giving and accepting of the commitment reflects the employer's and employee's shared valuation of a kind of production and the skills for executing it (Parsons 1969, chapter 16; see Parsons and Smelser 1956).

One source of confusion about Parsons's writings on power, influence, and value commitments has been that these media do not circulate in clear and palpable quantities as money does. The quantities of money in our wallets and bank accounts, or needed for a specific purchase, can be calculated precisely, even if their "real" value, or purchasing power, changes over time. Power, influence, and value commitments cannot be so precisely quantified: public policies are not promulgated through use of specific amounts of "power chits," nor are there definite "power prices" for making particular policy decisions. Yet we commonly view power, influence, and commitments in quantitative terms. We speak of White House officials as exercising a great deal of power, of leaders in a profession as highly influential, or of a person who has taken on too many responsibilities as overcommitted. We know that structures of authority entail methodical allocations of power, with high officials having greater power than their subordinates.

Although power, influence, and commitments have quantitative aspects, their uses would likely be compromised if they circulated in definite quantities. We can understand this point easily with respect to commitments. Commitments circulate in the form of promises to make efforts that others can rely upon in planning cooperative action. Because the difficulty of fulfilling a commitment often changes with circumstances, actors may know that they have made large commitments, but not know the actual level of effort needed to fulfill them. Nevertheless, a commitment would be valueless if others could not count upon its fulfillment, even if and when circumstances change. A commitment is not measured by a specific quantity of effort to be made, but by its relative priority among an actor's set of value-based undertakings.

Parsons's writings on money, power, influence, and commitments completed a general model of how processes are mediated within each of the four subsystems of society and, in ways that are too technical to review here, how the subsystems relate to each other homeostatically

through double interchanges. As some of the chapters in this volume indicate, the model suggested as many new problems as it resolved, and Parsons did not deal with even some of the most important ones. Yet the model does unify structural and dynamic analysis, identifies six double-interchange systems as essential centers of a society's homeostatic mechanisms, and with the four-function paradigm it presents a format for analyzing systems into subsystems, and those systems into still more specific functionally defined sub-subsystems, while retaining a methodical overview of how the parts fit into the societal whole. No other social theory has achieved a comparable level of refinement in formatting macrosocial analysis. For this reason, Parsons's formulations remain a fundamental resource for sociological theory forty years after his first discussions of the symbolic media, and fifty years after the first presentations of the four-function paradigm and its application to the subsystems of society. Essays in this volume that take up problems of the analysis of subsystems of society, the symbolic media, and the major societal interchanges treat theoretical problems of immense importance to the sociology of today.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Parsons wrote a number of essays on the modernization of so-called underdeveloped societies and social change more generally (Parsons 1960). These writings revitalized his long-standing interest in comparative institutional analysis and led him to write two short books presenting a theory of social evolution: *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Parsons 1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (Parsons 1971).

The first book presented a broad typology of "primitive," archaic, historic, and "seed-bed" societies. It drew on a wide range of works in anthropology, ancient history, and civilizational studies to analyze the major institutions characteristic of societies at each "stage" of social evolution, and to demonstrate the range of variation in basic institutional patterns observed among societies at each stage. For example, Parsons discussed archaic societies by comparing the radically different institutions of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations of antiquity. The book also provided sharp definitions for each of the evolutionary types, listing a number of the cultural and institutional criteria that distinguish each type from the others. Thus, the presence of developed craft literacy, or literacy known only to special status groups of scribes and priests, central cults where priests monopolize the rituals and interpretation of religious beliefs and mythology, written codes of law, a class system secured by legally codified discriminations among aristocrats, commoners, and slaves, a central administrative apparatus, consolidation of authority around an institution of kingship, intensive agriculture, storehouses for essential goods, local markets for craft and agricultural produce, the concentration of the nonagricultural population in towns sets "archaic" societies apart from "primitive" societies, which do not possess these features.

The discussion of historic civilizations covered the classical Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Roman empires, all of which, as examples of a type, extended over vast domains, included many ethnic groups, and had cultural and institutional systems, including law and status orders based on religio-philosophical belief systems with transcendental conceptions of sources of value and legitimacy. Their social hierarchies included specially honored status groups that were the main proponents and interpreters of their respective religio-philosophical traditions. Following Weber, Parsons focused his analysis on the social makeup and privileged ways of life of these key status groups—for example, the Confucian literati and mandarins in China and the Brahmin priesthood in the Indian "caste" system. He used the four-function paradigm to compare the major institutional complexes developed within each of the historic civilizations.

Parsons gave special attention to ancient Greece and Israel, which he termed "seedbed" societies because their importance to the comparative study of societies derives not from their wealth or power but from the effects of their cultural heritages on the religious and philosophical frameworks of later civilizations. Greek philosophy was the ultimate source of ideals of

objective reason that became essential to early Christian theology, medieval theology, Renaissance philosophy, and Enlightenment rationalism, and Greek ideals of the autonomous politically organized city-state, mediated by the Roman republican tradition, became the source since the early Renaissance of modern republican traditions. The Hebraic idea of a transcendent but personal and jealous God who enters history to reward and punish peoples for their achievements and failings became the primary source of Christian theodicy and religious ethics.

The System of Modern Societies discussed modern societies as a distinctive evolutionary type that first emerged in Western civilization but has grown to have worldwide impact. As a starting point in the analysis, Parsons sought to systematize our understanding of why modern society originated in Western civilization. He emphasized the dynamic quality of the civilization that had emerged several centuries before modern institutions in the West, beginning with the emergence of many small, overlapping, yet competing societies after the fragmentation of Western Roman authority. Medieval civilization then developed through a number of consolidating forces: the Christian church with its partly universalistic priesthood and hierarchy; the heritage of Roman ideals of effective law and authority; a class system centering on a pan-European feudal-military nobility based on unstable, ever-changing feudal ties; agricultural production rooted in peasant villages; and active commerce and craft production centered in towns and cities. It was this distinctive European civilization that became transformed by the cultural movements of the Renaissance, with its elaboration of secular culture in the arts, technology, and moral belief, and the Reformation, with its redirection of fundamental religious beliefs.

Generalizing Weber's analysis, Parsons argued that the Calvinist ethic of inner-worldly asceticism provided, against a background of other Reformation movements, a special impetus to break with traditional social arrangements and devise new institutions. The two centuries following the Reformation were a period of intense social conflict and repeated efforts to create new social foundations. Societies in which ascetic Protestant movements predominated, especially England and its American colonies, established stringently disciplined religious ethics and social orders. In the eighteenth century, ascetic Protestantism began to accommodate secular as well as religious ethical reasoning and gave rise to elements of the modern "spirit of capitalism," with its emphasis on creative entrepreneurship and efficient use of secular talents and resources. The economic forces that created the Industrial Revolution spread from England to the Low Countries and the United States, then all of the north and west of Europe, including predominantly Catholic nations. The Industrial Revolution produced a growing, self-confident "middle class," which generated pressures toward democratizing political change. Electoral institutions emerged that enfranchised common citizens and promoted competition among political parties, undermining privileged groups and aristocracies and empowering elected representatives of the citizenry at large.

The United States institutionalized a combination of the Industrial and democratic revolutions more rapidly than any other society. It also went the farthest in placing a middle class without ascriptive privileges in a central position in the class system. The American legal system firmly but flexibly protected new forms of property, contract, and employment. By the early twentieth century, American society had developed the largest and most efficient industrial institutions, with the most highly differentiated occupational structure, in the world. Parsons argued that these changes were complemented by an educational revolution that upgraded popular education well in advance of other nations. As part of this revolution, university-based research and advanced training of personnel in the sciences, professions, and other technical fields transformed the work force and the economy's capacity for innovation.

Parsons suggested that the institutionalization of the Industrial, democratic, and educational revolutions in the United States created a new, "advanced modern" type of society by the

late twentieth century. He then discussed the prospects for the spread, in partial or complete forms, of this type of modernity in Europe, the Soviet Union, and Japan. Early in the Brezhnev era, he predicted that the Soviet Union could not sustain its authoritarian political system in a world where democracies predominate (Parsons 1971).

In 1970, Parsons extended four-function analysis to relations between social systems and other subsystems of action, which he began to call the general action system. He replaced the classification of culture, social system, and personality with a scheme of four primary subsystems (Parsons 1970). For the adaptive function, Parsons introduced the concept of the behavioral organism, constituted of aspects of the individual organism that provide resources for physical behavior. The senses, ability to speak and to understand speech, capacities for coordinated motion of the body, and the intelligent capabilities of the brain are primary resources of the behavioral organism. The personality was aligned with the goal-attainment function because of the importance of psychological patterns of motivation to purposeful agency for implementing action and achieving ends. The social system was treated as integrative in its functioning because its normative structures bind actors into common relationships and situations. Culture was linked with the pattern-maintenance function because of the importance of core beliefs, values, and symbols in establishing basic principles and direction for entire action systems. Having identified these functional subsystems, Parsons tentatively designated the symbolic media that regulate their internal operations and interchanges with one another (Parsons 1970; Parsons and Platt 1973, chapter 3). His treatment of affect in a broadly Freudian sense as one of the media of the general action system is discussed in one of the chapters in this volume.

In the mid-1970s Parsons, by then retired from Harvard, led an informal faculty seminar at the University of Pennsylvania (in which the editors of this volume collaborated) to discuss new developments in the theory of action. One issue was an objection that had been raised to the conception of behavioral organism as the adaptive subsystem of action (Lidz and Lidz 1976). The criticism held that the notion of behavioral organism violates the idea of a system constituted entirely of meaningful action, as it consists of physical elements of the human organism. To correct this violation of the action frame of reference, it was suggested that the adaptive subsystem of action should be seen as a system of cognitive schemas in Jean Piaget's sense. Such a system would also correspond to "mind," in George Herbert Mead's usage. Parsons accepted the new proposal, but argued more broadly for a fresh examination of how systems of social action relate to their environing systems, including organisms, the broader biosphere, and the physical cosmos. Discussion of the boundary relations of action systems continued in the faculty seminar for several years.

The major outcome of the discussions was a long essay, "A Paradigm of the Human Condition" (Parsons 1978, chapter 15). Using the four-function paradigm, Parsons here argued that the human condition as experienced by actors involves the action system's relationships with three other systems. Systems of action serve the integrative function of the human condition as system. They exist in three orders of environment, the physico-chemical environment (adaptive), the human organic and ecological environment (goal-attaining), and a telic, or transcendental, environment (pattern-maintaining). To complement these system identifications, Parsons tentatively suggested terms for subsystems, media, and interchange categories.

The idea of a telic system has been especially controversial. In fact, Parsons was not positing that a god or divine principle sets a general direction for human action, but only that all systems of action are intrinsically open with respect to ultimate principles. Any given system of action—even an entire civilization—follows specific ultimate principles. Those principles establish the terms in which people living in the system of action confront ultimate questions of meaning, including the injustices of social life, poverty, illness, suffering, death and other losses,

and hopes for “salvation” or other transcendental conceptions of the significance of life. The characteristic principles with which an action system addresses ultimate issues, however, are not the only possible ones. We know that in times of great stress in civilizations, pressures arise to change the principles, as in the Roman Empire during the epoch of Christ, or during the Reformation. Parsons argued that ultimate principles are formulated by social actors, but within a limited set of possibilities. Weber’s concepts of inner-worldly and other-worldly, mysticism and asceticism, Parsons proposed, demarcate the dimensions of transcendental possibilities for principles of action. As civilizations struggle to develop and maintain ultimate principles, they confront these essential alternatives for basic orientations of action. The telic order stands for the limited set of possibilities for ultimate principles of action that constitute an inherent environment of all action systems.

Parsons treated action systems as integrative to the human condition because they interrelate elements of all three environments (physico-chemical, organic-ecological, and telic) in terms of their own meaning patterns. A system of action provides the anthropocentric basis of the integration of the human condition, which is different, as Parsons wrote, from the fish condition (or horse, or rat, or paramecia conditions). Moreover, given the importance to humans of meaningful orientations, the human condition has different experiential significance for Americans, ancient Greeks, premodern Chinese, and medieval Muslims, and for various status groups within any of these societies.

The essay on the human condition has attracted attention in part because it was Parsons’s last major publication. Not only is it representative of his work in opening large issues, proposing insightful and suggestive answers, and yet leaving significant problems unresolved and awaiting future contributions. It also made manifest an important, albeit often implicit, metatheme that tied together many aspects of his work. Several of the contributing authors to this volume select Parsons’s essay on the human condition as a starting point for their own efforts to address the corpus of his action theory. In its broad scope and reflective, philosophic quality, some commentators have noted, the essay has attributes of a final testamentary statement.

THIS VOLUME

All of the chapters in this volume clarify and critique aspects of action theory and strive to extend its reach. Although they take up ideas that are abstract and in many cases macrotheoretical, they are not removed from empirical reality. Quite to the contrary, all of the authors demonstrate a lively interest in considering how Parsons’s action theory might be applied to important events in our present-day world and the contemporary condition of sociological thought and how certain elements of his theoretical system might need to be altered in light of them. The contemporary developments to which most frequent reference is made are the complex phenomenon of “globalization”; the historically unprecedented economic, political, military, and cultural power that the United States has attained as an “empire-less empire,” and the changes in American institutions associated with those expansions; the emergence of various forms of fundamentalism; the upsurge of “primordial,” clanic, tribal, and ethnic conflicts; and the florescence of several types of deterministic or positivistic thought that have assumed (or reassumed) importance in the last several decades, including biological determinism, economic utilitarianism, and rational-choice theory.

The chapters are grouped in four parts: “Social Institutions and Social Processes”; “Societal Community and Modernization”; “Sociology and Culture”; and “The Human Condition.” Since several of the chapters—not surprisingly—address more than one topic in the theory of social action, the grouping is, unavoidably, somewhat arbitrary.

Part I: Social Institutions and Social Processes

The first group of chapters takes up issues in Parsons's conceptions of social institutions and social processes, basic material in any sociological theory and an area of analysis with many implications for contemporary work. The first two chapters concentrate on economic institutions and their relationships to broader institutional frameworks, including especially family and household, political institutions, and legal frameworks.

Neil Smelser begins his chapter, "Parsons's Economic Sociology and the Development of Economic Sociology," by reviewing considerations that went into the writing of his and Talcott Parsons's collaborative work, *Economy and Society*, published in 1956. They placed the economy squarely within the larger society, treated the economy analytically as an adaptive subsystem, and analyzed its relations with the pattern-maintenance, integrative, and goal-attaining subsystems, each of which receives vital resources from the others. A conception of double interchanges between pairs of the four subsystems was one of the achievements of the book. Parsons and Smelser's analysis consolidated several strands of sociological and economic thought into a single coherent theory. Nevertheless, the book was not well received by economists whose rationalistic paradigms led them to dismiss nonrational cultural and sociological ideas as irrelevant. Sociologists also paid scant attention to the book because in the mid-fifties they had little interest in treating relationships between sociology and economics at this level of abstraction and rigor. Despite this rejection, the book heralded the beginnings of the mature version of action theory—the four-function scheme and the theory of the generalized symbolic media of interchange.

Over the last twenty years, Smelser notes, independent work in economic sociology has become a burgeoning subdiscipline. Analyses of economic activity affected by population ecology, cultural constraints, embedded networks, organizations, and political institutions have been conducted with disparate but rigorous technical means and have yielded valuable insights. But these many studies and approaches remain an unordered aggregate, and in this respect they are of uncertain theoretical value. Smelser suggests that, given the advances made in sociology and economics in the past forty-five years, the time may be more favorable to attempt a synthesis along the lines of, but not necessarily identical to the one Parsons and he proposed almost fifty years ago.

In his chapter "Looming Catastrophe: How and Why 'Law and Economics' Undermines Fiduciary Duties in Corporate Law," Mark Gould continues his program of developing a sociology of law from the perspective of action theory. Gould's analysis draws in part on insights of Durkheim and Weber and also on implications of Parsons's early work, *The Structure of Social Action*, that have hardly been noted by sociologists and American legal scholars. At issue are the understandings of managerial responsibilities of loyalty to the firm and fiduciary obligations to shareholders as they are codified in corporate law. In discussing several leading legal texts and court decisions, Gould observes that contemporary law regulating the contractual obligations of managers of business firms is based exclusively on utilitarian and rationalist premises. These premises give primacy to the balancing of individual interests, limited only by situational opportunities and constraints, a primacy in accord with individualistic and pragmatic values that Americans prize. This emphasis tacitly puts concerns for the collective entity, the firm, in a distant second place. The firm becomes a zone primarily to negotiate and fulfill individual interests. Given these emphases, loyalty to the firm and care for its shareholders are eroded, and the firm veers toward becoming an atomistic aggregate and loses inner coherence and solidarity. Gould warns that as these processes, supported by contemporary contract law, continue, investor trust and confidence will decline and the viability of firms will be endangered. What is needed,

he argues, is a clear legal understanding of the fiduciary responsibilities of managers that are central to the regulation of their contractual obligations.

Gould's analysis of the practical limitations of individualistic and utilitarian understandings of contract law closely parallels Parsons's classic critique of reductionistic utilitarian social theories. However, Gould adds an emphasis on the deleterious consequences for corporate law of institutionalization of reductionistic understandings, whether through judicial decisions, legislation, or regulatory processes. In this way he importantly extends Parsons's analytic argument into an area of policy of immense practical significance for contemporary American society.

Harald Wenzel argues in "Social Order as Communication: Parsons's Theory on the Move from Moral Consensus to Trust" that the solution Parsons developed to the problem of social order in his earlier and middle periods shifted radically in his later work. In the earlier work, Parsons relied primarily on the idea of shared normative order held in common by the members of a society and thus constraining and stabilizing their conduct as the foundation of social relationships. But the centrality of normative order in Parsons's thinking slowly gave way as his appreciation grew of the enormous complexity and variability, indeed the often fleeting quality, of modern social relationships. The idea of a normative order was perhaps adequate to understand social relationships in earlier, more stable, less socially differentiated historical periods. In the modern era, however, normative order alone is insufficient.

Wenzel draws on the work of several other scholars, in particular Erving Goffman and Alvin W. Gouldner, to amplify this point. Wenzel sees in the tacit negotiations, the subtle parrying, the thrusts and counterthrusts that precede a relationship a hallmark of modernity. Judgments of trust are developed in such anticipatory communications and are necessary before constraining norms can be brought into play. Wenzel believes that Parsons's implicit understanding of the importance of such communications of trust begins to appear in his later idea of the symbolic media of interchange. The normative order remains important in Parsons's thinking, but it no longer holds the precedence it had in the earlier work. Parsons began to see that in the modern, highly fluid and differentiated social world, the communication of trust at the very outset of relationships permits the normative order to function.

Harold Bershad's chapter, "Affect in Social Life," examines the kinds and combinations of affective involvement in social life. This is a matter about which Parsons wrote a great deal over the course of many years but which he never fully developed. The binary opposition Parsons drew in earlier formulations between affectivity and affective neutrality—one of the "pattern variables"—is, in Bershad's view, too extreme. Bershad argues that there is always some affective, or emotional, involvement in everything that people do. He agrees in part with Parsons's later view that affect is one of the symbolic media of interchange that circulates through every sector of society, and functions in a way analogous to money, with which it shares many properties. However, Bershad also identifies unique properties of affect that are quite unlike those of money. Affect requires its own analysis.

Bershad cleaves to the insights of Freud and Parsons in considering affect to be a sign of motivation to act, or to continue acting. Affect first appears in bodily manifestations and is a possession of the person, but with few notable exceptions it is shaped in its genre, expression, and appropriateness by many different kinds of norms. Affective expression can thus be communicated independently of the body, and through a variety of representations shared by people physically distant from one another. Bershad discusses a few kinds of poorly regulated or unregulated affect, such as in situations of anomie, effervescence, and panic, and closes with a brief discussion of the anxiety generated by 9/11 and its aftermath. He concludes that affect in general, and anxiety in particular, is an ongoing feature of the human condition.

Part II: Societal Community and Modernization

The first two chapters in this part, by Jeffrey Alexander and Giuseppe Sciortino, focus specifically on evaluation of the concept of societal community. Essays by Robert N. Bellah and Donald N. Levine discuss issues of the understanding of contemporary American society (Bellah) and modern societies (Levine) more generally, but in ways that in both cases relate directly to qualities of community institutions and feeling. The Alexander and Sciortino chapters evaluate the concept of societal community by different methods and reach contrasting conclusions. Alexander's approach in "Contradictions in the Societal Community: The Promise and Disappointment of Parsons's Concept" is based on a close reading of Parsons's definitions of the term "societal community," which he then subjects to an abstract and general critique. Sciortino treats societal community as a second-order concept integrating a wide variety of materials that Parsons drew from nearly all aspects and phases of his writings.

Alexander notes that earlier in his own career he viewed the concept of societal community very favorably. In recent years, however, in part under the influence of Jürgen Habermas's reformulation of critical theory, he has sought a theory that combines a concern for justice with analysis of social integration. This theoretical interest has led him to join the interdisciplinary discussions over the concept of civil society, its dimensions, and its potential that emerged in the 1990s. Alexander reviews key sources of Parsons's concept of societal community in Durkheim's analysis of societal solidarity, Weber's treatment of the city and urban institutions from antiquity through the Renaissance, and T. H. Marshall's analysis of the elements of citizenship. He acknowledges that many of Parsons's essays exhibit an interest in democracy and justice, but suggests that a concern for order emerged as a stronger conceptual interest. Thus, by the time the concept of societal community was formulated, it emphasized the importance of order and tended to place issues of democratic relations, fairness, and justice in the background.

Alexander's close reading of the definitions Parsons provided for the term "societal community" is presented as documentation of this tendency. He then argues, citing mainly *The System of Modern Societies*, that Parsons moved to an overly "buoyant" and "optimistic" analysis of the condition and historical promise of the American societal community. If Parsons did not totally overlook "uncomfortable facts," he tended to recognize them only in the form of qualifications—framed by "buts, despites, however, of courses, and althoughs"—that diminished his acknowledgment of them. Alexander proposes that an analysis of social integration that entails a more critical and dynamic vision of the civil sphere and eschews idealizing specific institutions would be a more fitting complement to democratic theory.

In "How Different Can We Be? Parsons's Societal Community, Pluralism, and the Multicultural Debate," Sciortino calls for reconstruction and elaboration of Parsons's notion of the societal community as an integrative subsystem of society. Like Alexander, Sciortino views the concept of societal community as a bold but unfulfilled theoretical vision, but where Alexander sees an overly "optimistic" perspective, Sciortino perceives an insightful, "non-nostalgic" or "anti-nostalgic" understanding of modern pluralistic solidarity—a "sustained criticism of pseudo-Gemeinschaft illusions." He proposes that the concept of societal community should be understood as a "second order phenomenon" that coordinates "several kinds of coordinating systems" that are of recognized importance in sociology, yet not often perceived to be integrated with one another. Thus, societal community involves an integration of mechanisms of formal and informal social control; social classes, strata formation, and lifestyles; the civil institutions of deliberation on public policies; and the more diffuse solidary ties of family, kinship, ethnicity, and religion that support personal identity. He notes that Parsons had written on all of these primary coordinating mechanisms, with emphasis on the "specific social strains" that each entails, before

proposing his conception of societal community. Parsons's analysis of the societal community emphasized that societal solidarity can be achieved only through successful combination of several independent factors that are always contingent, fallible inputs from the other subsystems of society: economy, polity, and fiduciary system.

Sciortino argues that Parsons's non-nostalgic perspective led him to stress the pluralism, based on segmentation as well as differentiation, involved in the inputs of factors across each of the societal community's boundaries as well as in its internal institutional structures. Cross-cutting networks of pluralistic solidary relationships thus make up the structural principle that renders modern societal communities possible. Sciortino observes that Parsons emphasized the stabilizing effects of multiple cross-cutting memberships in practically all of his writings on modern societies, and especially those in which he propounded the concept of societal community.

Against the background of this framework, Sciortino suggests several analytical topics and themes that contemporary sociologists should explore more intensively than Parsons did. Among them are the creative variations in value and norms that may evolve from competition and conflict among groups; the continuing importance of diffuse and quality-based solidarities in modern life; the importance of social segmentation in pluralistic structures; and the emergence of mass media, educational systems, and juridical institutions as what Parsons called "storm centers" of contemporary societal communities. Sciortino also proposes a focused but general proposition that deserves empirical evaluation as a corollary to Parsons's hypotheses about pluralism: pluralism is stabilizing in its effects where there is more variance in values and culture within specific groups than across groups.

Robert Bellah's evocative "God, Nation, and Self in America" unfolds around a narrative analysis of how and why he has concentrated so much of his intellectual attention on the study of American society and of the evolution that his perspective on this society has undergone since 1967. That is the year when, at the urging of his teacher and colleague Talcott Parsons, he wrote and published the essay "Civil Religion in America," which, he avers, "changed my life." Threaded through his account is a running comparison of the "points of intersection" between Parsons's view of American society and his own, and of some of the "divergences" between them that developed over time.

As a consequence of his scholarly study of American society, the first-hand research he has conducted in certain American milieux, and his experience and interpretation of the cardinal events of the past five decades of this country's history, Bellah has become increasingly convinced that the Protestant Reformation, which underlies the deepest level of American "self-understanding," was "a mistake"—albeit a "necessary mistake." In his view, this mistake, or its consequences, "needs to be rectified if we are to solve the crises of modernity." What Bellah considers mistaken is that from its inception, the American nation was religiously conceived in a way that "contained destructive as well as creative possibilities" and "cultural consequences." At its core lay the "Protestant temptation" to "confuse religion and nation," and "church and nation"—"to imagine that America had become a realized eschatology." In turn, this dangerous elevation of the nation to transcendent "messiah" status, "unleavened by . . . strong consciousness of divine judgment," opened the door to "the confusion of God and self." Most recently, Bellah claims, "Self seems to have replaced, or . . . subordinated, God and Nation as the predominant idea of our culture." The simultaneously theological and sociological "mistake" involved here is that "the sacred" has become "available only in the fragile consciences of individuals."

Bellah reports that Parsons reacted with strong reservations and ambivalence to these ideas about the flaws and perils of American civil religion, which Bellah first elaborated in *The Broken Covenant*. He attributes this to the fact that although Parsons, too, regarded Protestant Christianity as the primary source of the American value system, he took a more positive view of it.

Indeed, the concepts through which he expressed what he considered to be the essence of Protestant Christianity, which, he believed, provided context for “instrumental activism,” “institutionalized individualism,” and the “societal community”—brought him, says Bellah, to the edge of viewing the United States as “a version of the Kingdom of God on earth,” adding, “a tendency to which Parsons did not entirely succumb, but by which he was sorely tempted.”

Bellah is certain that Parsons would not have subscribed to the crux of his argument that the Protestant Reformation was a mistake. And yet, somewhat wistfully, he ends up wondering whether the divergences between his understanding of the development and problems of American society and Parsons’s might stem primarily from “generational differences”: “I have lived through years very different from those of Parsons’s lifetime,” he concludes, “but if he could have experienced those years perhaps he would have been more open to the possibility that my argument is valid.”

In “Modernity and Its Endless Discontents,” Donald Levine reviews and analyzes several features of modernity considered to be troubling, even dangerous, by many prominent scholars of the past one hundred fifty years. Among the chief sources of these discontents with modern life are processes such as equalization leading to an inevitable breakdown of traditional authority and roles in family and workplace; inclusion whereby the dominance once enjoyed by particularistically defined groups is steadily eroded; and differentiation whereby many aspects of social life (governmental, religious, educational, artistic) attain a degree of independence from each other that seems to threaten the unity of society. These processes continue to generate considerable disquiet for many today. Levine discusses Parsons’s deep appreciation of the dislocations and disequilibria created by these processes, many of which are of global reach.

But he argues that Parsons did not consider the dilemmas precipitated by these processes to be insuperable, although they were formidable and in many places seemingly intractable. Parsons believed that new ways of resolving many of these dilemmas would be developed, and social unification and synthesis achieved in keeping with the tenor of modernity. However, Levine states, modernity is not one thing, but many things. New, unanticipated dilemmas, some intrinsic to social life, some pertaining to relations of human social life with its environments, are constantly emerging. The various modernities are themselves in process and the dilemmas and discontents they generate have not yet been fully exhibited. As long as modernity continues to develop and change, perhaps they never will be. Our understanding of problems of modernity and our ability to resolve them, Levine implies, remain fragmentary, uncertain, and, much like modernity itself, ongoing.

Part III: Sociology and Culture

The third group of chapters discusses the important concept of culture. Helmut Staubmann begins “Culture as a Subsystem of Action: Autonomous and Heteronomous Functions” by noting that sociological understanding was riven during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the opposition between idealist (cultural) and materialist (economic, political) frameworks, the two alternating in becoming dominant. He points out that whereas Max Weber initially bridged this polarity—as did Georg Simmel in some ways—it was only in Talcott Parsons’s *Structure of Social Action* that a systematic synthesis of the two standpoints was achieved.

In Parsons’s view, culture is a system in its own right, with its own integrity and autonomy, but it is also a subsystem of the larger action system. In its autonomous functions culture *influences*, but does not determine, processes in the social system, the personality system, and the behavioral system. Culture as a subsystem is also influenced but not determined by each of the other subsystems. In their heteronomous functions, however, cultural elements such as

artworks, literature, and knowledge of musical compositions or performers are put to the *use* of political or economic ends, and in this respect such elements are not evaluated by cultural standards but by other considerations such as their monetary value, or as indicators of taste, status, or class position. Staubmann argues that it is largely these heteronomous functions of culture that preoccupy most contemporary sociologists of culture, to the exclusion of its autonomous functions. Staubmann stresses that the actions of snobs, poseurs, and parvenus who use cultural elements in these heteronomous ways are not cultural in meaning but rather have social or economic or political significance.

Although many contemporary sociologists of culture disparage Parsons's functionalism as "idealist," their own equally functionalist but much simpler approach is a reversion in modern dress to the materialist-positivist standpoint of the nineteenth century. Staubmann concludes that the contemporary emphasis in the sociology of culture not only reduces the understanding of culture but also shrinks the understanding of our lives and our social world.

Jeremy Tanner's "Rationalists, Fetishists, and Art Lovers: Action Theory and the Comparative Analysis of High Cultural Institutions" is the first fully articulated analysis of artistic culture based on an action-theoretic framework. It is also one of the two chapters in this volume (the other is Renée Fox's) that integrates empirical materials—here, archival records and museum holdings—deeply in the analysis.

Tanner's organizing concept is "expressive symbolism," the aesthetic-affective representation of normative attitudes and forms as these have been shaped through evolutionary processes originating in Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek societies. His methodology is correspondingly comparative-historical.

Tanner traces differences in conceptions of the sacred on the one hand and political and social life on the other, between ancient Greek and later Western Christian societies, and relates them to corresponding shifts in the role of the artist and the substance of artistic representation. The Greek emphasis on logos and form fostered a rationalized approach to visual representation in which proportion, measurement, calculation of foreshortening, and perspective became established formal aesthetic principles. The artist in ancient Greece was, however, primarily a citizen of the polis and only secondarily an artist, and worked at the behest of the state and state-religious bodies for whom his primary obligation was to defend and provide for the welfare of the state. The aesthetic principles developed by Greek artists were committed to treatises that were then passed on over the generations, and came to serve as the core of later artistic developments. For centuries, artists worked under the patronage of kings, aristocrats, and the church; in later periods, their products were sought after in the market by the rising bourgeoisie. Competition among artists, the emergence of "schools" of art, and then the creation of academies devoted to artistic training became common and even a necessity. The Christian subject matter of art sought to portray the wisdom and will of the divinity in all its beauty, and the artist became linked to the divine as a creator and a genius in his own right. The autonomous role of the creative artistic genius, established firmly in the Renaissance, has been continually developing and becoming more institutionalized. Much of ancient Greek art consisted of a repetition of forms. Modern art, though its representational skills are deeply informed by ancient Greek principles, is embedded in a highly differentiated society. Modern artists abide by a cult of creativity, relying on buyers who are for the most part anonymous. They follow the injunction "Make it new."

Tanner's chapter shows how particular strands of Greek and Judeo-Christian culture, adapting to different political and social environments, yielded a radical differentiation of art and artist from other cultural and social spheres and imparted a cultural pattern distinctive to Western high culture. In a long concluding section he notes that the expressive symbolism of Western high culture is intimately engaged in exchanges with other spheres of Western life—

economic, social, political as well as cultural—and thus profoundly affects our perceptions, our motivations, and our understanding.

Staubmann's and Tanner's chapters are complementary, together indicating the way forward for a new and powerful action-theoretic analysis of art that is both congenial to the art object and illuminating of it.

Uta Gerhardt's and Charles Camic's chapters explore historical roots of Parsons's conception of culture and its role in the body of his theory and in his empirical interests and concerns. Both Gerhardt and Camic make extensive use of primary documents in the Parsons Papers at the Harvard University Archives, but they approach the topic of culture and its role in social action in different ways. Gerhardt's "The Weberian Talcott Parsons: Sociological Theory in Three Decades of American History" covers much of Parsons's career and discusses his contributions to many areas within sociology. Camic's chapter, "From Amherst to Heidelberg: On the Origins of Parsons's Conception of Culture," focuses on a decade in Parsons's early career in which his understanding of the concept of culture changed.

Gerhardt suggests that a unifying theme of Parsons's corpus is his adherence to both substantive and methodological ideas derived from Max Weber's writings. In making this argument she is closely in line with Parsons's own autobiographical writings. She emphasizes commitment to the independence of academic thought and research from religious and political ideologies and commitment to the objectivity of scientific or scholarly concepts as methodological continuities between Weber and Parsons.

She interprets Parsons's efforts to use sociological understanding and insight to contribute effectively to public political discourse as following a Weberian model. To support this view she discusses Parsons's writings on a long list of politically controversial matters: Nazi Germany, planning social change for postwar Germany, the importance of the social sciences as a national resource in the United States, the McCarthyism of the 1950s, the distribution of power in American society, the Cold War, economic development and modernization of underdeveloped societies, civil rights, and university institutions and academic freedom. These essays not only make up a large portion of his work but also are organically related to some of his most creative thought. For example, his writings on social science as a national resource were amplifications of his earlier understanding of the potential of theory-centered research for advancing empirical analysis. His critique of C. Wright Mills's discussion of the power structure of American society led to his innovative conception of political power; and his analysis of the civil rights movement amplified his understanding of societal community in modern societies. Gerhardt also notes that Parsons made frequent use of specific Weberian concepts—the Protestant ethic, modern capitalism, rational-legal authority, and charisma—in these practical or applied writings, thus indicating the extent to which he remained under Max Weber's influence throughout his career.

Camic's chapter examines Parsons's understanding of the concept of culture in the context of the different usages he encountered in the course of his studies at Amherst College, in Bronislaw Malinowski's anthropology seminar at the London School of Economics, and at the University of Heidelberg. At Amherst Parsons was taught—and adopted, if his extant undergraduate papers are a fair indication—a conception of culture as "omnibus," or patterning many domains of human life, and as "loose-knit," or permitting much independence among the different domains. The Franz Boas school of anthropology was the primary source of this conception, but Camic argues that it became an overlay to broad intellectual concerns that American culture of the 1920s, divided between rural or small-town and urban, between fundamentalist and sophisticated versions, was in crisis. William F. Ogburn's theory of cultural lag, which emphasized differences between industrial or technical culture, and moral or customary culture, captured this sense of crisis, and Parsons seems to have adopted a similar view in his undergraduate essays.

In Malinowski's seminar, however, he learned a conception of culture that underscored the ways in which a culture is strongly integrated and functions as a unitary whole. This perspective was strengthened during Parsons's period at Heidelberg, where, he later wrote, the "ghost" of the several-years-deceased Max Weber was the predominant influence in the social sciences. Here Parsons was exposed to the Germanic conception that emphasized Kultur as a unitary, organic expression of the inner spirit of a people or nation. His later writings on culture entail this understanding, notwithstanding his introduction in 1951 of a basic distinction between cultural and social systems. Camic also underscores the fact that Parsons, however much he took from Weber, did not adopt the German sensitivity to the ways that contemporary culture is tragically under attack and vulnerable, a theme highly developed in Weber's writings on modern civilization.

Part IV: The Human Condition

The chapters in the last section of the book take up issues that moved to the foreground of Parsons's thought in the last decade of his life, although, as the essays make clear in various ways, they had been leitmotifs of his work throughout his career.

Edward Tiryakian's contribution centers on one of Parsons's major essays, "A Paradigm of the Human Condition." For Tiryakian, this essay is not just a "capstone" piece that "retraces [the] major steps" Parsons took over the course of his seven decades of "theorizing about action systems." Rather, it breaks new ground in that here Parsons moved beyond the orbit of the social and behavioral sciences, even the most general system of action, into metatheory, and some of the largest and deepest questions about the meaning of human existence.

Tiryakian begins by providing an overview of some of the core components of Parsons's general theory of action, particularly its four function categories and their bearing on his long-standing "motivation to integrate knowledge while advancing sociological theorizing." His general paradigm of the human condition, Tiryakian states, extends the reach of the four-function schema to include the interrelationships of the action system with what Parsons termed the human-organic, the physico-chemical, and the telic systems. For Tiryakian, the most significant feature of the paradigm is the inclusion of the telic dimension, which he attributes in part to the influence of Robert Bellah, and which is the component of Parsons's perspective on the human condition that pertains to the "reality of the nonempirical world," transcendent aspects of human existence, and the ponderably imponderable domain of ultimate meaning. Tiryakian quotes Parsons as stating that the telic has "especially to do with religion," that he recognizes "the philosophical difficulties of defining the nature of that reality," and that he "shar[es] the age-old belief in its existence."

Tiryakian goes on to compare Parsons's approach to the human condition with those of a "peer group" of other intellectuals "drawn mainly from the ranks of social scientists." These include Emile Durkheim, Georges Gurvitch, Edward O. Wilson, Hannah Arendt, and Margaret Archer.

Tiryakian moves on to discuss evidence that, directly and indirectly, Parsons "received an important philosophical justification" for bringing the telic into his conceptual framework from the modern, post-Kantian, existential-phenomenological outlook of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, who was a member of Parsons's doctoral dissertation committee at Heidelberg. (In later life Parsons wrote a laudatory essay in which he called Jaspers a "social scientist's philosopher.")

Tiryakian enjoins us not to treat the human condition paradigm as a "museum-piece," but to "utilize, elaborate, and update" it. He attempts to do this by placing it in a contemporaneous

historical framework, reflecting on how it illuminates the impact of several phenomena: the collapse of the Soviet Union and empire, the current domination of international agendas by the United States, the attack of 9/11, the confrontations occurring between world religion-based civilizations, and the relationship of these developments to the process of globalization, terrorism, and the “antinomy of war and peace.”

Renée Fox’s chapter is the only one in the volume based on firsthand ethnographic research and as such illustrates the two-way interchange between theory and research that Parsons espoused. It grew out of her studies of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF—Doctors Without Borders), the international organization devoted to medical humanitarian and human rights witnessing action, and of the emergence and ramifications of bioethics in American society. Both are medically centered developments with roots in the value-oriented social protest movements of the 1960s, MSF in France and continental Europe, and bioethics in the United States. Fox’s immersion in Parsons’s theoretical perspective on the importance of health, illness, and medicine to the functioning of a society and on their cultural and human condition significance contributed to her recognition of the sociological import of MSF and bioethics, her motivation to study them, and her conceptual approach. Conversely, some of her data and insights suggest ways in which certain Parsonian ideas might be enriched or modified.

Fox focuses on the complex relationship within both MSF and American bioethics between “universalism” and “particularism”—the components of one pair of Parsons’s “pattern variables.” Intellectually and morally, in their ethos and practice, MSF and U.S. bioethics are strongly committed to universalism: in the case of MSF, in their dedication to responding to the suffering of people urgently in need of medical care, regardless of their nationality, ethnic group, location, and the cause of their suffering; in bioethics, through its adherence to a notion of a “common morality” that it considers authoritative for all persons in all places. Their allegiance to universalism creates strains for both MSF and bioethics in dealing with social and cultural differences, and also results in tendencies for them to universalize some of the particularities of their underlying worldviews.

Fox’s chapter opens with a discussion of the connections between universalism and particularism and the evolutionary unfolding of modern society that Parsons delineated in many of his works, and the way that they are experientially encountered by members of MSF and by American bioethicists. Both MSF and American bioethicists exhibit a belief in the worthiness of modern society, shaped by Western cultural tradition. But Fox’s research highlights the tenacity of ascriptive particularism and, beyond that, of internecine conflicts between particularistic groups in the face of modernizing global forces. These conditions that MSF confronts in its field missions represent a development that Parsons may have underestimated. Furthermore, at the beginning of the twenty-first century U.S. bioethics and MSF confront new, politicized forms of particularism that constitute serious challenges to their universalism.

Fox concludes with the suppositions that Parsons would have recognized how his theory might need to be altered to account for these developments, and that he would also have been perturbed by the societal and global implications of the threats to universalism that U.S. bioethics and MSF presently encounter.

In the final chapter, “‘Social Evolution’ in the Light of the Human-Condition Paradigm,” Victor Lidz finds that the comprehensive analysis of the human condition that Parsons developed in 1970s undermines the conceptual status of the theory of social evolution that he had developed in the 1960s. Lidz shows that Parsons’s writings on social evolution had deep roots in the development of his thought. They are connected with his studies of Max Weber’s writings on religion and comparative civilizational analysis and to his early teaching on comparative social institutions, and also draw on his use of biological models in theory construction, including con-

cepts of equilibrium, function, and cybernetic control. Lidz traces the complex typology of societies that Parsons developed as part of his evolutionary theory, and suggests that it continues to be valid and useful as an important starting point for contemporary comparative sociology. However, relying on theoretical writings of the evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, Lidz argues that the logical form of Parsons's typology actually departs fundamentally from that of neo-Darwinian taxonomy. It is not actually an evolutionary theory. In Lidz's view, the paradigm of the human condition suggests that the concept of evolution, strictly construed, should be limited to the domain of living systems or biology. Human action systems have evolved out of biological systems, but the dynamics of their change are different from those of living systems subject to natural selection. Theories of social change can be developed around Parsons's typology of stages of societal development, but they should not be constrained by an effort to make them fit the dynamics of evolutionary biology.

CONCLUSION

This collection of essays constitutes the work in progress of a loosely knit yet strongly allied group of colleagues who find Parsons's theory of action a valuable resource for understanding contemporary issues in sociological theory. All of the chapters select elements of the theory and critique, adapt, refine, or extend them to gain fresh purchase on problems that confront sociologists today. None of the chapters presents simply an "application" of the theory of action as Parsons formulated it, and we are hopeful that readers will appreciate that a fixed or static theory that can be applied to particular problems in a mechanical fashion was not Parsons's legacy to us. Parsons himself strove constantly for extension, tighter codification, and refinement of his theory, and above all for fresh insight, empirical as well as theoretical. We believe that the chapters in this volume demonstrate the continuing vitality of this heritage in the social sciences.

NOTE

1. The following section draws on materials previously presented in Victor Lidz (2000) and Lidz and Harold J. Bershad (2000).

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