Current Folklore in the Criticisms
of Parsonian Action Theory*

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This paper examines the often repeated assertion that Parsons abandoned the notion of "voluntarism" in favor of "macrofunctionalism" or "behavioristic naturalism" and that the Parsonian scheme therefore reveals marked discontinuity. When Parsons' strategy for theory building is appreciated, this prevalent assumption proves to be incorrect. In fact, the Parsonian action scheme evidences a considerable degree of continuity from 1937 to the present. While a prevalent piece of sociological folklore is refuted by a careful examination of the Parsonian theory building strategy, a number of significant problems in following this strategy are felt to remain.

THE FOLKLORE

With the publication of *The Social System* (1951), a number of commentators have asserted that Parsonian action theory underwent a conceptual metamorphosis. Martindale (1959; 1960: 484-490) was perhaps the first to impute this metamorphosis to the Parsonian scheme when he argued that between the publication of *The Structure of Social Action* and *The Social System* Parsons went "from the worm of social behaviorism [to become] the butterfly of macrofunctionalism." But it was left to John Finley Scott in the early 1960s to codify this line of reasoning into a piece of well entrenched sociological folklore, for Scott was to raise what was to become an often repeated question: "What happened to the voluntaristic thesis?" (1963: 716). His answer, which was incorporated into almost all subsequent commentaries on Parsons' work, was that Parsons had abandoned the voluntaristic actor and left him to be pushed and pulled around by the normative forces of the social system.

Apparently taking their cue from Scott, many critics have argued, with varying degrees of malice, that Parsons has abandoned the first and perhaps the only redeeming feature of action theory. For example, Tiryakian (1965: 684) laments Parsons' unfortunate adoption of a "Freudian model" that has tended, "as Scott has pointed out, to undermine Parsons' own earlier voluntaristic scheme." He argues further that while, generally speaking, a "phenomenological approach to 'meaning' and 'structure' is at the heart of functional analysis," and while a

phenomenological approach underlies the voluntarism built into *The Structure of Social Action*, this approach was shelved in Parsons' later efforts due to the corrupting influence of psychologists. The outgrowth of this influence was for action to become "the result of either primary libidinal drives or passive receptivity to socialization" (Tiryakian, 1965: 676). Buckley (1967: 19) takes a more independent tack in his generally unfavorable evaluation of Parsonian theory by citing neither Scott nor anyone else (e.g. original source material) when he observes that Parsons "had tended to backtrack in his later works by stressing structure at the expense of action." Sorokin (1966: 403-408) continues the assault by noting that Parsonian theory has undergone considerable change with successive publications (appropriate footnote to Scott). Sorokin then immediately reverses himself (p. 404) by noting that "the concept of social action as developed in *The Structure of Social Action*... continues to be the axis on which [Parsons'] theory of social systems is built." But then (p. 405), Sorokin again changes his mind and concludes that "in his later work [Parsons'] 'voluntarism' almost completely disappears and is largely replaced by Freudian biopsychology." Wallace (1969: 39) reprints Scott's essay and argues that "as Scott has suggested 'the decline of voluntarism' is visible in [the] historical development of Parsons' action theory." Finally, Robert W. Friedrichs (1970: 13-14), whose book won the Sorokin Award, notes that "an interesting and not-too-subtle change had taken place [in Parsons' work] between the late 'thirties and the early' fifties... John Finley Scott documents this shift in perspective..." Friedrichs then argues that "Parsons has come to speak quite openly of his later work as a very real 'revision and extension' of his prewar posture."

When one reads between the lines of these

persistent criticisms of the Parsonian action scheme, the impression emerges that Parsons' last great work was his first one, *The Structure of Social Action.* By abandoning and/or equivocating on voluntarism, as well as on the philosophical assumptions underlying it, Parsons' subsequent works would appear to have come to naught. It is this latter feature that makes the folklore so comfortable, for criticisms of Parsons have tended to be uncritically accepted during the decades that sociological theory has attempted to shake off the excesses of structural-functionalism. Regardless of how comfortable this folklore has become, it has been "institutionalized" at the cost of misreading and misinterpreting the Parsonian scheme. While many justified criticisms can be brought to bear on Parsonian action theory, it is better that they be leveled at the scheme itself rather than the fabrications of the critics. To correct for this folklore, it would seem necessary to document for the critics the continuity of the Parsonian scheme, especially of the voluntaristic component. In this way, future critical analyses can, hopefully, be more discriminating and focus upon more genuine faults in action theory.

THE CONTINUITY OF ACTION THEORY

The Parsonian Strategy for Theory Building. Much of the misinterpretation of Parsons' work comes from a failure to understand the strategy he proposed in *The Structure of Social Action* for building a theory of action.[1] It is only when this strategy is understood that the imputed discontinuity in action theory, particularly the supposed abandonment of voluntarism, disappears.

In *The Structure of Social Action,*[2] Parsons (1937: 730) argues that theory in sociology must utilize a limited number of important concepts

that "adequately 'grasp' aspects of the objective external world.... These concepts correspond not to concrete phenomena, but to elements in them which are analytically separable from other elements." Thus, theory must, first of all, involve the development of concepts that allow the isolating of existential phenomena out of their embeddedness. The unique feature of Parsons' "analytical realism" is his insistence on how these abstract concepts are to be employed in sociological analysis; for Parsons does not opt for the immediate incorporation of these concepts into theoretical statements, but rather, their use to develop a "generalized system of concepts."[3] This use of abstract concepts would involve the ordering of concepts into a coherent whole that reflects the important features of the "real world." What is sought is an ordering of concepts into analytical systems that grasp the salient and systemic features of the universe without being overwhelmed by empirical details.[4] As such, sociological theory should initially resemble an elaborate classification and categorization of social phenomena that reflects significant features in the organization of these existential social phenomena.[5]

However, like Durkheim, Parsons has more than mere classification in mind, for he is advocating the priority of developing systems of concepts over systems of propositions. Caution should be exercised in incorporating concepts into propositions prematurely, for only after systemic coherence among abstract concepts has been achieved is it likely that the job of constructing propositional inventories will generate much theoretical pay-off.

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[1] Parsons' orientation toward theoretic strategy shows the heavy influence of Durkheim and Weber. In *The Rules of Sociological Method,* for example, Durkheim emphasized that there are several stages to scientific investigation. Only after social facts have been defined and, most importantly, classified and ordered can the search for laws begin. Durkheim (1938: 35) writes that "the subject matter of every sociological study should comprise a group of phenomena defined in advance by certain common external characteristics ..." In similar fashion, Parsons (1967b: 88) interprets Weber as arguing rather successfully that causal explanation involves not only relating sequences of events, but analysis by means of generalized theoretical schemes.

[2] For the best elucidations of this strategy as outlined in *The Structure of Social Action* see pp. 27-42. It should be noted that this section is preceded by a careful definition of theory as systems of propositions, but as becomes evident in his delineation of the theory of action, Parsons seeks the prior development of a system of concepts. This emphasis on the coherence of concepts becomes even more evident in

his definition of "analytical realism" near the end of *The Structure of Social Action,* pp. 728-731, and in his discussion of the "Role of Analytical Elements," pp. 748-753.

[3] In *The Structure of Social Action,* Parsons (1937: 28) argues that all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is conceptually formed and that all observation is made in terms of conceptual schemes —whether they are implicit or explicit. "This is true not only of sophisticated scientific observations but of the simplest common sense statements of facts."

[4] For examples of such analytical systems in Parsons' work, see his analysis in *The Social System* of the pattern variables. For additional examples, see Parsons' and Smelser's (1956) delineation of the analytical interchanges among the four functional subsystems of society. Or, for a recent example of Parsons' "analytical realism," see his discussion of the cybernetic relations among the components of the over-all action system (1959; 1966: 1-29).

[5] Following Whitehead, Ackerman and Parsons (1966: 25) argue that the existential "facts" of science are really myths. "In order to deal with what we make concrete as 'fact,' we rip it from concrete connectedness and we pretend that it is a discrete particle."

This position advocates a unique strategy for theory building in sociology; and it is only after this strategy is comprehended that Parsons' substantive work makes theoretical sense. By following this strategy Parsons has not abandoned voluntarism, but has intead woven the basic concepts enumerated in *The Structure of Social Action* into a more extensive system. Such a tack does not represent the abandonment of interpretative and decision making processes on the part of actors, but rather the recognition that voluntaristic action occurs within a systemic context that must be denoted by a corresponding system of concepts.[6]

The initial formulation of the theory of action. Much of the criticism of Parsons' presumed inattention to voluntarism in recent years has stemmed from the incorrect assessment by Scott and those who have chosen to follow his lead that voluntarism can be equated with "free will." Evidence for this indiscriminate equation is gained from one of Parsons' (1934: 282) early statements that "man is essentially an active, creative, evaluating creature." While there is some ambiguity in this early essay on "The place of ultimate values in sociological theory," Scott and others who have used these passages to equate "free will" and "voluntarism," have ignored other passages in the same essay in which Parsons clearly argues that social action is organized in terms of norms "which regulate action in conformity with the ultimate value-system of the community" (1934: 296). In addition, the very title of the essay, "The place of ultimate values...," suggests Parsons' early emphasis on the theoretic examination of the manner in which norms circumscribe social action. More significantly, by the time Parsons was ready to make his conceptualization of voluntarism more systematic in *The Structure of Social Action*, any earlier ambiguity over the issue of "free will" was resolved by his clear conceptualization of voluntarism as involving choice and decision-making that is circumscribed by ideas and situational conditions. Since even for the critics it is in *The Structure of Social Action* that Parsons makes his most forthright statement on voluntarism, it is clear that those who equate "free will" with voluntarism are left with the empty assertion that Parsons "abandoned" something that he never seriously advocated in his first major conceptual work (whether he should have advocated "free will" is, of course, not at issue here).

What Parsons did advocate was the conceptualization of "unit acts" that involved these

basic elements: (1) an actor, who at this point in Parsons' thinking, is an individual person; (2) the actor is viewed as goal seeking; (3) the actor is also in possession of alternative means to achieve the goals; (4) the actor is confronted with a variety of situational conditions, such as his biological make-up, heredity, and ecological constraints which influence the selection of goals and means; (5) the actor is seen to be governed by values, norms, and other ideas in that these ideas influenced what is considered a goal and what means are selected; and thus (6) action involves the actor making subjective decisions as to the means to achieve goals, all of which are constrained by ideas and situational conditions.[7]

From the perspective argued here, Parsons appears to have emphasized the "unit act" in order to isolate conceptually the systemic features of the most basic unit out of which more complex processes and structures are built. Then, in accordance with his commitment to building systems of concepts, Parsons appears to have become concerned with how unit acts are connected to each other and how this connectedness can be conceptually represented. Indeed, near the end of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons recognizes that "any atomistic system that deals only with properties identifiable in the unit act... will of necessity fail to treat these latter elements adequately and be indeterminate as applied to complex systems" (1937: 748-749). However, only the barest hints of what is to come are evident in these closing pages.

The systems of action. Parsons' commitment to building systems of concepts thus led him inexorably to the analysis of systems of action. By 1949, Parsons began to emphasize that the concepts denoting the unit act need to recognize the "complications introduced by the interaction of a plurality of actors"[8] (1949: 229). The addition of concepts denoting systems of action to those denoting the unit act appears to have occurred in this way: (1) Unit acts are not emitted in a social vacuum—as Parsons clearly recognized in *The*

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[6]The metaphysical justification for the use of "system" occurs in Ackerman and Parsons (1966). As to its use in theoretical work, see Parsons' (1970) recent statement, "Some problems of general theory in sociology."

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[7]Scott (1963: 721) writes that, in 1937, "action involves actors, goals, conditions, and means. Orientation to action necessarily involves a normative element and its components are distinguished as they are seen from the point of view of the actor..." Yet, in effect, Scott chooses to ignore Parsons' clear statement that norms circumscribe social action.

[8]In the new preface to the 1949 edition of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons (1968: xix) argues that the basic connectedness of all social action can only be accounted for in theoretical terms by effecting "a transition and translation to a different level and focus of theoretical systematization." The critics are clearly correct when they argue that the level of analysis changed dramatically. What they have misunderstood, however, is that Parsons' purpose was not to abandon voluntarism, but to transform it into a more generalized conceptual scheme.

Structure of Social Action. (2) Rather, unit acts occur in a social context, a context in which an actor occupies a status and enacts normatively prescribed role behaviors. (3) Status-roles are not unrelated, but in fact, are connected to each other in various types of systems. (4) Unit acts must therefore be viewed from the perspective of systems of interaction in which action is now seen as patterns of enactment of role behaviors by actors. (5) These interaction systems comprised of actors occupying statuses and enacting normatively prescribed roles thus comprise *The Social System* (1951).

However, in *The Structure of Social Action*, the "structure of action" involves more than normatively prescribed behaviors. The unit act also denotes: (1) individual decision making in the pursuit of goals; (2) values and other ideas that circumscribe actor's decision making in the pursuit of goals; and (3) situational conditions, such as heredity and features of the physical environment, that further circumscribe such action. It was not surprising, then, that these three components of the unit act also begin to be conceptualized by Parsons in systemic terms. Initially, in addition to the conceptualization of the normative component as the social system, Parsons postulated just a personality system which would encompass the systemic interrelations among needs and decision making capacities of actors enacting roles in the social system. At this early stage in Parsons' transition from the analysis of unit acts to systems of action, culture as well as the organic and physical features of action are not viewed as systems. However, cultural patterns figure prominently in Parsons' analysis in that they are seen as underlying both the normative structure of the social system and the need dispositions and decision making processes of the personality system. But given Parsons' commitment to developing analytical schemes that capture the connected coherence of reality and given this new commitment to separating analytically the components of the unit act into discrete systems of action, Parsons soon began to visualize culture in systemic terms. And somewhat later the physical features of organisms, or situational conditions component of the unit act, were also seen as a separable system of action.

This transition is marked by Parsons' *The Social System*, and by Parsons' and Shils' edited volume *Toward a General Theory of Action*. It is noteworthy that in both these volumes the voluntaristic thesis is re-emphasized in virtually the same form as in Parsons' initial works. For example, in *Toward a General Theory of Action*, Parsons and Shils (1951: 53) note:

> The theory of action is a conceptual scheme for the analysis of the behavior of living organisms. It conceives of this behavior as oriented to the attainment of ends in situations by means of normatively regulated expenditure of energy. There are four

points to be noted in this conceptualization of behavior: (1) Behavior is oriented to ends of goals or other anticipated states of affairs. (2) It is normatively regulated. (3) It takes place in situations. (4) It involves expenditure of energy or effort or 'motivation' ...

Furthermore, in conceptualizing systems of action, Parsons was led to reassert the decision making features of action by his enumeration of the pattern variables (Parsons, 1951; Parsons and Shils, 1951). These concepts represented an attempt by Parsons to capture the systemic coherence of the value and normative patterns of the cultural and social systems as well as the circumscribed decision making processes of actors. The pattern variables thus allowed Parsons to conceptualize more precisely the systemic properties of the unit act and yet to retain a vital component of the "voluntaristic thesis." In developing the pattern variables (whose adequacy is not in question here), Parsons was able to follow his strategy for theory building and heed the warning in *The Structure of Social Action* that "any atomistic system that deals only with properties identifiable in the unit act ... will of necessity fail to treat these elements adequately and be indeterminate as applied to complex systems."

The four imperatives paradigm. In further elaborating the connectedness of action, Parsons was led to develop the concepts of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency to denote the requisites that must be met by any action system (Parsons and Bales, 1953; Parsons and Smelser, 1956). In this conceptual elaboration (again, its merits are not at issue here), Parsons felt that he had developed a set of criteria by which action was to be assessed in terms of its consequences for a more inclusive systemic referent. Yet, even in his most structural-functional work, *Economy and Society*, Parsons and Smelser are careful to emphasize that while action can be assessed in terms of its functional consequences, all action involves "elements pertaining to the *situation* of action and those pertaining to *orientation* of actors toward that situation" (1956: 35, emphasis in original). Thus, the functional requisites denote the structure of the situation in which action occurs, while the pattern variables point to the processes by which actors actively orient themselves to the situation. While the merits of this conceptual elaboration are questionable, it does represent a further extension of Parsons' theoretical strategy: developing a system of concepts that "adequately grasp" the imbeddedness of voluntaristic processes (unit acts) within more inclusive systemic contexts.

The informational hierarchy of control.[a]

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[a]The most recent and complete theoretical statement of the informational hierarchy of control is in Parsons' (1966) *Societies*. For a good presentation of the overall action system, see Parsons (1970).

Toward the end of the 1950s, Parsons turned attention toward interrelationships among (rather than within) what were the four distinct action systems: culture, social, personality, and organism. This effort represents a clear concern with the basic components of the "unit act" outlined in *The Structure of Social Action*. But now, each element of the unit act is a full-fledged action system, each confronting four functional problems to resolve: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. Furthermore, while individual decision making is still a part of action as personalities adjust to the normative demands of status-roles in the social system, the ever evolving system of concepts now includes a concern with the input-output connections among the four action systems (Parsons, 1959).

It is at this juncture that Parsons begins to visualize an over-all action system, with the cultural, social, personality, and organism comprising its constituent subsystems. In turn, each of these subsystems is seen as fulfilling one of the four system imperatives of the over-all action system. After viewing each action system as a subsystem of a more inclusive, over-all action system, Parsons begins to explore the interrelations among these four subsystems. What emerges is a hierarchy of informational controls, with culture informationally circumscribing the social system, with the social system informationally regulating the personality system, and with the personality system informationally regulating the organismic system. Conversely, each system in the hierarchy is also viewed as providing the "energic conditions" necessary for action at the next higher system in the hierarchy. That is, the organism provides the energy necessary for the personality system, the personality system provides the energic conditions for the social system, and the organization of personality systems into a social system provides the conditions necessary for a cultural system.[10] Thus, the input-output

relations among action systems are reciprocal, with systems exchanging information and energy. Systems high in information circumscribe the utilization of energy at the next lower system level, while each lower system provides the conditions and facilities necessary for action in the next higher system.

In this manner, the basic components of the unit act as delineated in *The Structure of Social Action*[11] are not only conceptualized as systems, but also as complex interchanges of energy and information that circumscribe each other's operation. Yet, this analytical concern with informational and energic exchanges confronts the problem, first raised in *The Structure of Social Action*, of the causal relationship between conditional and normative forces. Unwilling to follow the strict behaviorist's exclusive emphasis on the causal primacy of conditions, while at the same time resisting the idealist's over-emphasis on the deterministic impact of values and norms, Parsons, in both *The Structure of Social Action* and now in his conceptualization of the cybernetic hierarchy of control, maintains a vision of reciprocal causal relations between conditions and norms (or, information and energy). Just as the complex interactions of these basic components of the unit act initially led Parsons to his conception of "voluntarism" among individual actors, so their explicit incorporation into the analysis of the over-all action system reveals his concern with preserving, in expanded and generalized form, the voluntaristic element among systems of action.[12] Thus, behind the new

[10]This conceptualization provides for the conceptual organization of a number of concrete findings in the social psychological and sociological literature. For example, McClelland's (1961) analysis of the "achievement motive" and its impact on economic development, or Weber's (1930) analysis of the impact of the Protestant Ethic on the emergence of capitalism, can be conceptually organized by the cybernetic hierarchy of control. Certain types of values in the cultural system (achievement values, nationalism, the Protestant Ethic, etc.) informationally regulate the normative structure of the family subsystem in the social system, which in turn, engages in those socialization practices conducive to high need for achievement in the personality system. Need for achievement as manifested in the depositing of energy by personality in the roles of the social system then provides the conditions for the economic development that supports cultural values encouraging such development. What is significant from Parsons' strategy for constructing theory is that the organiza-

tion of McClelland's and Weber's specific variables by the system of concepts in the informational hierarchy of control allows for the development of many interesting hypotheses not initially evident in either Weber's or McClelland's work.

[11]In *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons (1937: 732) wrote that "action must always be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional." As process, action is "...the process of alteration of conformity to norms." This appears to state (though implicitly) the notion developed later as the informational hierarchy of control. After the initial drafts of this paper were written, two recent commentators, Wolf Heydebrand (1972) and Jackson Toby (1972) have begun to recognize the continuity between Parsons' conceptualization of voluntarism and his presentation of the informational hierarchy of control. While their analysis is constrained by their task of reviewing Parsons' work on evolution, each recognizes the intellectual odyssey of the cybernetic hierarchy of control. As Toby notes: "The concept of the cybernetic hierarchy represents Parsons' return to the relationship between values and conditions, an intellectual problem he grappled with in *The Structure of Social Action*, but this time he achieves a more elegant solution." (1972: 397).

[12]Leon Mayhew and Rainer C. Baum both pointed out to us that Parsons has continuously insisted on reciprocal causal relations between conditions and

"cybernetic" vocabulary is the same analytical thrust revealed in *The Structure of Social Action*. And true to his commitment to developing an ever expanding system of theoretical concepts, Parsons has extended the analysis of the systemic interrelations among the components of the original unit act.

The generalized media of exchange. In the last two decades, Parsons has maintained his interest in the intra and inter systemic relationships of the four action systems. Although he has yet to develop the concepts fully, he has begun to view these inter and intra systemic relationships in terms of "generalized, symbolic media of exchange." What Parsons (1970; 1969a; 1969b; 1969c) proposes is that the links among action components are ultimately informational in that transactions are mediated by symbols. This emphasis on information is consistent with the development of the cybernetic hierarchy of control, but it expands upon this conceptual apparatus in at least three ways: (1) the interchanges or exchanges among the four sub-systems of the over-all action system are carried out in terms of different types of symbolic media; (2) the interchanges within any of the four action systems are also carried out in terms of distinctive symbolic media; and (3) whether within a particular action system or among the four general action systems, the four system imperatives determine the type of generalized symbolic media that will be used in an inter or intra systemic exchange.

Thus, what he appears to be approaching is a conceptual scheme for analyzing the basic types of symbolic media, or information, linking systems in the cybernetic hierarchy of control. This conceptual tack represents an elaboration of the precise ways—that is, the symbolic media—by which "ideas" circumscribe decision-making processes of actors. As such, the analysis represents, once again, a concern with developing a system of concepts that captures the contextual imbeddedness of the unit acts first outlined in *The Structure of Social Action*.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PARSONIAN STRATEGY:
THE FOLKLORE RECONSIDERED

Even the above cursory analysis of Parsons' conceptual elaboration of the action scheme casts doubt on the prevalent folklore that Parsons abandoned the voluntaristic thesis. Such a viewpoint stems from a failure to understand that voluntarism never pertained to "free will" and from an unwillingness to appreciate Parsons' strategy for theory building. If Parsons' commitment

norms by generalizing from the "unit act" to the "informational hierarchy of control."

to developing systems of concepts is understood, then the conceptual elaboration of the basic elements of the unit act was inevitable. But elaboration is a far cry from abandonment; and it is this fact that the propagators of the folklore have ignored. Coupled with Parsons' reiteration of the voluntaristic thesis in many recent essays (e.g., Parsons, 1961, 1967a, 1970) and in his major work on evolution (1966), it is difficult to understand the persistent misinterpretation of the Parsonian action scheme. The appeal of this folklore must therefore be viewed as a convenient way of discrediting the Parsonian scheme in particular, and structural-functionalism in general. But there are too many valid lines of attack on the scheme for such a spurious critical tack as that initiated by Scott and sustained by others to be either necessary or desirable.

An alternative tack taken by the critics has been to question the utility of Parsons' strategy for building theory, for the wisdom of erecting elaborate conceptual edifices without paying due attention to developing testable propositions can certainly be questioned (Turk, 1967). But to argue that Parsons does not conscientiously endeavor to develop a deductive set of theoretical statements, and hence does not engage in true theory, is not only to state the obvious, but to ignore Parsons' strategy for theory building. Since for Parsons, inventories of logically inter-related propositions should only come after the development of a conceptual inventory, or system of concepts, it does little to note that Parsons does not do the very thing he says he will not do (Schwanenberg, 1971). Furthermore, even in his commitment to building systems of concepts, Parsons had indeed enumerated a number of suggestive abstract theoretical statements which the critics have frequently chosen to ignore.[18] Coupled with his application of the action scheme to the analysis of social change (1966, 1971), economic processes (Parsons and Smelser, 1956), kinship interaction (Parsons and Bales, 1955), political processes (see Mitchell, 1967), and other concrete phenomena, Parsons' scheme must be viewed as inspiring not only highly abstract theoretical statements, but also many propositions having specific empirical referents. In fact, the suggestiveness of so many of these propositions might well argue in favor of further elaboration and ordering of Parsons' systems of concepts so

[18]For example, the delineation of the pattern variables was rife with theoretical statements on the conditions under which certain patterns were likely to occur (Parsons, 1951; Parsons and Shils, 1951). Or the presentation of the four functional imperatives paradigm contained numerous propositions on the cyclical phasing of each imperative (Parsons and Bales, 1953). Or, the analysis of the interchanges among the subsystem of society in Parsons' and Smelser's (1956) *Economy and Society* is filled with suggestive propositions.

that these and other interesting propositions might begin to reveal, with further conceptual elaboration and refinement, the logical rigor the critics deem so necessary. Moreover, the fact that some of these propositions, such as those on the evolutionary universals (1964; 1966), have received empirical support could suggest that the Parsonian strategy is "working," since when the abstract scheme does generate ordered propositions, they prove both testable and plausible.[14]

Yet, despite the apparent promise of the Parsonian strategy, it still remains extremely vague and illusive, even to sympathetic commentators. For this reason, it is necessary to undertake a critical assessment of the strategy in order to reveal the reasons behind such vagueness. However, in contrast to previous critical appraisals, assessment will not be undertaken from the perspective of the critic, but rather, from Parsons' own strategy for theory building. When done in this way, assessment of the Parsonian strategy would seem to invite answers to three important questions: (1) How clear are the abstract concepts of the scheme? (2) How are they linked to form a system of concepts? And (3) can this system of concepts potentially generate, in the long run, logically interrelated bodies of statements of a truly scientific body of theory?

How clear are the abstract concepts? Parsons clearly has made a commitment to employing highly abstract concepts capable of denoting a wide range of social phenomena. Notions of institutionalization, the pattern variables, culture, personality, society, the cybernetic hierarchy of control, and the functional imperatives of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency all document the abstractness of Parsonian concepts. One criticism of such concept formation revolves around Parsons' apparent unwillingness to provide criteria as to which classes of phenomena are denoted by a concept. While Parsons has often used his concepts in many descriptive essays on a wide variety of concrete phenomena, from the American school classroom to political processes in Nazi Germany, there is still a lack of definitional precision as to how to climb down the abstraction ladder to concrete events.[15] Without

even operational clues, which are a far cry from overly rigid operational definitions, it is difficult to determine if these concepts will be useful in generating an "analytical realism," for employing vague concepts to erect a conceptual edifice can lead to the construction of a logical schema that reflects not so much the real world, but the logical imperatives of the schema or the whims of its framer's intellect.

How are the concepts linked? In his commitment to developing systems of concepts, Parsons has tended to link concepts to one another in several ways (Williams, 1961): (1) Concepts frequently overlap so that elements of one concept denote part of the same phenomena as another concept; (2) concepts are connotatively associated in that the definition of one is phrased so as to evoke the definition of another concept; and (3) concepts are often linked through cross-tabulation in such a way that two independently defined dimensions or axes imply additional concepts when intersected with one another. While such a system of linking concepts suffers from lack of logical rigor, the Parsonian scheme compels investigators examining one feature of a system to examine other related features. As such the scheme provides a "check list" for the description of the interrelatedness of social phenomena. However, such vague links among concepts can do little more than alert investigators to systemic features of action, for they cannot indicate precisely how and in what ways the concepts, and hence phenomena of the real world, are connected. Without clear definitions of concepts and without systematic derivations of concepts from one another, the action scheme can perhaps be better typified as bundles rather than systems of concepts, for in a true system of concepts, the overlaps, gaps, and vague associations among concepts in the Parsonian would not be allowed. Thus, what is needed to be consistent with Parsons' strategy for building systems of concepts is more meticulous attention to both independently defining abstract concepts and pointing to their modes of articulation (perhaps through the elucidation of additional concepts).

Potentially, can the Parsonian strategy generate scientific theory? At the heart of the Parsonian strategy for theory building is the presumption that the development of systems of concepts is the first step on the road to generating logically related theoretical statements. From the failure to follow his own avowed strategy for forming and linking concepts, it can be questioned whether such vague bundles of concepts can generate the logically interrelated sets of propositions that Parsons has always felt are the ultimate goals of sociological theory (see for example, *The Struc-*

[14]See for example, Buck and Jacobson's (1968) insightful analysis of the evolutionary universals: "Social evolution and structural-functional analysis: an empirical test."

[15]Rainer Baum has suggested two reasons for such vagueness: (a) Parsons' concern with the comprehensiveness of his concepts and (b) his desire to develop a theoretical perspective that employs the concepts of diverse disciplines. Thus, Parsons appears to have felt it more desirable to accept vagueness as a price for maintaining a broad and interdisciplinary conceptual scope. Yet, the critics can correctly charge that comprehensiveness and the interdisciplinary nature of Parsons' framework does not inexorably necessitate vagueness; and in fact, to continue to justify vague concept formation will

discourage the kind of hard-nosed conceptual clarification that must eventually ensue if the Parsonian scheme is to be more than "suggestive."

ture of Social Action, 1937: 6-20). Without eventually revealing such logical connectedness, Parsonian theory will fail to keep its promise of capturing the systemic embeddedness of social phenomena, since its suggestive propositions will remain interesting but highly discrete, with the result that the testing of one proposition will not necessarily have implications for the plausibility of other propositions in the scheme.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to refute the current folklore that the development of the Parsonian scheme reveals sharp discontinuities, especially with respect to its voluntaristic component. As has been argued, this folklore ignores Parsons' strategy for building sociological theory; and when this strategy is recognized, the Parsonian action scheme reveals an impressive degree of continuity over a forty year period, particularly in regard to voluntarism.

In the course of revealing how an appreciation of the Parsonian strategy for building theory refutes the current folklore, it is inevitable that questions concerning the utility of the strategy, per se, should be raised. Unlike previous criticisms, this questioning did not involve a futile exercise in chastizing Parsons for not following a strategy advocated by the critic, but rather, it presented three queries that would seem to require answers from the criteria of good theory outlined by Parsons himself. The answers to these queries suggest that while the systems of concepts developed by Parsons have generated many interesting propositions, serious problems remain with respect to the clarity of concepts, the explicitness of their linkages, and their potential utility for building true scientific theory.

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Comment on: "Current Folklore in the Criticisms of Parsonian Action Theory"

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The primary thesis as I take it of the authors of this paper, which is developed in the first main part is very gratifying indeed to me. Ever since Professor Martindale and, somewhat later, Professor Scott, raised the question of my alleged abandonment of the "voluntaristic" component in the theory of action, I have felt that this was an untenable position and its untenability ought to be clearly stated and analyzed. I am very grateful to Messrs. Turner and Beeghley for having done just this.

Perhaps I may add a few comments of my own. I think Turner and Beeghley are quite right that the older philosophical views of the "freedom of the will" never did constitute the primary basis of my own conception of the voluntarism which was an essential aspect of the theory of action. They are quite right that I did attempt to pursue the matter in two different contexts which are outside the older philosophical traditions and I think I have adhered consistently to the points of view established within those connections. The first of these concerns the philosophy of science, the second concerns psychology.

The overwhelmingly important influence on my thinking in the philosophy of science was A. N. Whitehead, particularly his seminal book, Science and the Modern World. Here I was particularly impressed by his argument about the dangers of the reification of theoretical schemes and the attendant "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." This set of views of Whitehead constituted the primary reference point for my own views of the role of analytical abstraction in all generalized theory, including that of the social sciences. This is a view which, as early as my Structure of Social Action, I formulated under the heading, "Analytical Realism."

An important implication of this was a major challenge to the older ideas of determinism as these had figured in earlier and I think more naive versions of the philosophy of science. Once one refused to accept the older deterministic conceptions, the door was open to some kind of conception of a voluntaristic component in any general theory at least of living systems and certainly of overtly symbolic human action. The question of the status of "indeterminacy" in