Value-Relations and General Theory: Parsons’ Critique of Weber

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A b s t r a c t: Talcott Parsons and Max Weber, despite the complexities and uncertainties of the latter’s work, represent two competing approaches to the nature of sociological theory. Despite his reliance upon many aspects of the work of Weber, Parsons’ critical remarks on the problems of value-relevance and value-neutrality can be interpreted in this light. The methodological views of both theorists are tied to differing views of the development of western society and of the role of the Social Sciences. Both are haunted by the spectre of relativism.

I. Introduction

In his essay on “Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy Weber states that:
“All serious reflection about the ultimate elements of meaningful human conduct is oriented primarily in terms of the categories ‘end’ and ‘means’. (Weber 1904, in 1951: 149; 1949: 52).

Parsons places this statement at the beginning of his ‘Structure of Social Action’ as an indication of his attempt to make clear the foundations for a general sociological theory that would take the ‘action frame of reference’ as its foundation.

It is now generally but not universally agreed that as Weber’s work developed, the sociological and potentially sociological element became more prominent. For example, his discussions and use of the ideal type show an increasing awareness of the difficulties involved in a movement of interest away from investigations within the framework of cultural history towards the elaboration of general concepts that would make possible sociological generalisation and explanation. In his work on comparative social structure he is less concerned with the motives and intentions of action than with the structure of systems of belief that mould its course and content. His ideal types of legitimate rule, for example, are defined primarily as systems of belief, although Weber did think that they ought to be redefinable in individualistic and probabilistic terms. It can be argued that the distinction between ‘Wert’ and ‘Zweck’ rationality establishes the difference between these two modes of analysis.

Weber’s insistence upon the exclusion of value-judgements from scientific inquiry does not contradict his insistence upon the critical role of value-relations in determining a field of investigation. In Weber’s view the demand for value-neutrality must presuppose the existence or, at least, the possibility of objective knowledge. The results of scientific inquiry must be valid for all individuals irrespective of their personal evaluations. Weber defines his own standpoint:

“that the distinction between the purely logical deducible and empirical factual assertions on the one hand, and practical, ethical or philosophical value-judgements on the other, is correct, but that, nevertheless (or perhaps, precisely because of this), both classes of problems properly belong within the area of instruction.” (Weber 1917 in 1951: 475; in 1949: 1).

Objective sociological knowledge is itself only made possible by the prior adoption of a theoretical value-related attitude.

A theoretical value-relation implies more than the selection of a problem and its possible significance in terms of a value standpoint; it also implies:

“the elaboration of the various possible meaningful attitudes towards a given phenomenon.” (Weber 1917 in 1951: 474; in 1949: 22).

The role and importance of value-relations in sociological inquiry implies the analysis of values themselves. The analysis of value standpoints, according to Weber, serves to force the individual

“to give himself an account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct.” (Weber 1919 in 1951: 592; in 1948: 152)

and in so doing we reach the limits of science. This idea of value analysis is closely related to Weber’s concept of political conduct for the


2 See, for example, Touraine (1965).
purpose of such self-clarification of value stand-
points is to produce a sense of responsibility. A
Social Science that investigates the inner struc-
ture of values can be a foundation for rational
political practice. Weber’s insistence upon the
autonomy of values is a demand for their free-
dom from ‘scientific’ or ‘pseudo-scientific’ jus-
tifications.

In a basic sense Weber’s concept of methodology
requires the systematic investigation of the pre-
suppositions and values involved in the value-re-
lated inquiries of social science. However, Weber
is also clear that the basic presupposition that
scientific knowledge is worth having cannot it-
self be demonstrated by scientific means. This
means that, in Weber’s terms, the presupposi-
tions of Science can only be ‘interpreted’ with
reference to ultimate values which we either re-
ject or accept according to our “ultimate posi-
tion towards life”. (Weber 1919, in 1951:
583, in 1948: 143). The demand for an avoid-
ance of value-judgements in scientific practice
cannot be weakened by a demonstration of the
technical difficulties involved in such a
demand because it is moral in character. It
appeals to a sense of honesty, and the necessity
to face ‘inconvenient facts’. (Weber 1919, in

Stated briefly, Weber’s viewpoint is that we can
infer from our experience that in terms of our
theoretical language reality is boundless and
inexhaustible. Scientific concepts can only em-
brace aspects of reality. All concepts represent a
selection; they cannot reproduce reality. The
problem in interpreting Weber’s use of the con-
cept of ‘value-relations’ is that, at least, in his
earlier essays he strenuously opposes the notion
that ‘value-related’ inquiry is equivalent to ‘sub-
sumption under general concepts’. He seems to
follow Rickert in distinguishing between an ini-
tial practical value-relation and a subsequent re-
flective ‘rotation’ of value-relations, but at no
point does he indicate that the values active in a
value-relation must be granted normative validity.
In fact, it is essential to Weber’s argument that
the object of study be related to values other
than the initial guiding value. This is the essence
of his opposition to intuitionism with which he
contrasts the act of concept formulation that
must force clarity upon the investigator.

Rejecting or, at least, ignoring Rickert’s argu-
ments concerning the normative features of
value-related inquiry and also denying that a
value-relation is not equivalent to subsumption
under general concepts, Weber had the problem
of how criteria for the selection of data are to
be justified. Given his own notion of social
reality, the data used by the sociologist can not
decisively influence the construction of value-
related approaches. For example, Weber is quite
clear that an institution may be termed ‘eco-
nomically relevant’ from the investigator’s point
of view, even when that institution has not
been “deliberately created or used for economic
ends”. (Weber 1904, in 1951: 162; in 1949:
64). The construction of value relations is a-
chieved by a scholar in terms of his own inter-
ests and it is an essential element of scholarship
to strive for original value-relations. In this
sense, the construction of a value relation and
the mode of inquiry associated with it is a
highly subjective affair. The values concerned
need not, of course, be thought of as the pro-
duct of the scholar’s own thought, they are
not his private property nor his private language,
but they are an elaboration or interpretation of
the values of his own society. Whatever the sta-
tus of the values that enter into value-relations
one thing is clear. Weber does not refer to, and
in some ways rejects, any reference to their
validity.

Weber, especially in his earlier essays, is quite
clear in stating that his conception of value-
relation is not to be confused with subsump-
tion under general concepts. The historical ele-
ment is paramount despite the recognition
that the analysis of values has a status that is
“beyond history”. (Weber 1906, in 1951: 249;
in 1949: 147) The construction of value-rel-
ations involves “taking an attitude” towards
the individuality of a social phenomenon. Fur-
ther, the relevant ‘value-standpoints’ are not
concepts but are an “individually structured”
“feeling and preference”. (Weber 1906, in 1951:
252; in 1949: 150). At the level of theoretical
inquiry ‘historical individuals’ are constructed
in terms of their possible evaluation and their
cultural rather than their causal significance. All
historical individuals posses a potential inex-
hauability of content which is their fundamen-
tal characteristic and this defies all attempts to
erect non-trivial general laws. Weber’s conception of the guiding values is essentially subjective, although he does remark on the possibility of a systematic theory of interpretation. In Weber’s view all social science concepts are ‘fictions’ and no complex of fictional concepts can be exhaustive of reality. In short, it could be argued that Weber maintains his insistence upon the crucial role of value relations because he wants to distinguish between the typical interests and peculiarities of the methods of the natural and the social sciences while at the same time assuming that objective knowledge is made possible because both groups of science share “the rules of logic and method (Weber 1919, in 1951: 582-3; in 1948: 143)³.

“It has been and remains true that a systematically correct scientific proof in the social sciences, if it is to achieve its purpose, must be acknowledged as correct even by a Chinese — or — more precisely stated — it must constantly strive to attain this goal, which perhaps may not be completely attainable due to faulty data. Furthermore, the successful logical analysis of the content of an ideal and its ultimate axioms and the discovery of the consequences which arise from pursuing it, logically and practically, must also be valid for the Chinese. At the same time, our Chinese can lack a “sense” for our ethical imperative and he can and certainly often will deny the ideal itself and the concrete value-judgements derived from it. Neither of these two latter attitudes can affect the scientific value of the analysis in any way.” (Weber 1904, in 1949: 58-9; in 1951: 155-156).

Weber’s social science presupposes this logical unity of natural and social science yet at the same time it is tied to an underlying historicist standpoint. If our value-related inquiries can never be completely integrated into reality-describing theoretical systems, if all knowledge of social reality is always knowledge from particular points of view, then Sociology progresses through a perpetual reconstruction of its central concepts and this process itself reflects or is tied to the cultural and social problems of the age within which the investigator lives. The process of perpetual concept construction leaves open the exact nature of the ‘progress’ to which Weber refers apart from the technical refinement of theoretical constructs. Weber’s insistence upon the necessary role of causal explanations in sociological explanation does not clarify this issue because, although the results of causal analysis are objective they can only state relations of ‘objective possibility’, not necessary causal connections⁴.

II. Parsons’ Critique

In its most fundamental sense Parsons’ main objection to Weber’s methodology is its failure to recognize in a consistent manner that the differences between the natural and the social sciences are only substantive. In terms of the logic of explanation there can be no difference. In Parsons’ view Weber makes too rigid a distinction between the subjective directions of interest of the scientist in each of the forms of science.

According to Parsons there are two kinds of motive that guide scientific inquiry. An ‘instrument interest’ is manifest

“whenever the question arises of using elements of the situation of action as means, or adapting action to them as conditions.” (Parsons 1937b: 595)

This ‘interest’ is contrasted with another type of ‘nonscientific motive of cognitive interest’ that Parsons terms the ‘disinterested’ value attitude. A ‘disinterested’ attitude is concerned with the ‘appreciation’ of events and phenomena rather than with their control. In other words, Parsons seems to be expressing the contrast between an interpretation of historical individuality and any attempt at the construction of general theoretical systems. Parsons’ critique is made possible by the ambiguities, contradictions and complexities of Weber’s own account. What Parsons terms the ‘disinterested’ attitude is the sphere in which the principle of ‘value-relations’ is most applicable and the element of individuality most prominent. In terms of Parsons’ argument it may be true to say that this principle of ‘value-relations’ is more important for social science than it is for natural science, but it cannot be taken to be sufficient to justify a fundamental methodological distinction between these sciences. Parsons’ standpoint is made clearer by the following remarks:

“Indeed . . . it is curious that Weber took the position that he did, for one of his major theses throughout his work was that of the importance of scientifically

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³ As early as 1906 Weber is concerned with the distinct character of the “systematic cultural sciences”. Weber (1949: 161; 1951: 263)

⁴ See, for example, Rossi (1971) as well as Winch (1958).
verifiable knowledge of human affairs as a guide to rational action. Moreover in just this connection he strongly emphasized the need for general, theoretical knowledge. Insofar as this is the context in which social studies are considered it would seem that, on the cognitive level, the ultimate aim of research was the building up of one or more systems of valid general theory, which would be equally applicable to any concrete situations that might arise.” (Parsons, 1937b: 595)

More importantly, value-relations enter into the formation of natural scientific theories and problems to a greater extent than Weber realised. In fact, Weber, in the ‘Protestant Ethic’ and elsewhere, hints at the role of religious motivation in the promotion of natural science. In this case it is clear that ‘a value interest’ does not necessarily concentrate upon ‘concrete individuality’ (Parsons 1937b: 596). The urge “to know God through his works was directed to the element of order in the physical world, and thus to those aspects of it that could be formulated in abstract and general terms”. It can be argued that Weber’s own distinction between the sciences rests upon his diagnosis of the ‘disenchantment of the world’ which is reinforced by a tendency derived from contemporary philosophy to exaggerate the substantive unity of the natural sciences.

Parsons’ account of the structure of theory is such that, whatever the motives that guide the original interest of the scientist, there is an inherent tendency for the theoretical structures of all sciences to become logically closed systems. The correspondence between ‘disinterestedness’ and ‘instrumentality’ will result in the formation of an integrated theoretical system and when this occurs there exists an emergent and purely theoretical basis for interest in the phenomena that are to be investigated that itself is incapable of being reduced to either of its constitutive guiding interests. This idea of the immanence and autonomy of theoretical understanding is fundamental to all of Parsons’ work. For example, in this characteristic statement Parsons argues that:

“It is clear that the Weltanschauung and the scientific theories of an eminent scientist cannot be radically dissociated. But this is no reason to believe that there is not an immanent process of the development of science itself.” (Parsons 1937b: 27)

From Parsons’ perspective, Weber could not adequately recognize that the value-related aspect of inquiry is ‘controlled’ by the autonomous logic of theoretical systems. Weber’s own understanding of science and its development is weakened by his inability to recognize in any consistent manner that the conceptual structure of a science will organize the data from which any selection is to be made. To be sure, Weber does, of course, recognize that:

“It is not the ‘actual’ interconnection of ‘things’ but the conceptual interconnections of problems (italics in original) which define the scope of the various problems. A new ‘science’ emerges where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discovered which open up significant new points of view.” (Weber 1904, in 1949: 68; in 1951: 166)

But the notion of social science here is predominantly one of a ‘Wirklichkeitswissenschaft’.

“The type of social science in which we are interested is an empirical science of concrete reality. Our aim is the understanding of the characteristic uniqueness of the reality in which we move. We wish to understand on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise”. (Weber 1904 in 1949: 72; in 1951: 170-1)

Parsons is more concerned with an ideal of scientificity that emphasizes the priority of a conceptual scheme. If “observation is always in terms of a conceptual scheme” then there can be no boundary or

“radical distinction in principle between the natural and the social sciences with regard to the roles of individuality and generality.” (Parsons 1937b: 597)

The idea of value-relations as a general selective principle can make clear the element of relativism in social inquiry but it is applicable in the sense outlined by Parsons to both the natural and the social sciences.

The division between the sciences is principally one of emphasis between ‘individualising’ and ‘generalising’ sciences and this distinction is not to be reduced to a distinction between natural and social science. The ‘generalising’ and ‘analytical’ sciences are primarily concerned with the creation of general systems of theory applicable to a wide range of phenomena.

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6 Parsons is heavily influenced by Henderson and Whitehead. See Barber (1970) and Whitehead (1926).
"In the natural science field theoretical physics is the leading example, but chemistry and general biology may also be included; in the social sciences theoretical economics is by far the most highly developed, but it is to be hoped that theoretical sociology and certain others will find a place by its side." (Parsons 1937b: 598)

Parsons' hopes for the theoretical development of sociology are clearly evident in his discussion of the relationship between sociological and economic theory. He is highly critical of the view of Löwe that in the relationship between the two sciences it is the role of sociology to supply 'principia media' which are no more than supplementary structural descriptions of the cultural and institutional framework within which economic activity occurs. It is important to note that a central feature of Parsons' misgivings about the role of these 'principia media' is that the principal of historical relativity is fundamental to their status. Parsons asks and answers his own rhetorical question:

"Is it not possible to attack the problem of the theoretical supplement to economic theory on a higher plane of generality than this? I am quite convinced that it is. 'Pure' economic theory, even as a generalised analytical system, is not the theory of a class of concrete phenomena but is part of a broader system of analytical theory on the same level of generality - the 'theory of action'. It focuses attention only on one limited part of the structure, not of a specific concrete society but of a generalized system of social action. Basic to economic theory is the conception of a 'rational' relation of means and ends. Economic theory really deals with one mode of normative orientation, the 'rational', in the sense of that involving valid empirical knowledge as defined by the criteria of scientific methodology and, in one aspect, defined by the role of scarcity. But as Löwe himself remarks, it is not concerned with the specific content of ends, of the ultimate means and conditions of action, or with many other structural elements of a generalized social system.

But these other elements, which must enter into the data of the concrete problems of economics, are not random relative to those dealt with by economic theory. They can, however, be analysed in terms of a conceptual scheme on the same analytical level as economic theory and directly articulated with it in such a way as to fill the empirical gaps left open by economic theory." (Parsons 1937a: 480) 7

In Parsons' account Weber is to be commended for avoiding the extremes of both 'reification' ('the fallacy of misplaced concreteness') and theoretical 'irrationalism', in the sense of a denial of the validity of general concepts, and for combining the essential properties of both science and action. It is Parsons' argument that as science in particular and human action in general both operate through the medium of values they both share the same relativistic foundation. Once this has been recognized it is clear that as scientific inquiry can be analysed as a mode of action without destroying its claim to objectivity then rational action itself requires the existence of objective verifiable knowledge:

"A knowledge of action and its elements is indispensable to ground the methodology of science and, vice versa, scientific knowledge itself constitutes an element indispensable to the analysis of action." (Parsons 1937b: 600)

If rational action and the objectivity of science are connected in this manner, then the concepts and theories produced through the operation of value-relations, must, if valid, be 'translatable' either into each other or into another theoretical language held in common. As far as Parsons is concerned, if a complete relativism of theories is to be avoided, the 'solidarity' of science and action is an essential ingredient in his argument. "Thus Weber's principle of value relevance, while it does introduce an element of relativity into scientific methodology ... does not involve the scepticism that is the inevitable consequence of any really radical relativity." (Parsons 1937b: 601)

The "really radical relativity" that Parsons has in mind is that implied in his interpretation of the epistemological implications of Mannheim's and Durkheim's work. The problem of the nature and purpose of theories and concepts still remains. In Parsons' interpretation Weber's notion of the ideal type has a residual character within his system of ideas. Weber's polemical standpoint vis-a-vis both intuitionism and objectivism strengthened his view of the fictional character of social scientific concepts. Such concepts can only be relatively useful fictions that can never function as descriptions of a pre-given social reality. The main criterion of their usefulness is the ability to enhance our interpretations of the cultural meaning and significance of historical events and social phenomena. Weber, apart from stressing their utopian character, does not give a positive or clear identification of their qualities but stresses that they are neither hypotheses, nor descriptions and are certainly not class concepts.

Nevertheless, Weber did use an 'ideal type' concept of a generalising character. This is usually

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7 On 'principia media' see Mannheim (1940).
a construction of a hypothetical course of events, although it still has the property of being a ‘one-sided exaggeration of empirical reality’. In Parsons’ view when such concepts are applied to situations which are not ideal experimental conditions for a theory they are placed in a dilemma. They must be regarded as being either an illegitimate reification of a single theoretical system or merely as convenient fictions. Weber’s work culminates into a ‘mosaic’ of ideal types which, allied with his preference for the use of rational nouns, leads to an exaggeration of the inevitability of the process of rationalization. Weber could not recognize the need for an inquiry into the systematic interrelationships between his ideal types. His insistence upon the role of value-relations implies an interest in the ‘historical individual’ rather than in the construction of empirical generalisations or conceptual classifications. This view if clearly expressed in his critique of some critics of Rickerts, including Eulenberg, where he states that:

“The attempt has been made in all seriousness to understand or to ‘refute’ H. Rickerts’ very clearly developed idea that the construction of the ‘historical individual’ is conditioned by “value-relevance” (Wertbeziehung) as asserting that this relevance to values is identical with a subsumption under general concepts such as the ‘state’, ‘religion’, ‘art’, etc., and similar concepts, which are assuredly, it is said, the “values” in question; the fact that history brings its objects into relation with these values and thereby attains specific “viewpoints” is then equivalent – this is what is added – to the separate treatment of the ‘chemical’, ‘physical’, etc., ‘aspects’ of events in the sphere of the natural sciences. These are remarkable misunderstandings of what is and must be understood by “value-relevance” (Wertbeziehung).’” (Weber 1906; in 1949: 149-150, in 1951: 251-2) 8

“In constructing historical individuals I elaborate in an explicit form the focal points for possible ‘evaluative’ attitudes which the segment of reality in question discloses and in consequence of which it claims a more or less universal “meaning” – which is to be sharply distinguished from causal significance.” (Weber 1906, in 1949: 151; in 1951: 253)

In Weber’s account there is no clear limitation to the number of standpoints upon which a value standpoint may be based. There cannot be an ultimate system of social concepts. It is important to see how Parsons criticizes this fundamental axiom of Weber’s methodological approach. Parsons argues that Weber has cor-
rectly stated the logical independence of the standards of objectivity, and of ‘schema of proof’ from the threat of relativism. Further, as noted, the realisation of the ‘solidarity of science and action’ destroys the claims of extreme relativism.

“A knowledge of action and its elements is indispensable to ground the methodology of science and, vice versa, scientific knowledge itself constitutes an element indispensable to the analysis of action.” (Parsons 1937b: 600)

However, it is in discussing Weber’s notion of the plurality of value standpoints that Parsons makes the highly questionable statement that Weber also argued that the number of possible ‘ultimate value systems’ is, in fact, limited (Parsons 1937b: 601) 9. Parsons argues that there must be a limited number of constructed historical individuals and of theoretical systems. Parsons interpretation (or, possibly, misinterpretation) of Weber on this point, although not strictly necessary for his argument concerning the existence of objective sociological knowledge, allows him to connect the principle of value relations with his own view of scientific knowledge. For Parsons, it must follow that there is “in principle” a finite totality of possible social knowledge which, while not a “complete reflection” of the “totality of conceivable objective reality” does stand in a functional relation to it.”

“If this element of relativism in science is not to lead to sceptical consequences, it is necessary to postulate that in this sense the possible points of view are of a limited number.” (Parsons 1937b: 756)

Opaque as these statements may be, they are an essential foundation for the structure of Parsons’ theoretical system and an indication of its divergence from the spirit of Weber’s. Parsons can sympathize with, but must limit the scope of, Weber’s affirmation that the social and historical sciences are sciences of ‘eternal youth’ whose ideal types can only be transient. For Parsons the development of sociological knowledge as science must be characterised as "a process of asymptotic approach to a limit” (Parsons 1937b: 601)

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8 Weber’s main ‘target’ is Eulenberg (1905).

9 On the problem of the tension between the emphasis upon both action and values in Parsons’ work, see Martins’ distinction between ‘values’ and ‘valuations’ in Martins (1974).
III. Relativism as a Problem

In Parsons’ overall account of the methodology of social action theory the introduction of this principle of the progressive development of scientific knowledge constrains the operation of value-related enquiry and avoids the possibility of scepticism founded upon notions of the general conceptual relativism inherent in sociological thought. From Parsons’ point of view Weber’s misunderstanding of the true nature of scientific abstraction in terms of its fragmentation of the coherence of both historical individuals and of historical ‘chains of events’ lead him to erect, as a general theoretical statement, what is, in effect, no more than a ‘mosaic’ of ideal types which itself presupposes an implicit and more general theory of their interrelation and of their rationale. Weber could not supply such a theory precisely because his insistence upon the creative role of value relations implies an over-riding interest in the investigation of unique social phenomena which, in his view, is incompatible with the formulation of concepts of a high level of abstraction. This aspect of Weber’s ‘heroic positivism’ is shown in his insistence upon the elimination of metaphysical inquiry from sociology. A consequence of this is the argument that we should not seek general concepts, laws and theories which allow the ‘atomisation’ of social reality. The Weberian alternative to explicit general theorising is the classification of possible types of social action and social relationships.

Despite the detail and complexity of Parsons’ commentaries on Weber’s methodology, there is one aspect that emerges. Given the problem of conceptual relativism implied by a theory of investigation that stresses the role of value relations, Parsons’ solution is to put forward what, in its essentials, appears to have the form of a transcendental argument as an attempt to combat the scepticism and relativism that has been a constant companion to the development of sociological thought. In other words, its categories are necessary for, and are presupposed by, experience. Parsons’ interpretation of Weber’s use of the means-end relationship is intended to be the non-relative foundation for the analysis of rival or coexisting theories and as the foundation for cumulative theoretical development. Why should the ‘unit act’ and the action framework be fundamental? Parsons’ answer, at first glance, is simple but not necessarily persuasive:

“It is sufficient to point out that, just like the schema of the classical physics, it is deeply rooted in the common-sense experience of everyday life, and it is of a range of such experience that it may be regarded as universal to all human beings.” (Parsons 1937b: 51)\textsuperscript{10}

Parsons’ argument is that any phenomenon to which the theory applies may be described as a system of action and such a system can eventually be analysed in terms of its most basic ‘atom’, the ‘unit act’. The unit act itself is composed of an end, conditions, means, and a norm or set of norms that govern the way in which a means towards an end is selected. If all social theories can be analysed in terms of action then action itself can only be thought of in terms of the ends-means framework. The principle of relativity can apply to the specific modes of its application and to the values which it embodies but it cannot apply to the form of the schema itself. Parsons’ argument rests upon the assumption that the set of fundamental categories he elucidates is unique to social theoretical discourse. It would appear to be impossible to demonstrate such uniqueness and the underlying assumptions of the theory must remain as presuppositions that cannot be falsified but can be either eroded or undermined by critical analysis and the subsequent development of theoretical strategies that themselves may presuppose a uniqueness argument. Given the presupposition of the coherence and uniqueness of the ‘action frame of reference’ Parsons argues that ‘at least some’ of the general concepts that he uses are not ‘fictions’ in the sense that he ascribes to Weber’s usage, but that they grasp aspects of the social world. This ‘analytical realism’ asserts that its concepts do not correspond to total phenomena but to analytically separable elements. The assumption is that the more coherent a theory becomes then the more adequately will it correspond to the analytical elements of its domain of application. Of course, this idea presupposes an orderly knowable ‘social order’ which is not just a ‘factual order’ amenable to scientific analysis but is also a ‘normative order’. It is for this reason that Parsons poses the ‘problem of social order’ as being funda-

\textsuperscript{10} The metaphysical presuppositions of Parsonian theory have been discussed by Bershady (1973). See also Parsons (1975).
mental to social theory. However, given the role that this 'problem' plays in the total Parsonsian approach it is clear that this 'problem' can only be interpreted in terms of Parsons' own account of utilitarianism. There is no 'general problem of social order', as some have argued, outside of the Parsonsian problematic. (Parsons 1937b: 87–125)\footnote{See also Parsons (1967), Parsons (1968a), Parsons (1968b) and Schwanenberg (1970).}

On the basis of the action framework Parsons is able to clarify, in his earlier work, the classification of the social sciences. This classification plays a vital role in Parsons' delimitation of the scope of sociology. In his account there have been three ways in which sociology has been defined. Firstly it has been construed as a broadly encyclopaedic compendium of the knowledge we possess concerning man and society. As such it does not rest upon any specific set of theoretical principles. Secondly, the 'narrow encyclopaedic' view sees sociology being concerned with a synthesis of the 'sciences of action' without reference to the conditions of action. Thirdly, there is the 'specific' view according to which sociology is given its own subject matter. Parsons revealingly mentions Simmel's 'formal sociology' as the only methodologically self-conscious precursor of his own adherence to this perspective. Essential to Parsons' account is the argument that it is only possible to speak of independent sciences whenever there exists a coherent system of theory which is not translatable into the terms of another science. In nonempiricist terms Parsons stresses that the unit of reference for an analytical science is not a particular 'historical individual' or class of individuals but a closed system of theory. An empiricist methodology of the type criticized here assumes a classification of the sciences on a 'historical' basis and the limitation of theoretical development to typology construction and empirical generalization. The consequence of any attempt to theorize on this basis is the illegitimate reification of theories. Parsons, in illustrating this argument, points to the theoretical impasse produced by the institutionalist critique of classical economic theory.

IV. Parsons' Idea of a Social Science

In his early work Parsons indicates the development of three general theoretical systems. They are the systems of nature, action and culture. The first two are truly scientific in 'Parsons' account because they necessarily involve analysis in terms of 'processes in time'. The basic coordinates of the first system are space and time, and for the second system the means-end schema. However, with an indication of the special role that culture plays in his later work, Parsons argues that the cultural system presents certain difficulties or, at least, peculiarities. Culture is neither spatial nor temporal, it consists of

"eternal objects, in the strict sense of the term eternal, of objects not of indefinite duration but to which the category of time is not applicable. They are not involved in 'process'. "Eternal objects constitute the meanings of symbols. As objects they exist only 'in the minds' of individuals. They in themselves are not to be found by external observation, only their symbolic manifestations." (Parsons 1937b: 763)\footnote{For another discussion of this see Parsons (1933-4).}

Verifiable knowledge of such 'eternal objects' is possible not in terms of a 'causal understanding of events' but as an understanding of 'the interrelations of eternal objects in meaningful systems'. Systems of culture are, in part, the product of action and, in turn, are the conditions of action. Parsons adds that:

"from the causal point of view we must grant to them the relation to action a certain Eigengesetzlichkeit. A thought process which is a process of action is canalised by logical considerations. The system of logic, a culture system, is a causal element in the concrete result." (Parsons 1937b: 764).

Within this perspective Parsons situates the sociology of knowledge as a discipline that is concerned with the interrelations between action and culture.

From the standpoint of his notion of the unit act Parsons argues that the classification of the sciences of action can, initially, be made in terms of the emergent properties derived from the increasing complexity of systems of action. The first emergent property is economic rationality. Economic theory is concerned with the relationship between economic rationality and other aspects of action and, following this argument, if this emergent property can be made the
basis of a coherent theoretical system there does not seem to be any obvious reason why this should not also be true of the other emergent properties. If it is argued that only economic theory can attain this status then sociology becomes a residual science. Parsons’ critique of Pareto is essentially along these lines. In Pareto’s methodology sociology is concerned with the analysis of non-logical action and the description of social systems. It cannot attain the same degree of coherence that economic theory possesses.

The second emergent property that Parsons mentions is ‘coercive rationality’. Coercion is the exercise of power over others. It is not a property of a total system of action but can only apply to some individuals or groups of individuals in their relationship to others. Parsons adds:

“In this respect it is analogous to the economic conception of value. The idea of a ‘general level of values’ is nonsensical because value is a relative concept. Power is also a relative concept.” (Parsons 1937b: 767)

The fact of coercion creates the famous ‘Hobbesian problem of order’, the main premise of which is the unlimited struggle for power in a ‘state of nature’. Parsons deduces from the ‘state of nature’ argument that:

“In order that there may be a stable system of action involving a plurality of individuals there must be normative regulation of the power aspect of the relations of individuals within the system; in this sense there must be a distributive order.” (Parsons 1937b: 768)

The emergent property of power relations and their normative control is termed the ‘political action element’ but Parsons has always had great difficulty in arguing from this that there is anything like an autonomous ‘science of politics’.

The solution of the problem of power implies social integration in terms of a common value system which, for example, is demonstrated by the existence of legitimate norms, common ultimate ends of action and ritual. The emergent property of “common-value integration” is the domain of sociology which Parsons is able to define as

“the science which attempts to develop an analytical theory of social action system insofar as these systems can be understood in terms of the property of common-value integration.” (Parsons 1937b: 768)

The basic properties of the unit act form the methodological basis for the three sciences of action rather than itself being the subject matter for an autonomous science. In addition there is scope for a science of psychology as an analytical science concerned with the properties of action systems that are derivable from the hereditary basis of personality. The content of immediate ends and norms is also amenable to study in terms of what Parsons describes as the ‘technologies’. While maintaining the logical distinctions between the analytical sciences Parsons is also clear that they are all subsystems of the more inclusive general theory and that their interrelationships must be close.

Once again it is more than clear that the acceptance of Parsons’ classification of the sciences means that sociology is destined to be, and indeed, can only progress as an analytical science on the same basis as economic theory. Parsons’ objection to Weber’s methodology is precisely that according to its definition of sociology and its place among the ‘cultural sciences’ it is a historical and general social science that includes both the economic and the political levels as defined by the theory of action. Parsons’ meta-theory produces a definition of the concept of ‘society’ that must lead analysis towards formalism:

“Society is but an element in the concrete whole of human social life, which is also affected by the factors of heredity and environment as well as by the element of culture – scientific knowledge and techniques, religious, metaphysical and ethical systems of ideas and forms of artistic expression. Society cannot exist apart from these things; they play a part in all its concrete manifestations, but they are not society, which comprises only the complex of social relationships as such.” (Parsons 1934: 231)

Parsons’ insistence upon the necessity for the creation and, in fact, latent existence of, an autonomous body of analytical theory in sociology must be seen not just in terms of an appreciation of Weber’s methodological insights but as an attack upon the relativistic implications that were exploited by the classical sociology of knowledge that derived from Hegelian and Marxist roots represented especially by the early work of Mannheim. Parsons is clear that although it is probably true to say that a ‘Weltanschauung’ and a scientific theory cannot easily be dissociated it is also part of his own theory to state that there is also an immanent
process of development in science itself. In this
sense Parsons’ insistence upon the creative and
autonomous role of theory is meant to function
as a critique of all forms of historicism. In a
review of von Schelting’s work on Weber and
Mannheim he clearly states this theme. In his
view Mannheim’s relativism

“rests on an empiricism of the character which it was
one of Weber’s greatest achievements to have trans-
cended. It is just as easy to demonstrate that this so-
ciety could not exist without valid scientific know-
ledge as that knowledge is itself a social product. The
only escape from the dilemma of either a naive ra-
tionalistic positivism or a relativism of Mannheim’s
variety is an analytical breakdown of this entity ‘so-
ciety’ into its elements.” (Parsons 1936: 681)

From Parsons’ standpoint there is no fundamen-
tal epistemological difference between the em-
pirical knowledge of social and natural pheno-
mena. In a later work Parsons compares Mann-
heim’s ‘general’ conception of ideology to an
ideal state of social science which is subject to
all the canons of scientific inquiry but whose
selectivity of content and significance in cultural
terms is relative to the values of the society
within which it exists (Parsons 1967a: 151).
Parsons describes this conception as a ‘value-
science integrate’ which is a body of ideas that
combine a conceptual framework for interpret-
ing the state of a society with a set of premises
in terms of which this interpreted state may
be evaluated. In other words, Parsons is insist-
ing upon the complete separation of interpreta-
tion, explanation and evaluation against the
view of some of Weber’s critics that value re-
lations are not merely constraints upon the
choice of possible objects for analysis but are
constitutive of those objects. In Parsons’ theory
of ideology ‘particular ideologies’ deviate from
the ‘value-science’ integrate in terms of a select-
vity of relevance. Parsons gives the example
of the ‘intellectuals’ ideology’ that exaggerates
the importance of the ‘lonely crowd’ and the
pressures conducive, to conformity and devalues
the ‘institutionalised individualism’ of western
societies. Of course an intellectual with the
ideology mentioned would see ‘institutionalised
individualism’ as further evidence for his own
‘ideological’ arguments. Unfortunately, Parsons’
arguments, once they move away from abstract
formalism to the consideration of particular
cases, tend to be unconvincing. The problematic
and ‘essentially contestable’ nature of such state-
tements requires much more attention to the de-
tail of argument. A consequence of Parsons’ in-
ability to present persuasive definitions of his
central concepts is the self-referential opacity of
his statements concerning the nature of ideolo-
y. An example of this is his discussion of sys-
tematic ‘distortion’:

“The criterion of distortion is that statements are made
about the society which by social-scientific standards
can be shown to be positively in error, whereas selecti-
vity is involved where the statements are, at the proper
level, ‘true’ but do not constitute a balanced account
of the available truth. It is clear that both secondary
selectivity and distortion in an ideology violate the
standards of empirical social science, in a sense in
which the values science integrate does not.” (Parsons 1967a: 153)

Despite a general scepticism concerning the re-
ductionist implications of some aspects of the
sociology of knowledge, Weber was aware that
his own work could be regarded as a part of
the process of rationalisation that he had de-
scribed. Similarly, Parsons’ own methodological
prescriptions and standpoint are related to his
own image of the role of the sciences in west-
ern societies. A crucial difference between the
approaches of Parsons, on the one hand, and
Weber and Mannheim, on the other, is that
Parsons sees the objectivity of science in gener-
al and of social science in particular to be firmly
grounded in and made possible by the emer-
gence and institutionalisation of a scientific com-
unity. Insofar as a social scientific community
does exist it can only be partially insulated with
the result that its work will be open to ideo-
logical distortion. Science can develop only if it
is institutionalised on the basis of a universalistic
value system that has autonomy from other
‘value complexes’. In fact, Parsons curiously
goes so far as to assert that:

“This seems to point to the grain of truth in Karl
Mannheim’s doctrine about the special status of the
‘free intelligentsia’ who were not fully bound into
their cultures – however inadequate Mannheim’s anal-
ysis of this phenomenon. This is one crucial sense in
which Weber, as a comparative sociologist, could not
be a radical relativist with respect to values.” (Parsons 1967b: 90)

Throughout Parsons’ work there has been a
parallel emphasis upon both the methodological
critique of relativism in science and the structur-
al grounding of objectivity in the institutionali-

13 Parsons here also mentions the fact that he parti-
cipated in Mannheim’s seminar at Heidelberg in
1927.
sation of science from the earliest discussions of the distinctive role of the professions to the more recent concern with the structure of higher education and the subsystem of ‘cognitive rationality’.

The distinct nature of the Parsonian concept of social science is important because, despite criticisms of the substance of Parsonian functionalism, it is certainly consistent with a major part of the contemporary orthodoxy concerning social science methodology. For Parsons, the progress of social science requires the development of a body of general theory that in turn requires the autonomy of the science-based professions within a highly differentiated social system. For Weber the “progress” of social science can only be characterised in terms of a discontinuous process of conceptual reconstruction that itself is substantively tied to the development of ‘practical cultural problems’. If Parsons rejects the historicist implication of Weber’s methodology and feels that Weber is unnecessarily confused concerning the role of values in social science then he certainly rejects the more radical critiques of Weber’s methodology. In rejecting the arguments of critics such as Habermas and Rossi, that value-relations do not merely define the choice of possible objects for investigation but are also active in the formation of theories, Parsons goes so far as to claim that Weber’s ‘fourth position’ that rejected idealist historicism, utilitarianism and Marxism, in fact, heralded the ‘end of ideology’ (Parsons 1967b: 100).

Parsons’ notion of the progress of sociological thought rests upon the presupposition that the ‘analytical realism’ of sociological theory is itself made possible because it is in some sense a representation of the inherent orderliness of nature and society. The function of theory is to order knowledge in the direction of systematic coherence. The validity of Parsonian theory rests upon the presupposition that the natural order, as well as social reality, has a counterpart in the nature of reason. ‘Analytical reality’ is divorced from common sense and by avoiding the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ approaches reality ‘asymptotically’. Parsonian theory construction is characterised as a process in which concepts are formed and their interrelationships explicated so that their order reveals and approaches the order inherent in reality. Following Henderson, among others, Parsons is clear that all conceptual schemes require the corrective constraints of empirical observation and experiment. This is notoriously difficult, if not impossible in the true sense, in sociology and the thesis of theoretical convergence, initially concerning Pareto, Marshall, Weber and Durkheim, serves as a substitute for that in Parsons’ theory of sociological knowledge. If the ‘convergence thesis’ does not hold then ‘analytical realism’ does not hold either or it must be defended on other grounds. If sociological theories have developed separately from diverse intellectual and social contexts and conceptual identities can be demonstrated as the result of that development then, according to Parsons, this is sufficient evidence that they have approached and made possible a unified conception that corresponds to the continuous and patterned reality of the social order.

The ‘Parsonian scientist’ is a ‘Parsonian actor’ whose ‘action’ is conceivable as a manifestation of the general principles of the social system. The primacy of norms and values in the action frame of reference and the ‘effort’ of the actor in bringing conditions into conformity with norms is reflected in the Parsonian interpretation of Weber’s notion of the ‘calling’ of science. The idea of a social scientific vocation is not interpreted in terms of the heroic personal detachment of the scholar but in terms of the professional institutionalisation of the values of science within the social system. As has been mentioned this is the source of the antagonism towards the more extreme claims of the traditional sociology of knowledge that runs throughout Parsons’ works. In fact, it could be argued that Parsons’ critique of Weber can only be adequately understood not simply in terms of the formal structure of his epistemological and moral presuppositions, but rather in terms of their expression in his persistent animosity towards the sociology of knowledge. It is not surprising that the methodologies of Weber and Parsons are grounded in opposed philosophies.

14 A recent statement of this theme is to be found in Parsons/Platt (1973).

15 See the contributions of Habermas and Rossi to the debate and Parsons’ reply in Stammer (1971). Two other fairly recent works have taken a similar position to Parsons over the problem of ‘value-relations’, Runciman (1972) and Bruun (1972).
of history, including their images of the future. Despite Parsons’ attempts to incorporate the Weberian thesis of increasing rationalization within his theory of structural differentiation his image of progressive societal evolution is in striking contrast to Weber’s “iron cage of serfdom” and future of “long nights of icy darkness”. The process of intellectual rationalization has the unintended consequence of relativising absolute values and sharpening the irreconcilable value conflicts that Weber saw as a central feature of western societies. This is in complete contrast with Parsons’ most recent statements concerning the evolution of modern societies and their core ‘societal community’

16 See, for example, Parsons (1971).

References:


