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THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL ACTION

A Study in Social Theory
with Special Reference to a Group of
Recent European Writers

BY
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THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL ACTION

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PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

Nearly twelve years have passed since the original publication of *The Structure of Social Action*. The post-war wave of interest in theoretical study and teaching in the relevant aspects of social science unfortunately found the book out of print, so that the decision of *The Free Press* to bring out a new edition is most welcome.

For a variety of reasons, it has been decided to reprint the original book without change. There is, in this decision, no implication that the book could not be substantially improved by revision. Nothing could be further both from the spirit of the work and from a number of explicit statements* in it. The author's own process of theoretical thinking has not stopped and if he were to undertake writing the book again at this time, it would come out a substantially different and, let us hope, a better book.

To present a revised version which would at all closely resemble what the book would be like if newly written in 1949 would, however, be a very heavy task. It would not only involve much actual rewriting, but, prior to that, a careful re-study and re-evaluation of the principal sources on which it was based. This would certainly be highly productive, but the problem is to balance judgment of the productiveness of such work compared to alternative uses of the time and energy it would require.

The most important consideration involved in the balance is the relative advantage to be derived from further refinement of the critical analysis of theoretical work done a generation and more ago as compared with the probable fruitfulness of proceeding with direct analysis of theoretical problems in relation to presently going empirical research interests without further refinement of critical orientation. The decision not to embark on a thorough revision of the book represents the judgment that in the present situation of social science, the latter constitutes the more fruitful channel for a major investment of time and energy.

The Structure of Social Action was intended to be primarily a

* See Chapter I, pages 40-41.

contribution to systematic social science and not to history, that is the history of social thought. The justification of its critical orientation to the work of other writers thus lay in the fact that this was a convenient vehicle for the clarification of problems and concepts, of implications and interrelations. It was a means of taking stock of the theoretical resources at our disposal. In the on-going process of scientific development, it constituted a pause for reconsideration of basic policy decisions, on principles which are serviceable in scientific work as in many other fields, namely, that "it is a good thing to know what you are doing," and that there may be resources and potentialities in the situation which in our absorption in daily work, we tend to overlook. The clarification gained from this stocktaking has opened up possibilities for further theoretical development of sufficient scope so that its impetus is as yet by no means exhausted. This is certainly true in a personal sense and it is reasonable to believe that it continues to be true for others.

The Structure of Social Action analyzed a process of convergent theoretical development which constituted a major revolution in the scientific analysis of social phenomena. The three principal authors treated in that study are by no means isolated but as contributors to the "sociological" side of the development, the added perspective of another decade does not diminish their relative stature as high points in the movement. There is an elevated range, not just three peaks, but these three peaks loom far higher than the lesser ones.

This is true on the sociological side. A major one-sidedness of the book is its relative neglect of the psychological aspects of the total conceptual scheme—a balance which a thorough revision would certainly have to attempt to redress. Here, at least, one figure in the same generation as the others, that of Freud, looms up as having played a cardinal role in a development which, in spite of the differences of his starting points and empirical concerns, must be regarded as a vital part of the same general movement of thought. Psychology is probably richer in significant secondary figures than is true on the sociological side, but no other one seems closely to approach the stature of Freud. So much is this the case that a full-dress analysis of Freud's theoretical development seen in the context of the "theory of social action"—and adaptation of the rest of the book to the results of such an analysis—would seem

indispensable to the kind of revision which ought to be undertaken. This would, of course, necessarily result in a substantial lengthening of an already formidable work.

There may well be a difference of opinion whether there is any figure of comparable *theoretical* stature, who is classified as essentially a social or cultural anthropologist. It is the author's opinion that there is not. Though Boas, for example, may be of comparable *general* importance to social science and an equally great man, his contributions to systematic theoretical analysis in the same stream of development are not in the same category with a Durkheim or a Freud. In a diffuser sense, however, the contributions of anthropological thinking are, however, of first-rate importance and should receive distinctly more emphasis than has been given them in *The Structure of Social Action*. This is particularly true of the relations of the structure of social action to the "structure of culture." Further clarification of these issues is one of the most urgent needs of basic social science at present.

In its fundamentals, this basic theoretical development had taken place by, let us say, twenty-five years ago. But the frames of reference, the polemical orientations, the empirical interests and the intellectual traditions surrounding the authors were so various that the actual unity of their work was accessible only with a great deal of laborious critical interpretation. Indeed, it was worse than that, for the actual differentiations had already become overlaid with a welter of secondary interpretations and misinterpretations, which made the confusion even worse confounded. One of the principal services of *The Structure of Social Action* has been, I think, to clear away a great deal of this "underbrush" so that the bold outline of a theoretical scheme could stand out with some clarity.

A better understanding of the psychological and cultural aspects, which an analysis of Freud's work and of anthropological thought might have contributed would be desirable. Allowance should also be made for awkwardness of exposition. But even with qualifications of this sort, the book reached a point on which further developments can be built. Furthermore, given certain of the interpretive keys which it provides, the original works can be much more freely and fruitfully used. In a word, the outline of a theoretical scheme and the contributions of some of its principal creators have become much more the public property of a professional group rather than remaining the exclusive possession of a small coterie of

Pareto, Durkheim, or Weber scholars, which would more likely than not be rival coteries.

Assuming that, subject to the inevitable process of refinement, the basic theoretical outline developed in *The Structure of Social Action* is essentially sound, to place its significance in better perspective, something may be said about the nature and direction of the developments which can be built upon it.

It was emphasized that the scheme had developed in direct connection with empirical interests and problems of the authors. This is true and of the first importance. But only at a few points could this empirical orientation have been said at this stage to have approached the level of being "operationally specific." One of the most notable of these, with all its crudity, was Durkheim's analysis of suicide rates. Another, on a totally different level, was Weber's attempted test of the influence of religious ideas on economic development by the comparative analysis of the relationships between the relevant factors in a series of different societies. But on the whole, the major relation to empirical problems remained that of a broad "clarification of issues," elimination of confusion and untenable interpretations, and the opening up of new possibilities.

A central problem, therefore, has been and is, how to bring theory of this sort closer to the possibilities of guiding of and testing and refinement by technical research, especially with the use of technically refined instruments of observation, and of the ordering and empirical analysis of observational data.

At least at many points, an important series of steps in this direction seems to be made possible by a shift in theoretical level from the analysis of the structure of social action as such to the structural-functional analysis of social systems. These are, of course, "in the last analysis" systems of social action. But the structure of such systems is, in the newer version, treated not directly in action terms, but as "institutionalized patterns" close to a level of readily described and tested empirical generalization. This, in turn, makes it possible to isolate specific and manageable action processes for intensive dynamic study. Such processes, that is, are treated as action in relation to institutionalized roles, in terms of balances of conformity with and deviation from the expectations of the socially sanctioned role definitions, of conflicting role expectations impinging on the individual, and the constella-

tions of motivational forces and mechanisms involved in such balances and conflicts.

The isolation of such problems to the point of empirical manageability can, however, within the framework of a structural-functional system of theory, be achieved with a relatively high level of attainment of the advantages of generalized dynamic analysis. Treating dynamic problems in the context of their relation both to the structure of a system and the relation of the processes to the functional prerequisites of its maintenance, provides a frame of reference for judging the general significance of a finding and for following out systematically its interconnections with other problems and facts.

The most promising lines of development of theory in the sociological and most immediately related fields, particularly the psychological and cultural, therefore, seem to be two-fold. One major direction is the theoretical elaboration and refinement of structural-functional analysis of social systems, including the relevant problems of motivation and their relation to cultural patterns. In this process, the structure of social action provides a basic frame of reference, and aspects of it become of direct substantive importance at many specific points. The main theoretical task, however, is more than a refinement of the conceptual scheme of the presently reprinted book—it involves transition and translation to a different level and focus of theoretical systematization.*

The second major direction is the development of technically operational formulations and adaptations of theoretically significant concepts. The development of techniques of empirical research has been exceedingly rapid in the recent past and promises much more for the future. Such techniques can now accomplish impressive results even if the theory which guides their employment is little more than common sense. But this is a minor fraction of the understanding they promise if they can be genuinely integrated with a really technical and generalized theoretical scheme.

It is the promise of the fruitfulness of developments in such directions as these which motivates the author not to undertake a thorough revision of *The Structure of Social Action* at this time. Indeed, such a revision does not seem to be really necessary. Whatever theoretical progress the author has been able to make

* For a fuller account of this focus and what it involves, see Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Therapy* (The Free Press, 1949), Chapters I and II.

since its original publication* has been built solidly on the foundations it provides, starting, of course, with the insights provided by studying the great theorists whose works it analyzes. There seems to be substantial reason to believe that this is not merely of idiosyncratic significance. Further dissemination of these contributions, even in their present form, should help to elevate the general level of theoretical understanding and competence in our profession and to stimulate other contributors to develop the most fruitful lines of theoretical advance of social science to a level so much higher as to fulfill the promise in the work of their great predecessors of the turn of the century.

TALCOTT PARSONS.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

March, 1949

* See Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (The Free Press, 1949)

PREFACE

In a sense the present work is to be regarded as a secondary study of the work of a group of writers in the field of social theory. But the genus "secondary study" comprises several species; of these an example of only one, and that perhaps not the best known, is to be found in these pages.

The primary aim of the study is not to determine and state in summary form what these writers said or believed about the subjects they wrote about. Nor is it to inquire directly with reference to each proposition of their "theories" whether what they have said is tenable in the light of present sociological and related knowledge. Both these questions must be asked repeatedly, but what is important is not so much the fact that they are asked, or even answered, but the context in which this takes place.

The keynote to be emphasized is perhaps given in the subtitle of the book; it is a study in social *theory*, not *theories*. Its interest is not in the separate and discrete propositions to be found in the works of these men, but in a *single* body of systematic theoretical reasoning the development of which can be traced through a critical analysis of the writings of this group, and of certain of their predecessors. The unity which justifies treating them together between the same covers is not that they constitute a "school" in the usual sense, or that they exemplify an epoch or a period in the history of social theory, but that they have all, in different respects, made important contributions to this single coherent body of theory, and the analysis of their works constitutes a convenient way of elucidating the structure and empirical usefulness of the system of theory itself.

This body of theory, the "theory of social action" is not simply a group of concepts with their logical interrelations. It is a theory of empirical science the concepts of which refer to something beyond themselves. It would lead to the worst kind of dialectic sterility to treat the development of a system of theory without reference to the empirical problems in relation to

which it has been built up and used. True scientific theory is not the product of idle "speculation," of spinning out the logical implications of assumptions, but of observation, reasoning and verification, starting with the facts and continually returning to the facts. Hence at every crucial point explicit treatment of the empirical problems which occupied the writers concerned is included. Only by treating theory in this close interrelation with empirical problems and facts is any kind of an adequate understanding either of how the theory came to develop, or of its significance to science, possible.

Indeed though this volume is published as a study in theory in the sense just outlined, the tracing of the development of a theoretical system through the works of these four men was not the original intention of the author in embarking on intensive study of their works. It could not have been, for neither he nor any other secondary writer on them was aware that there was a single coherent theoretical system to be found there. The basis on which the four writers were brought together for study was rather empirical. It was the fact that all of them in different ways were concerned with the range of empirical problems involved in the interpretation of some of the main features of the modern economic order, of "capitalism," "free enterprise," "economic individualism," as it has been variously called. Only very gradually did it become evident that in the treatment of these problems, even from such diverse points of view, there was involved a common conceptual scheme, and so the focus of interest was gradually shifted to the working out of the scheme for its own sake.

Many of the author's debts, in the long history of the study, which in continuity of problems extends back into undergraduate days, defy acknowledgment, because they are so numerous and often so indefinite. An attempt will be made to acknowledge only those of most important direct relevance to the study as it now stands.

Of these immediately relevant debts four are of outstanding significance. The least definite, but perhaps the most important, is to Professor Edwin F. Gay, who over a period of years has taken an active interest in the study, has been a source of encouragement at many points in the long and sometimes discouraging process of its development, and has consistently stimulated the

author to the highest quality of work of which he was capable. Secondly, the author's colleague Professor Overton H. Taylor has contributed, in ways which would defy identification, at innumerable points, largely through a long series of personal discussions of the problems, particularly those associated more directly with the status of economic theory. Both have also read parts of the manuscript and made valuable suggestions. Third, Professor Lawrence J. Henderson has subjected the manuscript to a most unusually thorough critical examination, which led to important revision at many points, particularly in relation to general scientific methodology and to the interpretation of Pareto's work. Finally, much is owed to the changing group of students, especially graduate, with whom the author has carried on discussions of problems of social theory throughout much of the period of incubation of the study. In the lively give and take of these discussions many a fruitful idea has emerged and many an obscure point has been clarified.

Two other critics have been particularly helpful through the suggestions and criticisms they have given after reading the manuscript, Professor A. D. Nock, especially in the parts dealing with religion, and Dr. Robert K. Merton. Various others have read the manuscript or proof in whole or in part, and have made valuable suggestions and criticisms. They include Professor P. A. Sorokin, Professor Josef Schumpeter, Professor Frank H. Knight, Dr. Alexander von Schelting, Professor C. K. M. Kluckhohn, Professor N. B. DeNood, Miss Elizabeth Nottingham, Mr. Emile B. Smullyan and Mr. Edward Shils. To Mr. Smullyan and Dr. Benjamin Halpern, I am also indebted for research assistance.

The foregoing have aided this study in relation to the technical subject matter as such. But this is by no means all there is to the completion of such a work. In other respects two other debts are particularly important. One is to the Harvard University Committee on Research in the Social Sciences, which made possible by its grants some valuable research assistance in bibliography and the secondary literature, and stenographic assistance in preparation of the manuscript. The other is to my father, President Emeritus Edward S. Parsons of Marietta College, who took upon himself the heavy burden of going through the whole manuscript in an attempt to improve its English style.

Whatever of readability an unavoidably difficult work may possess is largely to be credited to him.

For secretarial assistance in typing the manuscript I am much indebted to Miss Elizabeth Wolfe, Miss Agnes Hannay and Mrs. Marion B. Billings, and for assistance in preparation of the bibliography to Miss Elaine Ogden.

TALCOTT PARSONS.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.,
October, 1937.

*Jede denkende Besinnung auf die
letzten Elemente sinnvollen mensch-
lichen Handelns ist zunächst gebunden
an die Kategorien "Zweck" und "Mittel."*

Max Weber, Gesammelte Aufsätze
zur Wissenschaftslehre, p. 149.

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