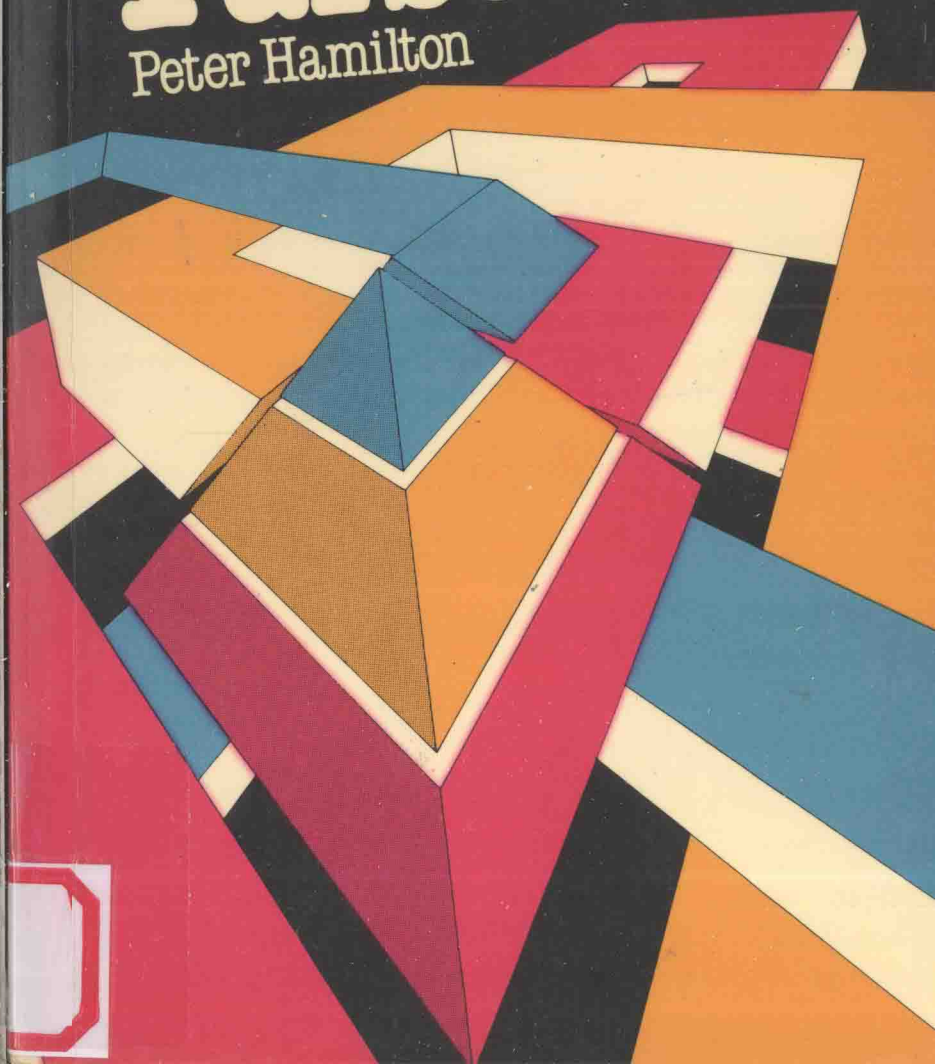


KEY SOCIOLOGISTS Series Editor: Peter Hamilton

# Talcott Parsons

Peter Hamilton



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Series Editor: **PETER HAMILTON**

The Open University, Milton Keynes

This series will present concise and readable texts covering the work, life and influence of many of the most important sociologists, and sociologically-relevant thinkers, from the birth of the discipline to the present day. Aimed primarily at the undergraduate, the books will also be useful to pre-university students and others who are interested in the main ideas of sociology's major thinkers.

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PETER HAMILTON is Lecturer in Sociology at the Open University, a position he has held since 1973. He was, in 1981 and 1982, Visiting Research Fellow, Station d'Economie et Sociologie Rurales, INRA, Paris.

He is the author of a number of books and articles on the sociology of knowledge, introductory sociology, rural sociology and French society and is the Editor of the Ellis Horwood and Tavistock series, Key Sociologists.

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## Preface

In the early 1970s I was present at some public lectures given by Talcott Parsons at the London School of Economics and Political Science — where he had in fact been a student briefly during the 1920s. Parsons was talking about the evolutionary theories of society which he had elaborated during the latter half of the 1960s. At the first of the two lectures a large and mostly respectful audience settled down in The LSE lecture theatre to hear the great man expound his views. The small and rotund figure of Parsons was introduced — I think by David Martin — and he began to speak. Suddenly, from the wings of the stage, several naked young women danced into view, pirouetted gracefully around the bemused Parsons and exited stage left. A couple had been carrying placards with women's liberation slogans, the apparent motive for this bizarre demonstration. As far as I can recall Parsons then continued his lecture as if nothing untoward had taken place.

Later, I had the opportunity to interview Parsons at some length about various aspects of his intellectual biography.<sup>†</sup> I wondered if he would be able to explain the curious little demonstration. Perhaps it had something to do with some vital new element in his own work,

<sup>†</sup>A great deal of this interview material has been used at a number of points throughout the book.

or perhaps I had missed heavy sexist overtones in his previous writings? Parsons was as baffled as I was about the reasons for the demo, and it was in all probability something internal to LSE matters of the time, Parsons proving a convenient victim whose paternalistic role in American sociology was probably only dimly discerned by the dancing women.

The multiple ironies of this situation remain firmly established in my mind. Parsons was a charming man of immense scholarship, but totally without the air of condescension which intellectuals of his stature so frequently display. I very much doubt whether he would have felt women's liberation to be a bad thing, and was clearly interested in its implications for modern societies — references exist in his last writings, for example, to such issues. But Parsons had been extensively criticized for his 'functionalist theory of the family' because he accurately described the subordination of women in the typical Western family of the 1950s and saw that such a subordination was functionally important in maintaining social structure. For this he has been reviled as a 'reactionary', as if his description were somehow to be read as a prescription. Yet his analysis was in essence correct, and not merely because he understood that a change in women's functional position within family structures would have major consequences for the wider society. But as is so often the case, the messenger was blamed for the bad news, and Parsons was read as saying that women *ought* to be subordinate.

Parsons's present status in sociology is that of usurped patriarch — a consequence of the decline from orthodoxy of the type of sociological theory which he propagated. In terms borrowed from the philosophy of science, Parsonian systems theory appears now as an overturned *paradigm*, ousted from the centre of the sociological stage by the new Marxist orthodoxy, which has achieved the status of paradigm in its turn. Unlike the natural sciences, however, sociology has always exhibited a tendency to retain a heterogeneous collection of theories aspiring to paradigm status. Given the large number of sociologists who still utilize Parsonian *systems theory* it is plausible to suppose that it is waiting in the wings for an eventual renaissance.

This book is devoted to a modest account of Parsonian systems theory, not in the hope of a 'return to power' one day, but rather in the expectation that a more measured assessment of Parsons's achievements might one day be possible.

## Acknowledgements

There are many people whom I would like to thank for their help — sometimes unwitting — in the preparation of this book. My old friend and teacher David Marsland deserves prominent mention for having first interested me in Parsons's work, and probably understands it better than I ever will. Others whose comments and advice I have found helpful over the years include Robert Bocock, Kenneth Thompson, David Potter, Percy Cohen, John Eldridge and Frank Parkin — none of whom, it is conventional to say, bear any responsibility for the views contained in this book. Others whose help I have most valued include my wife Susan for her continuing support and encouragement, my children for their total and refreshing disdain of all things sociological, and my publishers — especially Clive Horwood — for having the remarkable perspicacity to believe my assurances that a series on the 'Key Sociologists' was worth undertaking.

*For Susan, Toby, Oliver and Max*

## A Note on Abbreviations

For reasons of economy of space I have adopted the rather inelegant practice of abbreviating some references. Whilst I would prefer not to do this, one is faced with the dilemma of either retaining lengthy titles of books in full in the text, or of perhaps confusing the reader by peppering sentences with acronyms like 'SOSA' (i.e. *The Structure of Social Action*) or 'SECP' (i.e. *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*) throughout the book. Given the limited space available to me I have chosen the latter course and thus to annoy readers by abbreviating titles, something for which I apologize but nonetheless recognize as inevitable. I hope readers will agree.

The abbreviations are as follows, and are listed in chronological order of first publication.

SOSA	(1937)	<i>The Structure of Social Action</i>
EST(1)	(1949)	<i>Essays in Sociological Theory.</i> <i>Pure and Applied</i> (first edition)
SS	(1951)	<i>The Social System</i>
TGTA	(1951)	<i>Toward a General Theory of Action</i>
WPTA	(1953)	<i>Working Papers in the Theory of Action</i>
EST(2)	(1954)	<i>Essays in Sociological Theory</i> (revised edition)



- FSIP* (1955) *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*  
*ES* (1956) *Economy and Society*  
*SPMS* (1960) *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*  
*SSP* (1964) *Social Structure and Personality*  
*SECP* (1966) *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*  
*STMS* (1967) *Sociological Theory and Modern Sociology*  
*PSS* (1969) *Politics and Social Structure*  
*SMS* (1971) *The System of Modern Societies*  
*AU* (1973) *The American University*  
*EVS* (1977) *The Evolution of Societies*  
*SSEAT* (1977) *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*  
*ATHC* (1978) *Action Theory and the Human Condition*