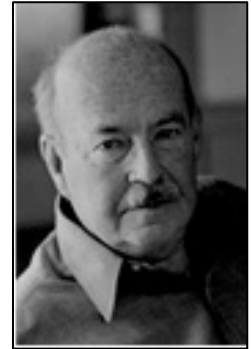




## Talcott Parsons (1902 – 1979)



Talcott Parsons was born on December 13, 1902, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. His father was a Congregational minister, active in the social reform movement “Social Gospel,” a Protestant Christian movement advocating the belief that the Second Coming could not occur until man rid himself of all social evils, and sought to do so. Religion played a large role in Talcott’s upbringing, and he was later called “the last Puritan” by his student, Jesse R. Pitts (Hamilton 1983). Parsons’ father also served as president of a small college in Ohio, so that there was also an early academic emphasis in Parsons’ life.

Parsons initially wanted to be a biologist or a medical doctor. He graduated from Amherst College with majors in biology and philosophy. He first became interested in sociology under Amherst professor Walter Hamilton. After Amherst, he entered the London School of Economics where he was introduced to the work of Harold Laski, Richard Tawney, Bronislaw Malinowski and Leonard Hobhouse.

Parsons met his wife, Helen Walker, in London, and they remained married until Parsons’ death. They had a son, Charles, in 1932, who later became a distinguished figure in the philosophy of mathematics.

Parsons moved to the University of Heidelberg in Germany where he received his PhD in sociology and economics in 1927. While still working on his dissertation, Parsons taught economics at Amherst for a year before joining Harvard University as an instructor of economics in 1927. He continued to teach there until 1974. In 1949 he served as president of the American Sociological Society.

Parsons died in Munich, Germany, of heart failure, on 8 May, 1979.

### Work

Parsons served on the faculty of Harvard University from 1927 to 1973. He was a central figure in its department of social relations, the creation of which reflected Parson’s vision of an integrated social science. For many years he was one of the best-known sociologists in the world.

Parsons was an advocate of “grand theory,” an attempt to integrate all the social sciences within an overarching theoretical framework. His early work, *The Structure of Social Action*, reviewed the work of his predecessors, especially Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, and Émile Durkheim, and attempted to derive from them a single “action theory” based on the assumptions that human action is voluntary, intentional, and symbolic.

In his model (1951), a “social system” consists of various individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a





tendency to the “optimization of gratification” and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of culturally structured symbols and beliefs. Thus conceived, a social system is only one of three aspects of the structuring of a complete system of social action, with the personalities of the individual actors and the cultural system of which they are part comprising the other elements. Thus, Talcott Parsons’ “grand theory” integrated not only sociological concepts, but also psychological, economic, political, and religious or philosophical components.

Later, he became involved in a large range of fields from medical sociology (personally undergoing full training as a lay analyst at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute) to anthropology, to small group dynamics (working extensively with Robert Freed Bales), to race relations, and then economics and education.

### Functionalism

Parsons produced a general theoretical system for the analysis of society based on a structural-functional approach, in which every group or society tends to fulfil four functional imperatives:

- adaptation—to the physical and social environment
- goal attainment—the need to define primary goals and enlist individuals to strive to attain these goals
- integration—the coordination of the society or group as a cohesive whole
- latency—maintaining the motivation of individuals to perform their roles according to social expectations

### Pattern variables

Perhaps the most noteworthy theoretical contributions from Parsons were his formulations of pattern variables, the AGIL Paradigm and the Unit Act. Parsons asserted that there were two dimensions to societies: “instrumental” and “expressive.” By this he meant that there are qualitative differences between kinds of social interaction. Essentially, he observed that people develop two types of relationship: formally detached and personalized, and these are based on the roles that they play. The characteristics associated with each kind of interaction he called “pattern variables.”

Some examples of expressive societies include families, churches, clubs, crowds, and smaller social settings. Examples of instrumental societies include bureaucracies, aggregates, and markets.

### Gloss

Parsons used the term “gloss” to describe how the mind constructs reality, “filtering” the data coming from our senses. This “filtering” is largely unconscious, and is affected by factors such as cultural constructs including language, personal experience, belief systems, and so forth. Different cultures create different



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glosses, all called reality by the members of those societies. Failure to recognize “glossing,” then, may explain what happens when cultures collide.

### **Criticisms**

Parsons was criticized by his contemporary, C. Wright Mills, for his grand theory. Mills believed that a grand theory was not based on fact but was the product of sociologists attempting to impose their will and interpretation upon data.

In an attempt to base his theory on fact, Parsons traced societal development through history. He explored three stages of evolution: 1) “primitive,” 2) “archaic” and 3) “modern” (where he defined archaic societies as having knowledge of writing and modern societies as knowledge of law). Viewing Western civilization as the pinnacle of modern society, Parsons examined its development, arguing that social systems have moved toward greater adaptation (adjustments that maintain the systemic order), differentiation (the specialization of social institutions and the division of labour), upgrading (greater freedom from want), inclusion (normative diversity), and value generalization (values that are more reflective of the needs of an increasingly complex system). In this work, Parsons declared the United States as the most dynamically developed society, and for this, he was attacked as an ethnocentrist.

In Parsons’ theory, societal evolution parallels biological evolution, with modern societies evidencing greater “generalized adaptive capacity” than earlier ones (Parsons 1971, 2-3). He postulated that all social systems tend toward a state of equilibrium, although never actually reaching a perfectly equilibrated state. However, his critics, particularly those like Mills who favoured the Marxist approach, maintained that the basic tendencies in social and cultural systems are toward social change rather than toward equilibrium.

Parsons’ writing style was difficult to understand and he was often vague and inconsistent with key terms, such as “pattern maintenance”. Thus, although initially well received, and his work in developing the sociology department at Harvard had lasting impact on the field, Parsons’ theories were severely criticized.

### **Legacy**

Parsons was one of the first iconic figures in American sociology. He was instrumental in developing Harvard University’s Sociology (then called Social Relations) Department into one of the top-ranked in the world. His theoretical formulations were influential not only within sociology, but throughout the social sciences, often associated with conservative political ideologies and free market capitalism.

Parsons’ later work focused on a new theoretical synthesis around four functions common to all systems of action, from the behavioural to the cultural, and a set of symbolic media that enable communication across them. However, his attempt to structure the world of action according to only four concepts was difficult to accept for many American sociologists, who were at that time retreating from the grand pretensions of the



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1960s to a more empirical, grounded approach. Consequently, Parsons' influence waned rapidly in the US after 1970. The most prominent attempt to revive Parsonian thinking, under the rubric "neofunctionalism," was made by sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, working at Yale University.

Parsons is at least partially responsible for Max Weber's popularity in the English speaking world, as he translated and compiled a number of Weber's key ideas.

The impact of Parsons' work is also evidenced through his students at Harvard, of whom some of the most notable included Robert K. Merton and Kingsley Davis.

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