THE EMERALD GUIDE TO TALCOTT PARSONS

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TALCOTT PARSONS AND AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

Once the best-known sociologist in the world, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons is now almost forgotten. His ideas on general theory and structural functionalism once dominated world sociology, being widely regarded as the only viable approach to the subject. Relatively few sociologists today have heard of him or think his ideas worth consideration. Those who remember his name tend to see him as old-fashioned, even misguided. His vision of general theory seems strange, kept alive only by a handful of committed adherents. Even during his lifetime, he was criticised for presenting complex and abstract ideas in unwieldy and incomprehensible texts, and these views are today often taken as grounds for disregarding his work.

I have written this book in the conviction that Parsons has been wrongly criticised and unduly ignored. It is time to reassess his ideas, which properly understood offer a fruitful way of undertaking empirical work and moving towards robust explanations. This explains a recent upsurge of interest in Parsons's sociology, most marked in Germany and the United States.

New critical studies of his works have appeared, and the archives have been trawled to find previously unknown draft manuscripts that could be brought to a new audience. These publications make it possible to reconsider the significance and contemporary relevance of Parsons's sociology. My presentation of Parsons's views – the first, I believe, to accurately and clearly explain the development of his work without misleading simplification – is intended as a contribution to that reassessment and to introducing his theoretical project to a new generation.

Very little is recorded about Parsons's life and personal characteristics. He is known to have been rather short, prematurely bald, a chain smoker, and, in later life, somewhat portly. He was typically dressed in a crumpled tweed suit flecked with cigarette ash. His rich East Coast accent betrayed traces of his origins in the American West. He spoke slowly and hesitantly, with long pauses in which he sought the correct word or followed an incidental thought. Though modest and rather shy in personal situations, his passionate commitment to the vocation of sociology as a systematic, scientific discipline was apparent in discussion and writing. Students and colleagues regarded him as a genial and rather avuncular character whose teaching could inspire students through his quiet, untheatrical passion for the subject. His lectures – delivered from brief notes on a yellow legal pad – were marked by frequent digressions as he pursued his thoughts enthusiastically and with great determination. Indeed, his students would sometimes wonder where these thoughts would end up. He was, however, unfailingly supportive of his graduate students, treating them as intellectual equals and as contributors to his evolving ideas. His office door was invariably open for students to drop in for discussion on sociological matters. He enjoyed collaborative work and co-authored papers with many former students and colleagues, always giving them full recognition.

Parsons published a great deal – perhaps too much – aiming to present his work to the widest possible audience. His ideas were published before they were fully formed, as works in progress, and his landmark publications were subject to frequent revision. As a result, he did not always make clear exactly how a paper or book extended or departed from what he had previously published. When writing on specific topics – religion, stratification, health, politics, death, ethnicity, education, and many more – he felt a need to recap and develop his most general theoretical arguments before coming to the key points, which he then left partially developed. This publication strategy reflected his drive to work things through as systematically as possible and to undertake much of his developing theorisation in public, written form.

It has to be admitted that Parsons did not write especially well. Although the complexity of his ponderous prose has been overstated, it is undoubtedly the case that the highly generalised level at which he wrote and the abstract terminology that he employed, and often invented, alienated many readers. This was exacerbated by his heavy grammar and lengthy sentences. He was, however, convinced that abstraction and complexity were essential if the real complexity of the empirical world was to be understood. The construction of abstract social theory was a means to better understand the social world and so to be able to intervene in practically effective ways.

SOCIOLOGY IN AMERICA

Parsons arrived at sociology indirectly and had no training in the subject, as it was very little developed when he began his undergraduate studies in the early 1920s. University and college teaching of courses in 'sociology' or 'social science' had

become established only between 1869 and 1890. Teaching began at the University of Pennsylvania in 1869 and similar courses began in the following years at Yale, Michigan, Indiana, Massachusetts, Colby College, Kansas, Bryn Mawr, Chicago, and Columbia. The long-lasting courses were those taught by William Graham Sumner at Yale, Albion Small at Chicago, and Franklin Giddings at Columbia, these becoming the principal centres of the expanding discipline. At Harvard, the leading New England university, a course on sociology was taught from within a new Department of Social Ethics from 1905, a department label indicating the common emphasis of many early departments on social reform and the training of those entering social work and social administration. Much teaching in the subject was influenced by the religiously inspired 'social gospel' movement and took the form of a self-consciously 'Christian sociology' focussed on the implications of the Sermon on the Mount for practical social improvement.

From the final years of the nineteenth century, however, a more theoretical orientation had begun to develop in the leading departments, and more comprehensive statements of sociological principles were published by Lester Ward (*Dynamic Sociology* in 1883), Albion Small (*An Introduction to the Study of Society* in 1894), Franklin Giddings (*Principles of Sociology* in 1896), Charles Cooley (*Human Nature and the Social Order* in 1902), Edward Ross (*Foundations of Sociology* in 1905), and William Sumner (*Folkways* in 1906). The leading influences on this theoretical work were the European theorists Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, though Small encouraged an interest in Georg Simmel and the pragmatist social psychology developed by his Chicago colleague George Herbert Mead. This body of sociological ideas and research was enriched during the 1920s by the social psychology of Charles Ellwood and, after his arrival

at Columbia in 1927, by the structural ideas of the British sociologist Robert MacIver.

Beyond these departments, sociological ideas had an influence on the development of 'institutional' approaches to economics. Institutional economists, including the sociologically oriented Thorstein Veblen at Wisconsin, explored the role of the normative and regulatory framework of property and contract that shaped economic behaviour in markets. It was through institutional economics that Parsons first became aware of sociology. The sociological ideas he encountered were those produced at the margins of the discipline and by those working in economics. To understand this, we need to know a little more about Parsons's life and background.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

Talcott Parsons was born in Colorado Springs in 1902, the fifth child of Edward and Mary Parsons, the name 'Talcott' being an old family surname perpetuated as a given name by a number of male members of the Parsons family. Edward Parsons came from a long-established New England mercantile family but took a degree in divinity to become a Congregationalist minister. He took up college teaching, becoming Professor of English at Colorado College, and his children were brought up with well-developed intellectual interests and a grounding in the principles of the Social Gospel movement. Edward was the author of books that set out a Christian critique of socialism and expounded the social teaching of Jesus, while Mary Parsons was a suffragist. The liberal politics of his parents remained with Talcott all his life, though he was never an active churchgoer.

Towards the end of the First World War, Edward was drawn into a protracted dispute with his college management

over what he saw as the improper behaviour of its president and was dismissed from his post. The family moved to New York City, where Talcott completed his education at an experimental school in the Bronx attached to Columbia College. He was a strong student in all his school subjects, he played soccer, and he ran the school ice-hockey team.

When a union-led investigation into the troubles at Colorado College exonerated Edward Parsons from any misconduct, he was able, in 1919, to return to a college career as president of Marietta College in Ohio. This family move to Ohio coincided with the beginning of Talcott's undergraduate studies, which he had chosen to pursue at Amherst College in Massachusetts, a college firmly rooted in Social Gospel principles. His intention was to train as a medical doctor – a path already followed by his older brother – and his initial studies were in the pre-medical course in biology. Following the broad curriculum taught at the college, however, he also took courses in economics and found himself attracted towards the social sciences. A course taught by Walton Hamilton on institutional economics introduced him to the works of Veblen and John Commons. Clarence Ayers's course on the 'moral order' of society introduced him to some of the ideas of Sumner and Cooley. Recognising a connection between these ideas, Parsons was attracted by the prospect of integrating institutional economics with the sociology of morals, this becoming the central concern of his developing social scientific interests. His second-year studies in German philosophy opened his mind further to the role of ideas in human life.

Graduating in 1924, Parsons took up an offer from his uncle to finance a study year in London. In order to further his knowledge of sociology, he decided on graduate work at the London School of Economics (LSE), the only place in Britain where it was possible to follow a full-degree programme in sociology. The professor of sociology was Leonard

Hobhouse, whose evolutionary theories Parsons had already encountered, but he was attracted also by the presence of political theorist Harold Laski and the Christian Socialist and economic historian (Richard) Henry Tawney. He followed Bronisław Malinowski's course on 'Magic, Science, and Religion', where his fellow students included Raymond Firth and Edward Evans-Pritchard. In this course, he encountered the work of Durkheim, though both Malinowski and Hobhouse's assistant, Morris Ginsberg, dissuaded him from reading his works. Their argument was that Durkheim was an exponent of an unsound theory of the 'group mind', seeing 'society' as a collective mental entity existing separately from individual minds. Ginsberg's dismissive view of Durkheim was probably due to the fact that only *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* had by then appeared in English translation and its place within the wider framework of Durkheim's sociology was not yet apparent. A more important encounter at the LSE was that with Helen Walker, a fellow visitor to the School that he met in the common room. They married in 1927 after both had returned to the United States.

Parsons had planned to return directly from London to a lectureship in economics at Amherst, but he decided first to take the opportunity of a one-year exchange fellowship in Germany. Knowing nothing of German social science, he simply accepted an assignment to study at Heidelberg, where he had discovered that it was possible to complete the basic work for a doctorate during his one year of study. Max Weber was completely unknown to him before his arrival at Heidelberg, but the influence of Weber, who had died just five years before, was still strong, and Parsons was drawn into intellectual discussions of Weber's attempts to devise an economic sociology. Through these he decided to write his dissertation on German discussions of capitalism, reviewing the works of Karl Marx, Lujo Brentano, Weber, and Werner Sombart.

During his Heidelberg year, Parsons came to know both Weber's widow, Marianne, and his brother, Alfred. His friendly relations with Marianne were to prove crucial to his later career as he devised a plan to make an English translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

ENTERING SOCIOLOGY

Parsons returned to his appointment as an instructor in economics at Amherst but was persuaded to move to Harvard, where he would be able to learn more economic theory. Although he found technical economics uncongenial, he did learn a great deal from his attendance at lectures given by Frank Taussig, who introduced him to the work of the British economist Alfred Marshall. Parsons also deepened his understanding of German historical economics through discussions with Edwin Gay, a student in Germany under Gustav Schmoller, and with the visiting Austrian scholar Josef Schumpeter. Parsons was regarded somewhat sceptically by most of the Harvard economists and he concentrated on completing his doctoral dissertation and writing a series of articles in which he used Weber, Sombart, and Marshall to explore the relationship between economics and sociology.

Parsons's interests brought him onto a committee formed to transform the Department of Social Ethics into a Department of Sociology. When this reorganisation took place in 1930, the Russian émigré Pitirim Sorokin was appointed as its head. Additional teaching support was to be provided from outside the department and, at the request of Sorokin, Parsons transferred into the department as an instructor. This move had been supported by the biologist Lawrence Henderson, the most influential professor within Harvard's