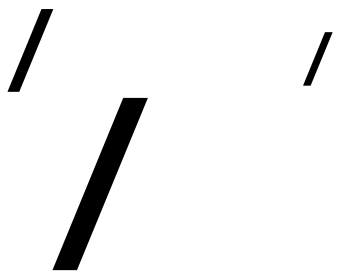**TEORIE VĚDY**
/ THEORY OF SCIENCE

THE THEORY OF ACTION: TALCOTT PARSONS AND AFTER

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Abstract

This article focuses on the problems and contradictions of socio-logical theories of action. It investigates critically the development of the theory of action after the Parsonian synthesis, drawing attention to the limitations of articulating the concept of action systematically within a presuppositional framework of analytical theory. Having exposed Parsons general theory of action and some inter-pretations and criticisms, the paper addresses the so-called "return of grand theory", spearheaded in the early 1980s by authors such as Alexander, Habermas, Giddens and Luhmann. The article analyses the conceptual innovations introduced by their theories according to Parsons own definition of theoretical work, which – as he said – consists in reconstruction and transformation of categories in the moments of their failure. While it is argued that sociological theory cannot do away with general concepts, it is also argued that these need not have the form of a synthetic theory of action of the kind outlined by Parsons and the Post-Parsonians.

Keywords: *action; Parsons; contradiction; system; general theory; conceptual scheme; voluntarism*

In sociology, the idea of general theory of action has one key reference and that is to the work of Max Weber.[1] Although Weber attempted to provide a classification of types of action, subsequent articulations of the theory of action have suggested that his typology of action, based on the distinction between *purposive-rational* and *value-rational* action is far from satisfactory, as it reproduces a dualism which makes it difficult to develop a consistent scheme of categories based on action. In his still provocative book *The Structure of Social Action*,[2] Talcott Parsons set out, with much enthusiasm, to solve this Weberian dilemma. What he strives to delineate is an action frame of reference which would unify the conditions, values and subjective motivations of action within a single form of voluntaristic action. His voluntaristic theory of action is inspired by criticism of both the positivist tradition (Marshall, Pareto, and Durkheim) and the idealist tradition (Weber) through the specific modalities of the relation between them. As he says: "It is [in] this connection that the voluntaristic theory of action assumes a place of central importance. It provides a bridge between

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[1] It has to be said that this article does not wish to provide a comprehensive account of the development of sociological theories of action. It is to a large extent highly selective and does not take into account many significant contributions of other equally relevant authors, such as Alfred Schütz, George G. Homans, James Coleman, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Boudon, Richard Münch, Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, Hans Joas, Allain Touraine, and Randall Collins, to name but a few. However, the argument I would like to unfold does not aim at providing an exhaustive account of the development of sociological theories of action, but it concentrates on some rather specific problems which, I think, can be best demonstrated in the works of authors I have chosen.

[2] Talcott PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: McGraw-Hill 1937. In a text dedicated to the prospects of the sociological theory, Parsons recalls the time he was working on the *Structure*. This memory charmingly serves as evidence that he was well aware of his own historical role: "Some fifteen years ago, two young Americans, who, since they were my own children, I knew quite intimately, and who were aged approximately five and three respectively at the time, developed a little game of yelling at the top of their voices: 'Sociology is about to begin, said the man with the loud speaker'." Talcott PARSONS, "The Prospects of Sociological Theory." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 15, 1950, p. 3.

the apparently irreconcilable differences of the two traditions, making it possible, in a certain sense, to 'make the best of both worlds.'"[3]

To realise this ambitious goal Parsons seeks a generalized integration of their categories within a syntactic explanatory model. Parsons sees himself as a general theorist whose main task is to articulate a general theory of action that should have both analytical and phenomenological status (in the specific sense of not having any empirical content that can be "thought away").[4] If, for Weber's ideal typical account of action, the basic criterion of the validity of social scientific concepts was their adequacy at the level of subjective meaning, for Parsons' scheme of general categories based on action, it is the adequacy at the level of logical coherence of the theoretical system that establishes an appropriate way to articulate the theory of action.

Parsons' theory of action

For Parsons, at its most general, theory is mainly a system of concepts. Adequacy in a theoretical approach thus manifests itself from the perspective of an ability to hold this system together, to deal with its potential contradictions and to arrive at a significant degree of logical closure:

> The process of the carving out of positive concepts from residual categories is also a process by which the reconstruction of theo-

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[3] PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 486.
[4] As John Holmwood says in his book dedicated to the critical analysis of general theory in sociology: "It is Parsons' intention to produce a scheme of general categories which will form the necessary foundation of social scientific inquiries. These categories, he argues, must be adequate to the diverse influences upon social behaviour. They will have the form of a theoretical system, with logical relations among them, and they are to be evaluated according to criteria of coherence, generality and their non-reliance upon residual categories, including those of 'empirical' observation." John HOLMWOOD, *Founding Sociology: Talcott Parsons and the Idea of General Theory*. New York: Longman 1996, p. 55.

retical systems is accomplished as a result of which they may eventually be altered beyond recognition. But this should be said: The original empirical insights associated with the positive categories of the original system will be restated in different form, but unless they entirely fail to stand up to the combined criticism of theory and renewed empirical verification, they will *not* be eliminated. [...] Theoretical systems change. There is not merely a quantitative accumulation of "knowledge of fact" but a qualitative change in the structure of theoretical systems.[5]

Theoretical development should thus be viewed as an effort to transform categories from a residual status into categories positively defined within a system. Adequacy of the postulated theoretical system must then be judged from the perspective of its subsequent logical consistency and adequacy in terms of empirical application. From this perspective, it is quite evident that the reconstructive project of the *Structure* is primarily to solve the problem how to arrive at a positive articulation of the theory of action without reliance on residual categories. Paradoxically, the *convergence* of the earlier approaches towards the common problem (voluntarism of action) is also mainly a problem of *divergence* of categories. If the aim is their synthesis, as John Holmwood puts it, the question which every proponent of a synthesis of distinct approaches must cope with, is: "If each position can be separately developed, what determines their mutual necessity? [...] Why should these two approaches be connected? How could they be connected, if their categories are mutually exclusive?"[6] The *Structure* gives a clear answer: the different authors' theoretical systems are not so distinct as not to allow for identification of similarities. Often they use different labels for same things; for instance,

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[5] PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 18–19.
[6] HOLMWOOD, *Founding Sociology*, p. 36.

what Pareto calls "logical", Weber calls "rational."[7] What is yet more important, however, is

> that this generalized system of theoretical categories common to the writers here treated is, taken as a total system, a new development of theory and is not simply taken over from the traditions on which they built. [...] Above all it does not contain only elements common to all the previous traditions. [...] The completed structure is at some vital point incompatible with each of these older systems.[8]

The categories such as "economic rationality" or "value integration" which played a key role in individual traditions and were "foundational" in them, are in the new generalized system identified not seen as divergent categories but as mutually necessary elements. Parsons is deeply convinced that a thorough and critical application of the reconstructive analysis will reveal "emergent properties" in the structure of social action.[9]

The later development of Parsons' general theory of action[10] shows a shift of his interest towards the explanation of common systems of norms that – in the logic of the argument put forth in *Structure* – transforms his theoretical system of action virtually "beyond recognition".[11] John Finley

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[7] PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 720.

[8] *Ibid*.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 739.

[10] See especially Talcott PARSONS, *The Social System*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1967 (1951); Talcott PARSONS, *Essays in Sociological Theory*. New York: Free Press 1954; Talcott PARSONS – Edward A. SHILS, *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1951 (especially the chapter "Values, Motives and Systems of Action"); Talcott PARSONS –Edward A. SHILS – Robert F. BALES, *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*. New York: Free Press 1953.

[11] Today, it is widely accepted that Parsons' reconstructive program of the theory of action was left – due to the change of emphasis – without *grand finale*. As late as the early 1980s, however, Parsons' development and shift from the perspective of the action frame of reference to the structural-functional perspective was

Scott who critically compared Parsons' use of the concept of action in his early and late periods shows that the transformation of the category of action is brought about by a different conceptualization of the distinction between action and behaviour in the two periods:

> The concept of "action" in 1937 was unmistakably distinguished from the concept of "behaviour" by two points. The first of these was the inclusion in action of an element which, with respect to what Parsons then called heredity and environment, is creative and autonomous: the choice of ultimate values. The second derives from the autonomy of the first: knowledge about the ends of action transcends the objective method of natural science, by which only the facts of heredity and environment can be known. The first of these points is, of course, the normative aspect of the action scheme; the second, its subjective reference. [...] The concept of "action" in 1951 – the next time Parsons gave a full and formal statement of the scheme – is by no means so sharply distinguished from behaviour.[12]

perceived as an astonishing proof of continuity of his theoretical and conceptual work (see, for example, Hans P. M. ADRIAANSENS, "The Conceptual Dilemma: Towards a Better Understanding of the Development in Parsonian Action-Theory." *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 30, 1979, p. 5–24; Hans P. M. ADRIAANSENS, *Talcott Parsons and the Conceptual Dilemma*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1980. For a summary of the development of Parsons' theoretical system see also John HOLMWOOD, "Talcott Parsons and the Development of His System." *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 34, 1983, p. 573–590 – who analyses key texts characterising the two periods of Parsons' work – and François BOUR-RICAUD, *The Sociology of Talcott Parsons*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1981; Stephen P. SAVAGE, *The Theories of Talcott Parsons: The Social Relations of Action*. London: Macmillan 1981.

[12] John F. SCOTT, "The Changing Foundations of the Parsonian Action Scheme." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 28, 1963, p. 724. Scott's argument is only partly justified. If we compare *Social System* with *Structure,* it is evident that the explanation is mostly given with the aim to describe and explain "behaviour in the system", but Parsons himself moderated the shift, or rewriting of the main meaning of his analysis, from the "action of the actor" to the "behaviour of the organism"

In the *Structure,* Parsons' action frame of reference was characterized by subjective reference[13] and the actors were exclusively humans. In his later work, he provides a scheme for "the analysis of the behaviour of living organisms".[14] If in the *Structure* the actor was conceived as active and his or her action contained creative, reflexive elements,[15] in the later period action is, to a large extent, a reflection of internalized, or rather socialized, common systems of values and norms.[16]

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in the final part of *Social System*: "It is in order to keep this system [of action – JB] distinct from the organism as a physico–chemical system that we prefer, instead of referring to the 'behaviour of the organism', to speak of the 'action of the actor', and instead of using the term environment, to speak of the 'situation of action'." PARSONS, *The Social System*, p. 543.

[13] The weakening and suppression of the "subjective perspective" or the "actor's perspective" for the study of action, as such, was conscious in the *Social System*. As Parsons says: "Contrary to the view held by the author in the Structure of Social Action it now appears that this postulate is not essential to the frame of reference of action in its most elementary form". PARSONS, *The Social System*, p. 543.

[14] PARSONS – SHILS, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, p. 53.

[15] As he says in a famous text from his early period: "It should be clear that the creative, voluntaristic element [...] precludes action ever being *completely* determined by scientific knowledge in the sense of modern positive sciences." Talcott PARSONS, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory." *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 45, 1935, p. 287. And several pages later he is yet more explicit: "Moreover, the fact that empirical reality can be modified by action shows that this empirical reality, the world of science, is not a closed system but is itself significantly related to the other aspects of reality." *Ibid.*, p. 290. The very "value factor" without which his work is unthinkable is supposed to contain a "creative element in action". PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 420, 446. However, for the general theory of action another thesis was more formative according to which, "there is no such thing as action except as effort to conform to norms." *Ibid.*, p. 76–77.

[16] As John Finley Scott remarks: "It is one thing to say that there are systems of norms – Structure – did say this – but another to say that there is consensus on any one system – this is the implication of Parsons' later writing. It is also one thing to say that norms are important, but another to say that norms are consistent, that is, that norms form a system." SCOTT, "The Changing Foundations", p. 734.

In sociology today (and especially in textbook summaries) there is a dominant opinion[17] that Parsons dissolved the category of action in his action frame of reference when he shifted his focus from the perspective of the actor to the perspective of the system.[18] Ironically, it may seem as though Parsons did not transform, but eliminated the residual and negative categories of the theory of action until he ultimately eliminated the category of action itself.[19] This would be a misunderstanding. The reconstructive project starts where contradictions appear within theories which in many other aspects are logically ordered and consistent. Donald Levine may be right to say that from the original claim of the general reconstruction of the sociological tradition, "*Structure* must be judged erroneous on nearly every fundamental point",[20] but the very fact that sociology still holds and repeatedly comes to terms with the sociological tradition defined and transformed by Parsons may serve as evidence that he identified problems that were there to be solved no matter how problematically he may have *constructed* such a tradition.

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[17] See Alvin W. GOULDNER, *The Coming Crisis Of Western Society*. New York: Basic Books 1970, p. 580; Anthony GIDDENS. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1984, p. xx.

[18] Especially in his second opus *The Social System* and the later period. As Anthony Giddens says in a rather exaggerated tone, "there is no action in Parsons' 'action frame of reference', only behaviour which is propelled by need dispositions or role expectations. The stage is set, but the actors only perform according to scripts which have already been written out for them." Anthony GIDDENS, *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*. London: Hutchinson 1976, p. 16.

[19] George Homans famously observed that it was necessary for sociology to "bring men back in". George C. HOMANS, "Bringing Men Back In." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 29, 1964, p. 809–818.

[20] Donald N. LEVINE, "Parsons' Structure (and Simmel) Revisited." *Sociological Theory*, vol. 7, 1989, p. 111.

The contradictions of Parsons' theory of action

Parsons' effort, however promising and powerful, failed to provide a comprehensive and consensual solution of the action/theory problem within the framework of the general analytical theory. His attempt to unify two contradictory perspectives (positivist and idealist) which historically "emerged" and "hinted at" the possibility of the theoretical solution of the problem of "action" within a framework of the generalized scheme of categories of action, ultimately led to self-contradictory formulation of the theory of action in which the division recurs. When the (external) system perspective comes to prevail in the general theory of action and leads to a reclassification of the scheme of categories, which are to serve as foundation for the analysis of action, the category of action as such is emptied. If this effort to unify the perspective of the *system* and the perspective of the *actor* into a single coherent scheme ultimately means a change of categories to accommodate the system perspective – then the declared attempt at synthesis is just a figure of speech.

If we present a "problem" as there being one (omnipresent) sociological problem – How is social order possible? – and two conflicting solutions, then we cannot arrive at a satisfactory solution. If we prefer one solution to the other, we will provide only one-sided, or one-dimensional, as Jeffrey C. Alexander puts it,[21] accounts. As Alan Dawe points out in his famous text on "two sociologies", the problem of how to bring them closer, or how to unify them, is inevitably transformed into the question what languages these two approaches use:

> There is a conflict of meaning between the two languages. The point is that, as soon as definitions of the situation become properties of the central value system – that is, as soon as the elements of action are, in effect, reduced to the single element of situational

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[21] Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology: Positivism, Presuppositions and Current Controversies*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1982.

conditions – then, in terms of its initial premises of subjectivity and historicity, action disappears. In short, the attempted synthesis subordinates action to system concept in such a way as to remove the concept of action altogether.[22]

If Parsons' main motivation was to overcome the "division of the field into warring 'schools' of thought"[23] then the response to his functional analysis of the social system is evidence that even the designer of the most sophisticated theory of action was not protected against unintended consequences of his theoretical action. The story of the "war of schools" which culminated in the late 1960s when both old and new approaches were activated in opposition to Parsons' structural functionalism gives a clear answer as to whether the attempt to resolve the division of the field was successful. It is ironical that Parsons, who is generally perceived (and who saw himself) as a theorist of consensus, is probably the most controversial figure in the history of sociology. And there is not even consensus over the precise nature of what Parsons actually developed. His approach is at one and the same time described as positivist, empiricist, non-relativist, then as post-positivist, anti-empiricist and relativist.[24] Sometimes he is criticized for too "'idealistic' emphasis on common values and for neglecting the question of power', at other times for a 'positivistic' over-emphasis upon 'structure' (or 'system') to the neglect of 'action'."[25] Simply put, his synthesis deepened fragmentation and his goal of theoretical consensus has brought conflict.

For our purpose, which is to analyze the project of the sociological theory of action, we naturally have to bring into play the question of what

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[22] Alan DAWE, "The Two Sociologies." *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 21, 1970, p. 211.
[23] PARSONS, *Essays in Sociological Theory*, p. 223.
[24] See Charles CAMIC, "The Making of a Method: A Historical Interpretation of the Early Parsons." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 52, 1987, p. 421.
[25] HOLMWOOD, *Founding Sociology*, p. 31.

actually caused the "breakup" of Parsons' theoretical system as such. If we look more closely at the way in which Parsons built his system, we will see that he was far more interested in the question *what is theoretically possible* than in the question *what is empirically to be known*. As he claims in the *Structure*: if the action frame of reference is to be acceptable logically and analytically, then it must precede every (concrete) empirical inquiry. Empirical actions by themselves cannot be the object of interest of the theory of action. Categories such as equilibrium, integration, value consensus or normative orientation are rather to be regarded as the reference points of an analysis and not as capturing, explaining or describing particular events or phenomena. As such they are "never really approached in reality".[26]

The action frame of reference, Parsons claims, has "phenomenological" status. "It involves no concrete data that can be 'thought away', that are subject to change. It is not a phenomenon in the empirical sense. It is the indispensable logical framework in which we describe and think about the phenomena of action."[27] The functional analysis of the *Social System* is justified with a similar claim and heads in the more or less the same direction. *The Social System* is

> intended as a theoretical work in a strict sense. Its direct concern will be neither with empirical generalization as such nor with methodology. [...] Naturally the value of the conceptual scheme here put forward is ultimately to be tested in terms of its usefulness in empirical research. But this is not an attempt to set forth a systematic account of our empirical knowledge. [...] The focus is on a theoretical scheme. The systematic treatment of its empirical uses will have to be undertaken separately.[28]

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[26] Randall COLLINS, "Jeffrey Alexander and the Search for Multi-dimensional Theory." *Theory and Society*, vol. 14, 1985, p. 886.
[27] PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 733.
[28] PARSONS, *The Social System*, p. 3.

And in the concluding summary of his intentions the author adds:

The volume is unequivocally meant as an essay in systematic theory. It is not an attempt to formulate a theory of any particular concrete phenomenon, but is the attempt to present a logically articulated conceptual scheme. [...] Social systems are empirical systems, but it is by virtue of their relevance to an articulated conceptual scheme that such empirical systems are classed together and made subject to a uniform analytical procedure within an explicitly defined frame of reference.[29]

The passages quoted above are clear evidence that Parsons was well aware of the possible objections to his theory of action,[30] i. e. that such a theory is logically closed only by suppression of its empirical reference, but he does not regard this as a legitimate objection. Parsons' frame of reference remains, in a substantial sense, "empirically" empty. It does not provide an account, explanation or description of concrete actions. However, the concrete subject as active, creative, valuing, reflexive actor is fixed within its logical frame and the consequence of the postulated structure of social action is that the actor's action is ultimately a passive reflection of the (theoretical) structure.

Parsons' emphasis on the question *what is theoretically possible* leads him unavoidably to the point at which the action frame of reference is logically closed, but this closure is not, and cannot be, empirically exemplified, as it does not project concrete (empirical) actions into itself. Parsons' own theoretical system "breaks down" because it is governed by the principle of *logical consistency*, while at the same time suspending the principle of *empirical reference and correspondence*. Parsons, the "incur-

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[29] *Ibid.*, p. 536.
[30] Or rather "a conceptual scheme for the analysis of social systems in terms of the action frame of reference". See PARSONS, *The Social System*, p. 3.

able theorist",[31] presents a logical integrated account of the *construction* of a theory of action, but his theoretical edifice, as the standard criticism has it, remains without *grand finale* in which its application would lead to the development of a coherent empirical sociology constructed on its foundations.

Parsons' efforts illustrate, in the purest way possible, how specific and problematic the category of action is when addressed abstractly. As the actor is conceived as free in forming his/her ends (and in choosing the means of how to achieve them), the voluntarist aspect of action that is "analytic" to it, namely, that the actor could have "always done otherwise", essentially limits our ability to use the concept of action as an category within explanatory models. Every general analytic theory of action thus necessarily faces the problem how to introduce into its presuppositional framework the element of "free" actor without actually limiting and negating the uniqueness (and, of course, the contingency) of subjectively motivated acts.

The idea of general theory: from dismissal to return

Although I am far from suggesting that Post-Parsonian attempts at synthesis means the end of the "war of schools" I wish to argue that sociological theory left a cul-de-sac at the moment it tried to solve those problems that Parsons' project of the general theory of action put before it. If the

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[31] Parsons proclaimed himself as such in *The Social System* (in the dedication to his wife). And he indeed remained faithful to theory during all of his life as can be seen from his personal recollection of "building social system theory". See Talcott PARSONS, "On Building Social System Theory: A Personal History." *Daedalus*, vol. 99, 1970, p. 826–881. Edward C. Devereux adds: "At a time when others have been turning more and more to empirical research, Parsons has never published a paper reporting directly on data derived from a specific empirical investigation. And in a generation when others have been concerned with 'theories of the middle range', Parsons has stood virtually alone in his concern with the construction of a total, general theoretical system." Edward C. DEVEREUX, "Parsons' Sociological Theory." In: Max BLACK (ed.), *The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall 1961, p. 1.

1960s and 1970s were characterized by a conflict of contradictory perspectives battling for the exclusive right to explain social life, then the 1980s brought a surprising (for some) return[32] of unifying approaches that have attempted to overcome the one-sidedness of partial approaches.[33]

In the late 1970s when the ideological, practical and moral criticism of structural functionalism weakened, it seemed for a while that Parsons' way of thinking had also lost its allure and was done for good, relegated to textbook summaries and introductions to the history of sociological theory. This anticipated scenario, however, did not happen. Parsons' "comeback" took place shortly after his death in 1979 and to a large extent it was brought about by German social theorists.[34] In 1981, the *American Journal of Sociology* translated and published a major article by Richard Münch called "Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action",[35] interpreting Parsons' theoretical and conceptual system in comparison with Kant's philosophy. *The Structure of Social Action,* Münch says, reproduces the logical form of *The Critique of Pure Reason*[36] and Parsons' theoretical and conceptual

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[32] Pierre Bourdieu, for example, sees the attempts at resurrection of Parsons' project as "parody" and comments on it by way of Marx's dictum, that "historical events and characters repeat themselves, so to speak, twice, 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'." Pierre BOURDIEU, "Vive la crise!: For Heterodoxy in Social Science." *Theory and Society*, vol. 17, 1988, p. 774.

[33] The general feeling is, however, as Dennis Wrong puts it, that "neither the apparently emerging consensus of the fifties nor the intellectual ferment and excitement of the sixties is likely to recur." Dennis WRONG, "The Present Condition of American Sociology." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 35, 1993, p. 195.

[34] See Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, "The Parsons Revival in German Sociology". *Sociological Theory*, vol. 2, 1984, p. 394–412.

[35] Richard MÜNCH, "Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action. I. The Structure of the Kantian Core.". *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 86, 1981, p. 709–739. Richard MÜNCH, "Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action. II. The Continuity of the Development.". *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 87, 1982, p. 771–826.

[36] Parsons' sociological *Reason* shares with Kant's philosophical *Reason* the basic antinomies and dualisms: subject/object, fact/value, theory/empiria (or practice) etc.

system is the sociological equivalent of Kant's critical (and transcendental) philosophy: "Talcott Parsons' sociology is elsewhere permeated with the structure of the philosophy of Kant. [...] His general theory of action and his theory of social systems are themselves thoroughly Kantian."[37] The confrontation of the basics of Parsons' project with the philosophical edifice of Kant's system and its new interpretation have also suggested (and perhaps predetermined) what kind of revision and reconstruction of Parsons' work will be characteristic of the Post-Parsonian way of general theoretical thinking. What comes to the fore is Parsons' project as a whole, not only the need to rethink, or refuse, one of its specific parts, such as power or norms.

"The return to Parsons" is, then, above all a "return to the general theory" and it is evident not just in the reinterpretation by Münch, but also by parallel projects by Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas. The former's *Social Systems* (first German edition 1984, English translation 1995) and the latter's *Theory of Communicative Action* (first German 1981, English 1987) – especially the second volume concentrating mostly on Parsons – are both general social theories which are no less ambitious in scope than that of Parsons. Although in some aspects they disagree with the points of departure of Parsons' approach, both of them quite evidently and knowingly accept Parsons' aspiration for a general theory of society which does not aspire to provide an exhaustive explanation or description of the empirical facts of social life, but rather is concerned with the analytical expression of the logic of development of society (or the social system) as such.[38] The "German reading" of Parsons is different from the "Anglo-Saxon" one. The Germans, as befits the national tradition of philosophy, were attracted to the general character of Parsons' theory

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[37] Richard MÜNCH, "Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action, I.", p. 712.
[38] Especially Niklas Luhmann, as he repeatedly admits, has always been devoted, similarly to Parsons, to the idea of the systematic *Theory* and is the same fanatic of *Theory* as was Parsons.

and the systematic character of his argument, which often irritated the Anglo-Saxon audience. They read him because, as Alexander puts it, "he has succeeded in bringing to German theory synthetic and explanatory perspectives that its native traditions often lack."[39]

In the early 1980s, Parsons' general theory also witnessed rehabilitation in the United States, when Jeffrey C. Alexander, as a self-proclaimed disciple of Parsons, published his four-volume opus, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*,[40] where he presented the most extensive and detailed analyses of Parsons' theory currently available. *Theoretical Logic*, often considered the most inspiring single contribution by an American author in social theory since Parsons' *Structure of Social Action* and Merton's *Social Theory and Structure*,[41] was received with much comment and it has proved, once again, that the "return" to Parsons was not just a whim or an act of piety towards a deceased (and, thus, less-compelling) author.

What is fundamentally transformed in Post-Parsonian sociological theory is the very idea of the foundational scheme of categories based on action, the adequacy of which has been, in Parsons' account, judged in terms of logical consistency. Attempts to go beyond a subject/object dualism and to integrate the objectivist and subjectivist sociologies explicitly takes up the project of general theory, albeit with an awareness of the contradictions with which such efforts are associated in the work of Parsons. They also addressed the new theoretical impulses ensuing from the so called "cultural" and "linguistic" turns, which were outside Parsons' theoretical "gaze". What manifests itself for Post-Parsonians as a major problem, and

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[39] Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, "The Parsons Revival in German Sociology", p. 409. Alexander also points out that the Germans do not read Parsons politically as do the Americans who perceive him as a conservative author. On the contrary: "The younger German scholars interested in Parsons are leftists and liberals". *Ibid.*, p. 409.

[40] Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1982, 1983 (4 vol.).

[41] David SCIULLI – Dean GERNSTEIN, "Social Theory and Talcott Parsons in the 1980s." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 11, 1985, p. 369–387.

the reason why functionalism in its explanatory efforts fails, is an insufficient differentiation of the external observer's perspective from that of the participant. Parsons was well aware that this relation had to be dealt with, writing that,

> Of course the results of analysis of human behaviour from the objective point of view (that is, that of an outside observer) and the subjective (that of the person thought of as acting himself) should correspond, but that fact is no reason why the two points of view should not be kept clearly distinct. Only on this basis is there any hope of arriving at a satisfactory solution of their relations to each other.[42]

However, Post-Parsonians argue that he failed to provide a satisfactory solution. Gradually, the perspective of the observer came to dominate in his work, bound closely with the structural perspective of the system.[43]

Post-Parsonian general theories of action perceive the interlinking of objective and subjective perspective as the key objective of social inquiry. In his *theory of communicative action*, Habermas claims that, so far, social inquiry has been divided between two conceptual strategies, the strategy of "systems" which ties "social scientific analysis to the external perspective of an observer", and that of actors which begins with "the member's intuitive knowledge". "The fundamental problem of social theory, for Habermas, is how to connect in a satisfactory way the two conceptual strategies and their respective notions of 'system' and 'lifeworld'."[44] Similarly, in his

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[42] Talcott PARSONS, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory." *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 45, 1935, p. 283.

[43] This is further developed in Niklas Luhmann's project of the systems theory. Luhmann speaks about "sociology without action" and his system theory gives up the "actor" and "action" as basic sociological concepts. See Niklas LUHMANN, *Social Systems*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995.

[44] Jürgen HABERMAS, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume II: Lifeworld and System*. Cambridge: Polity 1987, p. 151.

structuration theory, Giddens argues that structure, as the social object of inquiries, is not to be regarded as external to the subject, and that it is inseparable from action:

> Crucial to the idea of structuration is the theorem of the duality of structure. [...] The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize. Structure is not "external" to individuals. [...] Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling.[45]

Human action thus does not happen as a series of discrete acts that could be isolated; it cannot be divided into "unit acts" as Parsons suggested. We must instead recognize human action as a flow, or *durée.*

In their explanatory models of action, both Habermas and Giddens strive to avoid the one-sidedness of approaches favouring either the perspective of the system (or structure) or the perspective of the actor. In their arguments, it certainly looks as if the joining of the theory of structure and the theory of action is a way out of the dilemma, that it is a way of stepping beyond dualism, to join two dominant sociological traditions (structural functionalism and structuralism on one hand, hermeneutical and interpretative sociology on the other). Habermas strives to integrate the elements of system functionalism into the theory of action.

For their part, neo-functionalists also aim to "reconstruct Parsons' theory", seeking to re-formulate system functionalism in terms of the theory of action. The appropriate multidimensional approach, as Alexander repeatedly states in *Theoretical Logic*, must provide a consistent account of "two decisive questions": *How is social action possible?* and *How is social*

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[45] Anthony GIDDENS, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.* Cambridge: Polity Press 1984, p. 25.

order possible? The answer is to be given at the level of presuppositions. Alexander takes over Parsons' idea that agreement on general presuppositions is necessary for any concrete (empirical) social inquiry. However, Alexander suggests that Parsons made the methodological error of believing that "his analytical discoveries are, in the end, real" and that "despite its analytical autonomy, successful theory accurately reflects the empirical patterns themselves."[46] Parsons falls into the kind of positivistic error he criticised in others. His "objectivist" cast means that the contradictions that appear during the articulation of his synthetic theory are resolved primarily via the means of (idealizing) formalization;[47] as with his criticism of others, Parsons moves between positivistic and idealistic interpretations of his theory.

Alexander thus does not insist on the idea that general categories should capture and reflect particular empirical phenomena and argues instead that (theoretical) agreement on general categories is to be understood as a *presupposition* of any social inquiry and that *explanation* is a "lower level" activity. However, as Randall Collins points out, this poses a new problem: "what is theory dependent on if the relevance of the empirical world always depends on theory". Alexander's answer, according to Collins, is to propose "a criterion of objectivity in the one place it can be found: in the implicit standard within theory itself, that is, multidimensionality".[48]

If consistency in different delineated levels of analysis is to the adequacy of explanations, then it is evident that multidimensional synthesis is, itself, grounded in the coherence of general categories and basic premises. Theory depends on itself and its adequacy cannot be judged in terms of empirical relevance and correspondence. Up until this point, Alexander quite evidently holds to Parsons' concept of the general theory and the reflexive checking of its authorization. Theoretical logic, it seems, is self-referential;

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[46] ALEXANDER, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*. Vol. 4, p. 153.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 156–161.
[48] Randall COLLINS, "Jeffrey Alexander and the Search", p. 885.

it is consistent, if it is consistent in terms of its internal and self-imposed criteria and it is contradiction-free until the moment it finds contradictions through its own logic. Alexander's *Theoretical Logic* found contradictions in Parsons' (and Marx's, Durkheim's, and Weber's) presuppositions which he sought to resolve by the more adequate statement of the criteria implicit to it.

Parsons had identified the reasons why the classical theories of society "had broken down". Needless to say, this was done from the outside, logical and, therefore, "ahistorical" perspective of one subjective (theoretical) point of view. Parsons' theoretical system "broke up" because, among other things, it was not able, to elaborate fully its first "positive", but then, in elaboration, "residual and negative" category of "voluntarist action". This was because it sought to elaborate this category into its own synthetic and general frame of reference by no other means than those of formal thinking, where the tools of this formal thinking were relatively undeveloped. For Alexander, Parsons mistook the nature of his own implicit achievement in theoretical logic

The deficiency of Parsons' approach, as Alexander suggests, stems from his underestimating the relation of action and culture, which is a corrigible deficiency of an otherwise competent approach, on which Alexander[49] can build and, thereby, eliminate the imperfections. Alexander replaces Parsons' (cultural) values with codes and narratives and the whole theoretical structure is rethought in terms of a reconceptualization of the category of culture, or cultural system.[50] Parsons' action frame of reference and his systems of action are, then, significantly transformed with "contingent" and "historically-specific" action taking place in different environments as a logical possibility within processes of interpretation, typification, and

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[49] A similar argument is proposed also by Margaret Archer. See Margaret AR-CHER, *Culture and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988.
[50] Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, *Neofunctionalism and After*. Oxford: Blackwell 1988, p. 218.

strategization. However, these innovations do not alter their structures "beyond recognition".[51]

Alexander thus elaborates the relation between action and culture, and makes a step towards the dialogue with the action approaches, undertaken by Habermas and Giddens. As part of the "logic", however, Alexander still insists that in any given analysis, it should be possible to say just what environment our (meaningful) contingent action reflects and acts upon. However, as we shall see, he gives up the claim that it would be possible to "explain" it from some external system perspective.

What plays a key role in Alexander's revision and reconstruction of Parsonian theory is his "neo-functionalistic" solution of uniting objective and subjective perspectives. It is a problem that confronts functionalist approaches with more immediate difficulties than it does micro-sociological approaches. As we learn from Merton, the concept of function presupposes the standpoint of the observer and not necessarily that of the participant. Social functions are related to objectively observed consequences, and not to subjective motives and aims of actors.[52] A function can be (and indeed usually is) unfathomable for the actor. It may be reflected in his or her practices, but the "fulfilment of the function" does not have to be a conscious intention. In his effort to revise the functional analysis and to weaken the primacy of system perspective, Alexander is thus forced to make an explicit concession: "Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functionalist systems analysis, though not for participants in actual social systems as such."[53] It is this statement that probably marks the most significant departure from Parsons. Alexander, then, builds his system on a rather traditional delineation of the ideas of system functionalism, but he

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[51] Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, *Action and Its Environments: Toward a New Synthesis.* New York: Columbia University Press 1988, p. 7.
[52] See Robert K. MERTON, *Social Theory and Social Structure.* New York: The Free Press 1968.
[53] Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER (ed.), *Neofunctionalism.* London: Sage 1985, p. 9.

is aware that the "return of the actor" significantly limits the explanatory potential of a functional analysis limited in this way:

> Functionalism models society as an intelligible system. It views society as composed of elements whose interaction forms a pattern that can be clearly differentiated form some surrounding environment. These parts are symbiotically connected to one another and interact without a priori direction from a governing force.[54]

Here, the departure from Parsons' original project is quite evident. As Thomas Schwimm suggests, "*the functionalist systems model must not be used in an explanatory sense, only in a descriptive one.*"[55] Even as neo-functionalists declare that they are "bracketing" the "a priori self-regulating force of the differentiation process", they inevitably face the problem of the contingency of action. The perspective of the participant breaks the model of the system, if the category of action can no longer be viewed simply as the residual category it became for Parsons. Action in this sense could not be a mere expression of the system, as Alexander himself had admitted, when he set out his multidimensional theoretical synthesis, to accommodate the "normative and instrumental" aspects of action, in a Post-Parsonian micro-macro synthesis integrating "action and structure, subjectivity and objectivity",[56] or when he sought to develop a category of culture [57] which could contain intermediating potential.[58]

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[54] *Ibid*.

[55] Thomas SCHWIMM, "False Connections: Systems and Action Theories in Neofunctionalism and in Jürgen Habermas." *Sociological Theory*, vol. 16, 1998, p. 78.

[56] See ALEXANDER, *Action and Its Environments*.

[57] See ALEXANDER, *Neofunctionalism and After*.

[58] It was the departure from Parsons' project and weakening of the initial premises of the functional analysis that gave rise to voices claiming that neo-functionalism (or rather 'neo' neo-functionalism?) heads, via its reconstructive project, to the emptying of system analysis as such: "Neofunctionalists have not resurrected

The system perspective often (either explicitly or implicitly) privileges the external perspective and this attitude is repeatedly based on the following kind of argument. As systems of social interaction become differentiated, they get more complex and the consequences of action cannot be fully comprehended by the participants, whose actions constitute but a part of the system. To understand them, the external perspective of the disinterested observer (looking from the logic of the system as a totality) is needed. As Luhmann's functionalist thesis suggests, the system becomes self-sustaining and self-organized in a way that escapes the "member's intuitive knowledge". The founding category of the explanatory model of action, i. e. Weberian category of "subjectively meaningful action", loses its meaning: anything beyond the external perspective of the system is empty and, according to Luhmann, unnecessary.

The dualisms (observer/participant, subject/object, actor/system), which we are trying to get beyond, leaves the original presuppositional framework of a system perspective in contradiction. If system functionalism opens up to the theory of action, and admits into its frame of reference the perspective of the participant, it disturbs the logical consistency of its own theoretical and explanatory model. If it wants to retain the consistency of its approach, it necessarily has to ascribe residual status to the category of action. Otherwise the generalized scheme of categories is beset with contradictions.

Embrace of the "two sociologies" was also denied as an adequate solution in the 1980s. As can be seen from the approach taken by Habermas (and to a certain extent from that of Alexander), in the "new" syntheses (when compared to Parsons' own synthesis) there is a fundamental change in the direction of social inquiry. They are not interested in the system processes *per se*, but, rather, they felt bound to the perspective of

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functionalism, but killed it off". Jonathan H. TURNER – Alexandra R. MARY-ANSKI**,** "Is Neofunctionalism Really Functional?". *Sociological Theory*, vol. 6, 1988, p. 118.

the participant, building up to the system from there; the question is not how "these systems function in their own right but [what is – JB] their impact on action."[59] The recommended methodological primacy of the perspective of the participant was to bring into the analysis of the social world a corrective to the objectifying, dehumanized system perspective. As "differentiation is the primary tendency of social evolution", as Alexander puts it[60] and its consequences, especially on the level of system analysis, "escape the intuitive knowledge of members", it is necessary to emancipate participating actors from the immense structural pressure (of the unintended consequences) and differentiating pressure of social evolution. Only then it seems to follow, can the category of action be fully evaluated in the presuppositional framework of general theory. A passive image of the actor in system analysis is replaced by an idea of an actor as a concrete, active subject, whose action not only mirrors the structures of the social life, but also can transform them competently and creatively.

In his *structuration theory* – similarly to Habermas in the *theory of communicative action* – Giddens suggests that social action is unavoidably intersubjective and that this allows for – or should allow for, in contrast to the rigidity of the system approach (which by definition mostly only reproduces the *status quo*), a dynamic, non-reifying account or description of social action. Action, not the behaviour of the "system-bound" Parsonian actor, is seen as a product of the interaction of competent actors. The integration of objectives, means and conditions of action within a general frame of reference is possible if we ascribe to actors the ability to transform the rules of action in a coordinated way. As John Holmwood has pointed out,[61] such a presupposition does not solve the problem of openness, contingency and contradictoriness of action, but rather only repeats what Habermas and Giddens themselves criticized in Parsons and other systems

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[59] See ALEXANDER, *Action and Its Environments*, p. 317.
[60] ALEXANDER (ed.), *Neofunctionalism*, p. 10.
[61] See HOLWOOD, *Founding Sociology*.

theorists: "The openness that action requires has been closed-off. [...] The requirement of action, that actors 'could have done otherwise', comes to be restricted to a claim that had they not done *this*, *this* would not exist."[62]

Structures, as we learn from Giddens, have only "virtual" existence and the "norms implicated in systems of interaction have at every moment to be sustained and reproduced in the flow of social encounters."[63] The *life world* of communicative action, as Habermas emphasizes, draws from "achieved competencies, shared and respected norms, and received cultural knowledge [...] which are brought together to form a reservoir that the participants in interaction use to build up shared action orientations."[64] The basic presupposition of non-contingent human action are thus *mutual knowledge*, which appears, from a structural perspective, as "normatively co-ordinated legitimate order",[65] and *mutual understanding,* which "harmonizes the action *orientations* of participants".[66] Although contingent and contradictory action is – from the perspective of theoretical syntheses that proclaim to adopt the perspective of the actor – seen as a logical possibility, the presupposition of the normative competence of actors empties the general presuppositional scheme of action in the same way as the functionalist premise of a self-sustaining and self-regulating system. As Holmwood and Stewart put it:

> Theorists of action, then, give us societies reproduced in routine competencies and changed in contingent incompetence. By making competence normative, social theorists believed they could remove the necessity of development in the solution of social

[62] John HOLMWOOD – Alexander STEWART, *Explanation and Social Theory.* London: Macmillan 1991, p. 100.

[63] Anthony GIDDENS, *Central Problems in Social Theory.* London: Macmillan 1979, p. 86.

[64] Jürgen HABERMAS, "Talcott Parsons: Problems of Theory Construction." *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 51, 1981, p. 183.

[65] See Anthony GIDDENS, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 86.

[66] Jürgen HABERMAS, *The Theory of Communicative Action.* Vol. II., p. 150.

problems. The non-necessary nature of social arrangements is offered as the expression of human freedom, but reduces individuals to bearers of their culture, incompetent in the face of practical problems.[67]

Contrary to the system perspective, which ascribes to the category of action a residual status, *the structuration theory* and *the theory of communicative action* place the category of action into the very centre of the sociological analysis, but they do not succeed in integrating the voluntaristic aspect of action, namely the premise that the actor "could have always done otherwise". Dualism is transmuted into positive categories, but due to the "openness" of action the frame of reference of generalized categories cannot be closed logically without producing contradictions and without putting excessive burden on some concepts that are considered of key importance in the logic and structure of their theories. Habermas' concept of "communicative consensus" and Giddens' concept of "mutual knowledge", which are to serve the coordination of what might otherwise be scattered, contradictory and contingent actions, must ultimately also bring an "overintegrated" account of action, in much the same way as the general theories which they (appropriately) criticize for the very same conception. The question is, then, to what extent this is an unavoidable aspect of any generalizing scheme of categories based on action and system and to what extent it is a corrigible deficiency of a particular approach.

Conclusion

Every sociological theory of action inevitably faces the question: *How is an account of the mutuality of action possible?* Every attempt at the systematic explanation of action faces the problem of how to integrate into a general conceptual scheme those categories that resist attempts to unite them

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[67] HOLMWOOD –STEWART, *Explanation and Social Theory*, p. 112–113.

analytically. As the category of action is, in principle, an open category which cannot be articulated without concrete (empirical) actions being taken into regard, possibilities of a *general* theory of action are limited. When we say the actor acts, or will act, under such and such conditions in such and such way, we make a statement which must be necessarily examined not only in terms of the logical consistency of our account, but also in terms of its empirical implications. The presuppositional structure is always only a structure of *possible* actions, not concrete actions, and it is therefore necessary to weaken or mitigate our ambition to provide contradiction-free account of action or to give up the claim to provide an exhaustive, unified analytical scheme of categories of action. Thus, every general theory of action is an account of action of the *analytical* individual, not the *concrete* one. The account of action of an *analytical* individual can be logically closed while the latter cannot. Concrete action is not an exercise in the logic of a theoretical system (now matter how exquisitely articulated). This is something implied by the "general" argument against the idea of general or universal *theory* which cannot be ignored. On the contrary, it is necessary, that every attempt at general theory be endowed with methodological self-awareness that clearly says that in the theory of action not everything can be squeezed into a single theoretical framework or adapted to the basic premises of the theory.

The "general" criticism of general theory, however, does not imply that no theoretical account of action is possible. Alternatively, we can say that just as it is not possible to provide an exhaustive formal and ahistorical account of the concept of *being* in philosophy, of the concept of *ideology* in political theory, or the concept of *culture* in anthropology etc., it is not possible to provide a formal and ahistorical account of the concept of action in sociology either. That does not mean, however, that sociology has to give up its key and (possibly) most appealing concept. The concept itself is not a priori true or untrue. What is true or untrue are only the statements made in using it. Scientific interest in the development of the concept of

action can be sustained only if we understand scientific activity broadly as the solving of problems which, as it was formulated in Aristotle's foundations of science, cannot be "about particulars". Problems change and the same holds true for the means and the possibilities of their solving. The concept of a concept is empty. The concept of action, too, is empty, both logically and empirically. The specific foundations of sociology as a science were endowed, by Weber, with a thesis, which, as John Drysdale puts it, says that

> the concept neither contains nor entails a thesis. The concept *enables* the process of investigation and exposition; it implies no stance toward the conceptual object which would inappropriately restrict the range of alternative hypotheses. [... The concept] leaves open both the nature of hypotheses and the potential findings of the investigation.[68]

The fact that theoretical systems change and keep failing both analytically and explanatorily is the true substance of (sociology as) science, since the problems solved by (sociology as) science change, too. The conceptual apparatus of every theory of action therefore changes as a consequence of a trivial and uncontested fact that the world, in which people live and act, changes too. An exhaustive universal theory of action is not possible as it would prevent people from doing *otherwise:* a universal theory of action equals the end of history; a resolution of the "mystery" of action equals simple automatism of acts and reactions.

Reconstruction, revision and transformation of the conceptual scheme related to the (sociological) category of action, such as occurs in the *theoretical logic* of Alexander's multidimensional synthesis, *the logic of observation* of Luhmann's system theory, *reconstructive theory of*

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[68] John DRYSDALE, "How are Social-Scientific Concepts Formed? A Reconstruction of Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation." *Sociological Theory*, vol. 14., 1996, p. 85.

rationality of Habermas' theory of communicative action, *the duality of structure of* Giddens' structuration theory, were motivated by the aspiration to disentangle sociological theory from (solvable) problems caused by the contradictions of Parsons' general theory of action. These problems and contradictions, I want to suggest, cannot be dealt with outside the conceptual scheme which Parsons developed, for, to paraphrase his words, there are (not) as many systems of sociological theories (of action), as there are sociologists.[69]

What I said above implies that I do not share the current pessimism which ultimately comes with the assertion that no *theory* can be provided for the category of action. A theory of action is possible, but we have to give up the assumption that an adequate account of action must explain every action as the expression of the logic intrinsic to our accounts. At the same time, however, we must insist that our account refers to actions of concrete actors. The action of analytical actors will not tell us anything about *particular* social realities; eventually, we will learn only about the reality intrinsic to *particular* (sociological) theories. If our theory of action is not related to its subject, i. e. to the action of actors, we cannot say whether it is true or untrue. We can only say if it is logically consistent in terms of some scheme. As Donald Davidson puts it in his argument against the dogma of scheme and reality:

> In giving up dependence on the concept of uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth – quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity and truth relative to a scheme. Without this dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language and that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and work, we do not give up the world, but

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[69] PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 774.

re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.[70]

In other words, the truthfulness of our assertions about acting people naturally remains relative to reasons, causes or motives they may have for their actions. This is as objective as it can be. If we give up the dualism of the general theory of action and of concrete actions, we do not give up the possibility of a scientific solution of the problem of action, but only resuscitate an unmediated interest in the very subject/object of our inquiry, concrete actors, whose actions render our claims about them true or untrue.

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[70] Donald DAVIDSON, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 47, 1973, p. 20.