

# Continuity and Change in Parsons' Understanding of Rationality

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The chapter that Talcott Parsons prepared for the Parsons-Schumpeter Seminar on Rationality in the Social Sciences consists of not more than five and a half pages. It also gives the impression of being a hastily drafted, somewhat incoherent text, which mainly reiterates arguments presented in the chapters on Vilfredo Pareto in *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons 1937, 1968a). In the period around 1940, when the Seminar on Rationality took place at Harvard University, Parsons seemed to have lost much of his original interest in discussing, revisiting, and complementing economic approaches to the nature of rationality and the rational pursuit of self-interest.

In the autobiographical essay “On Building Social System Theory: A Personal History,” Parsons shed some light on his own intellectual trajectory and academic career—including the period after the completion of *The Structure of Social Action*. In the late 1920s, he had entered Harvard University through the Economics Department. But in the course of the following decade, he transferred, both intellectually and institutionally, from economics to sociology. Relatively late, in 1939, he received tenure in Harvard’s Department of Sociology. “In spite of the friendliness of [the economists] Taussig, Gay, and Schumpeter, I am quite sure I could not have counted on a future in economics at Harvard. But basically I did not want to do so. . . . Though I wanted to keep my contact with economic theory, and in fact have done so in various ways, I saw clearly that I did not want to be primarily an economist, any more than Weber turned out to be” (Parsons 1970, 1977: 32).

Parsons, however, also explicitly referred to the Seminar on Rationality in the Social Sciences:

“There was one interesting episode which might, at a relatively late time, have turned me at last farther in the direction of economics. After my formal transfer to sociology,

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29 Schumpeter organized a small discussion group with younger people, mostly graduate  
 30 students, on problems of the nature of rationality. After a few meetings he proposed to me  
 31 that the group should aim at producing a volume, of which he and I should be at least  
 32 coeditors, if not coauthors. Though not specifically rejecting the proposal, at least imme-  
 33 diately, I remembered having reacted rather coolly, and in fact I let it die. I am not wholly  
 34 clear about my motives, but I think they had to do with the feeling that I needed a relatively  
 35 complete formal break with economics.” (1970, 1977: 32–33)

36 Despite his career change, Parsons’ decision to “let it die” is a remarkable one.  
 37 Parsons was some 20 years younger than Schumpeter. While he was in the late  
 38 1930s in an early stage of his career, Schumpeter was a well-established economist  
 39 and an ex-minister of finance, who had also expressed his willingness to support  
 40 Parsons’ career within the Harvard setting. Parsons described Schumpeter’s pro-  
 41 posal as “flattering . . . for a young and still insecure scholar” (1970, 1977: 35).<sup>1</sup>  
 42 Moreover, problems of rationality remained central to Parsons’ sociological theory  
 43 throughout most of his career. Some commentators have even argued that Parsons’  
 44 sociological project can be defined as an ongoing reflection on the meaning and  
 45 limits of rationality (see Stichweh 1980; Hein 2009). It therefore seems relevant to  
 46 pay attention to transitions in Parsons’ understanding of rationality. Next to Par-  
 47 sons’ formal transfer from the Economics to the Sociology Department at Harvard,  
 48 such transitions might also have affected his collaboration with Schumpeter.

49 I will now proceed to highlight some lines of continuity and change in Parsons’  
 50 understanding of rationality in order to shed light on his decision to “let it die.” I  
 51 will, more particularly, point to a basic transition in Parsons’ understanding of  
 52 rationality in society—from an individualized, actor-oriented conception of ratio-  
 53 nality to one which deals with rationality as value pattern at the level of social  
 54 systems. The first indications of this transition can already be observed in work on  
 55 the professions, on which Parsons embarked shortly after the publication of *The*  
 56 *Structure of Social Action* (e.g., Parsons 1939, 1954). But *The American University*  
 57 (Parsons and Platt 1973), which is the last monograph that Parsons saw into print, AU1  
 58 also contains elaborate discussions of the problem of rationality. Perhaps Parsons’  
 59 chapter on cognitive rationality in that monograph might be read as his full chapter  
 60 for the Seminar on Rationality, which took place more than three decades earlier.

61 On the following pages, I argue that the tensions which accompanied the  
 62 transitions in Parsons’ understanding of rationality account for Parsons’ ambivalent  
 63 attitude toward the publication project with Schumpeter and others in the period  
 64 around 1940. By focusing on the shifting architecture of his theoretical account of  
 65 rationality and modern society, I intend to discuss this transition—or this process of

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<sup>1</sup>Schumpeter had been one of the supportive reviewers of the manuscript of *The Structure of Social Action* for the Committee on Research in the Social Sciences (which had financed Parsons’ research). At the same time, however, Schumpeter was in this report one of the first to comment on Parsons’ cumbersome prose: “The author has in fact so deeply penetrated into the German thicket as to lose in some place the faculty of writing clearly in English about it, and some turns of phrase become more fully understandable only if translated into German” (cited by Swedberg in Schumpeter 1991: 97). For more background information on the relation between Schumpeter and Parsons, see also Allen (1991: 98) and Swedberg (2015).

“continuity and change,” as Parsons typically liked to put it—in somewhat more 66  
detail. Although facing the risk of oversimplification, I hope to show some lines of 67  
transition in the large body of scholarly work that Parsons produced in the course of 68  
about half a century. 69

## The Structure of Action

70

In his early writings, Parsons advocated using an “analytical realism” to build a 71  
coherent theoretical or conceptual framework for sociology. In *The Structure of* 72  
*Social Action*, he stated that this theoretical framework had to consist of a 73  
limited number of important concepts that “adequately ‘grasp’ aspects of the 74  
objective external world. . . These concepts do correspond, not to concrete 75  
phenomena, but to elements in them which are analytically separable from 76  
other elements” (1937, 1968a: 730). Much like Max Weber, Parsons argued 77  
that theory had to involve the development of concepts that grasp the systemic 78  
features of the universe without being overwhelmed by empirical details. Social 79  
theory, more particularly, had to reflect significant features in the organization 80  
of social phenomena. For Parsons, the “voluntaristic theory of action,” presented 81  
in a number of early essays and in *The Structure of Social Action*, constituted an 82  
important step in this direction. 83

Critically building on the writings of classical economists, such as Marshall and 84  
Pareto, Parsons took the “problem of the rationality of action” as starting point for 85  
his reflections on the nature of modern capitalism. In *The Structure of Social Action*, 86  
he maintained that there was “obviously a very solid common-sense foundation for 87  
attributing a large importance to rationality in action. We are all engaged in 88  
multifarious practical activities where a great deal depends on the ‘right’ selection 89  
of appropriate means to our ends, and where the selection, within the limits of 90  
knowledge current at the time and place, is based on a sound empirical 91  
knowledge. . . [T]here can be no question of the pervasiveness of the rational case 92  
in all systems of human action” (1937, 1968a: 57). 93

Parsons not only linked rationality with the use of empirically sound knowledge. 94  
He also connected the concept of rationality with what economists called the 95  
process of want satisfaction. The model of the individual *homo economicus*, who 96  
strived to satisfy his wants to obtain his goals in the most efficient way, constituted 97  
the paradigmatic example of rationality: “the process of want satisfaction is itself 98  
the most general and obvious meaning of rationality of action” (1937, 1968a: 133). 99  
In many ways, the analyses Parsons presented in his early work departed from such 100  
an economic, utilitarian conception of rationality at the individual level (“Crusoe 101  
economics”). So also did Parsons’ emphasis on the “unit act” and its basic constit- 102  
uents in *The Structure of Social Action*. The point of departure of Parsons’ 103

104 “analytical realism” was a critique of the writings of classical economists. He did  
 105 not reject the basic assumptions of this approach but aimed to modify and comple-  
 106 ment them.<sup>2</sup>

107 In a discussion of Pareto’s logical norm of rational action, for example, Parsons  
 108 put emphasis on the “theoretical significance” of Pareto’s approach. Pareto had  
 109 been able to “define rigorously one of the principal types of norm governing the  
 110 means-end relationship” (1937, 1968a: 191). At the same time, however, he also put  
 111 stress on the limitations of Pareto’s approach. He proposed a “slightly different use”  
 112 of the norm. In this light, he defined the aim and program of *The Structure of Social*  
 113 *Action* in the following terms: “The most important questions for further inquiry  
 114 will be, what is the rest of the structure of acts and systems of action of which a  
 115 norm of this character can form a part and at what point does the ‘logical’ norm fit  
 116 into this structure?” (1937, 1968a: 191). Stated somewhat differently, Parsons’ aim  
 117 was to situate the concept of rationality in action within a broader framework,  
 118 within which the nonrational conditions and components of action could also be  
 119 taken into account.

120 To arrive at this framework, Parsons proposed several modifications to the  
 121 existing conception of rationality. Already in his early essays, in which the relation  
 122 between economics and sociology was an explicit topic of discussion, he stated that  
 123 rationality, defined in terms of economizing or exploiting means in order to achieve  
 124 ends, is not “a descriptive generalization . . . [but] a *norm* of rational action” (1934:  
 125 520, orig. emphasis). Economic “laws” were very different from “Newtonian or  
 126 Einsteinian formulae.” The empirical relevance of rationality “rests on the circum-  
 127 stance that men do in fact *try* (nor merely ‘tend’) . . . to ‘exploit’ the conditions of  
 128 their lives rationally in order to satisfy their wants. This idea of a norm which men  
 129 can be conceived as striving to attain by *effort* is something entirely foreign to the  
 130 ‘positive’ physical sciences” (1934: 520, orig. emphases). For Parsons, a sociolog-  
 131 ically adequate theory of action thus had to be based on a “voluntaristic” founda-  
 132 tion. “Effort,” as he put it in *The Structure of Social Action*, “is a name for the  
 133 relating factor between the normative and the conditional elements of action. It is  
 134 necessitated by the fact that norms do not realize themselves automatically but only  
 135 through action, so far as they are realized at all” (1937, 1968a: 719).

136 Parsons tried to develop this “voluntaristic” theory of action in two different  
 137 directions. On the one hand, he aimed to include the nonrational components or  
 138 conditions of action. A theory of action not only had to account for rational action,  
 139 for the rational pursuit of self-interest. He also looked for ways to distinguish this

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<sup>2</sup>In an article on utilitarianism, written for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Parsons later also wrote: “The primary focus of utilitarianism was on the process of action designed to satisfy given wants of individuals—that is, on goal-attainment, or want-satisfaction, whichever way it was put. The process was understood to be one of choosing means that would effectively gain the end. Since this conception was inherently ‘teleological’, . . . it required some normative reference beyond the **more** desirability of being satisfied. This was the origin of the famous concept of rationality in the restricted sense of choosing those means and concrete behaviors that are ‘best adapted’ to attainment of the end” (1968b: 229).

form of action from other forms of irrational or nonrational action. For the individual, action could also be *symbolically* meaningful, as in the case of religious rituals in which the means are symbolically but not rationally related to the religious goals (see also Parsons 1939, 2010). At the end of his short contribution to the Seminar on Rationality, Parsons equally pointed to the cultural determinants of rationality in the system of action: “there is a great deal of evidence that rationality is only one of the modes in which systems of action are integrated. The attempt to fit action in such fields as religion, magic, art and perhaps various others entirely into the conceptual scheme of rationality, results in severe distortion of the facts and gross misinterpretations” (p. 40 of this volume). Next to the norm of rationality, other social norms could also motivate individuals to act meaningfully in particular situations or circumstances.

On the other hand, he questioned the instrumentalist assumption underlying economic accounts of rationality. For Parsons, existing economic theories exclusively discussed rationality in terms of the relation between means and ends. These theories did not include the ends or goals in the interest of which such “instrumental rationality” was brought to bear within their frame of reference. Parsons also spoke of the assumption of the “randomness of ends.” In his autobiographical essay “On Building Social System Theory: A Personal History,” he later wrote: “The utilitarians, and still for the most part, economists, treated consumption ‘wants’ as given, that is, as *not* constituting the locus of intellectual problems for their purposes” (1970, 1977: 72). For Parsons, the status of these ends also needed to be specified theoretically. Ends often were embedded within systems of ends—and therefore anything but random or irrational. The implication was that “the ‘universe of values’ is not devoid of rational organization and that decisions of ‘commitment to’ values . . . have a rational component which is independent of instrumentality” (1970, 1977: 73).

To elucidate his point of view, Parsons distinguished between three realms: ultimate means, ultimate ends, and an intermediate chain of means-end relations in which ends are always also means to achieve other ends. He claimed, for example, that most actions are “both means and ends—means to more ultimate ends, but also ends of the actions leading up to them. In this intermediate sector of the means-end chain will belong all elements of action other than the ultimate ends, except the ‘ultimate means’ at the other end of the chain, the fundamental ‘positivistic’ factors of ‘environment’ and ‘human nature’” (1934: 529). In “The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory,” he also stated that action in “pursuit of immediate non-ultimate ends” was subjected “to normative rules which regulate that action in conformity with the common ultimate value-system of the community” (1935: 299). In this sense, Parsons extended the reach of rationality. He argued that rationality could not only pertain to means-ends relationships; rational action not just took place in an environment of “random ends.” The normative organization of the chain of “unit acts,” of intermediate means-ends relationships, had itself to be addressed within the action theoretical framework.

Parsons' rejection of the utilitarian assumption of the randomness of ends thus led him to focus on the normative organization of action. In his view, actors

185 typically relied on an *integrated* system of ends. He also believed that such  
186 integrated system of ends had to exist at the social level. Without coherent system  
187 of ends, no social order could exist. Without a broad range of social institutions that  
188 could specify and concretize the ultimate values and thereby provide structure to  
189 social action, no conformity with the ultimate ends of the total society could be  
190 ensured. Hence, also Parsons developed a concern with the institutionalization of  
191 ultimate ends or values, with the ways in which these values could circumscribe  
192 systems of social action. From this point of view, he maintained that sociology  
193 “would become the science of the rôle of ultimate common ends and the attitudes  
194 associated with and underlying them, considered in their various modes of expres-  
195 sion in human social life” (1934: 529). Like Durkheim, Parsons believed that  
196 ultimate common ends or values “constrained” human action. By focusing upon  
197 the relation between social institutions and common values, Parsons believed that  
198 sociology would be able to legitimize itself as one of the behavioral sciences.

199 While Parsons sketched the outlines of what he thought to be sociology’s  
200 mission in his early work, it has also often been remarked that he was hardly able  
201 to provide detailed hints of how this mission was to be carried out (e.g., Turner  
202 1988). Near the end of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons also recognized that  
203 “any atomistic system that deals only with properties identifiable in the unit act  
204 . . . will of necessity fail to treat these latter elements adequately and be indetermi-  
205 nate as applied to complex systems” (1937: 738–739). It is evident that his focus on  
206 the atomistic unit act ensued from his orientation toward individual action—and the  
207 ways it had been conceived in the economic, utilitarian tradition. For our purposes,  
208 it is also instructive to point to some underlying ambiguities in the voluntaristic  
209 theory of action, which might account for its limitations.

210 It is particularly instructive to pay attention to the distinction that Parsons drew  
211 between two types of norms organizing and controlling human action: efficiency  
212 norms and institutionalized moral norms. In “The Place of Ultimate Values in  
213 Sociological Theory,” he used the example of religious rituals to contrast “two  
214 types of authority in norms—efficiency and moral obligation. . . . Our attitude to  
215 [religious] ritual hence tends to be that kind of respect which we give to moral rules  
216 rather than the utilitarian attitude which predominates in attempts to realize a norm  
217 of efficiency” (1935: 303–304). Elsewhere, he discussed in a similar way the modes  
218 in which economic institutions could exercise control in order to “govern the whole  
219 complex of economic activities of a society. This control operates essentially in the  
220 form of a set of normative rules, obligatory on the participants (quite different from  
221 norms of ‘efficiency’) and governing the whole complex of economic activities of a  
222 society” (1934: 533). As these examples show, Parsons’ concern was with the  
223 institutionalized moral norms or obligations, not with “the utilitarian attitude” or  
224 the “norm of efficiency.” Despite his focus on voluntarism and normative con-  
225 straints, he tended to treat rationality as a “natural” phenomenon that did not need  
226 sociological explanation.

227 Another illustration can be found in Parsons’ discussion of “rationalization.”  
228 The concept of rationalization is introduced at the end of *The Structure of Social*  
229 *Action*. Parsons proposed, more particularly, an “analytical law” of “increasing



rationality”: “a process of action can proceed only in the direction of increase in the value of the property rationality” (1937, 1968a: 751). This law was compared to the second law of thermodynamics (entropy)—with the purpose of highlighting the irreversibility or directionality of rationalization processes. “Rationality occupies a logical position in respect to action systems analogous to that of entropy in physical systems. . . . Effort energy is, in the processes of action, converted into realization of ends, or conformity with norms. Rationality is one, at least, of the properties in terms of which the extent of this change is to be measured for any *given* system at any given point in the process of change” (1937, 1968a: 752, orig. emphasis). Rationalization thus referred to the realization or implementation of ultimate ends or values. While Parsons stressed that ultimate ends could vary, which different “value spheres” (Weber) existed, he again adhered to a universalist conception of rationality. While he stressed cultural relativity at the level of the ultimate ends, he also believed that some kind of “value pressure,” oriented toward the rational and efficient implementation of these values, was intrinsic to human action systems.

Again, we may assume that these tensions and ambiguities are a result of Parsons' starting point. Parsons departed from an instrumental and individualized conception of rationality. He built on the utilitarian assumption that individual action was rational in as far as the available means were used in the most efficient way for attaining the goals. In *The Structure of Social Action*, he wrote: “the procedure throughout has been one of cautious advance from well-known and clearly formulable ‘islands’ of theoretical knowledge—above all the conception of science in relation to the rationality of action—bit by bit into the unknown” (1937, 1968a: 627). But his starting point and cumulative “procedure” led him to accept a natural inclination to act rationally or efficiently. Both stood in the way of a sociological understanding of rationality. He did not yet offer an account of the problem of *social* rationality. In his early work, rationality seemed exempted from social determination. Parsons rather seemed inclined to define sociology as the science of the nonrational.

## The Professions

After the completion of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons embarked on a large and ultimately lifelong study of the professions. This project is closely built upon the analyses presented in *The Structure of Social Action*. His interest remained in the development of a theoretical account of the conditions of modern capitalism. He again questioned the reach and adequacy of existing utilitarian theories, in which the modern world is paradigmatically understood as a more or less integrated collective of individual actors, who are rationally pursuing their self-interests.

The starting point of Parsons' writings on the professions was the question whether professional activity could be adequately understood as a special form of economic activity as conceived in the utilitarian tradition. He particularly questioned whether the relationship between professionals and clients could be

271 understood as a special form of economic relationship. For Parsons, professional  
 272 activity **could not only be driven by self-interest**, because clients could not be  
 273 treated as means toward ends. But he also believed that professional activity was  
 274 a (if not *the*) form of rational activity. As no other type of work, professional work  
 275 depended on the application of scientifically sound knowledge (e.g., Parsons 1937,  
 276 **1939, 1954**). The extensive scientific and humanistic training which professionals  
 277 had to undergo at the university level made it in his view clear that professions had  
 278 to be dealt with as applied sciences, as distinctly rational institutions.

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279 From this point of view, Parsons again touched upon the meaning of the concept  
 280 of rationality. One of the main assumptions of the utilitarian paradigm, viz., that the  
 281 rationality of action follows from the pursuit of self-interest, made it difficult to  
 282 understand the rationality of professional work. For Parsons, the question was how  
 283 the orientation to one's own interests could be combined with the "disinterested-  
 284 ness" of the professions. In his early sociology of the professions, Parsons thus  
 285 already introduced one of the pattern variables he would later develop more  
 286 systematically, viz., self- vs. disinterestedness or self- vs. collectivity-orientation  
 287 (e.g., Parsons and Shils 1951: 90–91).

288 In these writings, one can also observe how his understanding of rationality  
 289 started to shift. For Parsons, rationality no longer was a kind of "natural" implica-  
 290 tion of the pursuit of self-interest. He put more emphasis on the institutional and  
 291 normative framework within which professional activities had to be carried out. He  
 292 defined rationality as a value pattern that was characteristic of modern society. In  
 293 different contexts, this overarching value pattern could be specified in different  
 294 ways. Depending on the situation, rational orientations could call for "self-interest"  
 295 or "disinterestedness." Seen in this light, one may also understand why Parsons was  
 296 hesitant to collaborate with economists, such as Schumpeter, in order to develop  
 297 another, sociological conception of rationality.

298 In the essay "The Professions and Social Structure," which was originally  
 299 published in 1939, Parsons explicitly questioned the naturalness or universality of  
 300 rationality. He described the context within which the business man, the foreman of  
 301 labor, and the professional man had to define "the 'best' thing to do" or to find "the  
 302 most 'efficient' way of carrying on his function" in the following way: "rationality  
 303 in this sense is institutional, a part of a normative pattern: it is not a mode of  
 304 orientation which is simply 'natural' to men. On the contrary comparative study  
 305 indicates that the present degree of valuation of rationality as opposed to tradition-  
 306 alism is rather 'unnatural' in the sense that it is a highly exceptional state. The fact is  
 307 that we are under continual and subtle social pressure to be rationally critical,  
 308 particularly of ways and means" (**1939, 1954**: 37). The shift in meaning of the  
 309 concept of rationality is evident. Parsons did not hold onto the universality of  
 310 rationality but instead drew attention to what he considered to be characteristic of  
 311 modern, Western rationality.

312 It might be added that Parsons afterward also started to explore micro-  
 313 sociological phenomena in his sociology of the professions. Best known perhaps  
 314 are Parsons' analyses of the "sick role," of the institutionalization of the social role  
 315 of being sick, and of the socialization of individuals into this role. His concern with



psychosomatic problems, and eventually those of mental illness, led him to discuss the accessibility of non- and irrational forces to rational understanding. It also led him to consider the compatibility between social rationality and individual nonrationality (or irrationality). In this sense, his micro-sociological analyses of professional activities led him to distinguish more systematically between different levels or dimensions. His understanding of rationality clearly started to shift: from an emphasis on individual rationality to one on the social system and its major institutions. As he later would put it, next to the distinction and relation between the social and the cultural system, he now also started to consider the distinction and relation between the social and the personality system (e.g., Parsons 1951: 428–479, 1968c, 1969; Parsons and Platt 1973: 225–266).

In the period around 1940, when the Seminar on Rationality took place, the problem of rationality was not yet formulated in these terms. Only after the introduction of the AGIL scheme (see below), these distinctions were more systematically addressed. Parsons' early sociology of the professions was driven by a scholarly interest in the conditions of modern capitalism and modern society. Parsons looked for structural anomalies, i.e., structural phenomena that did not fit into the dominant utilitarian paradigm. His understanding of rationality started to shift as a consequence of his attempts to deal with the many complexities of professional work. In his autobiographical essay "On Building Social System Theory," he referred to this "shifting ground" in the following way:

"I used the economic paradigm of the 'rational pursuit of self-interest' as the major point of reference, but in this case negatively, to throw light on the *differences* between the classical economic model of market orientation and the professional case with which I was concerned. . . The most important theoretical implications concerned the problem of the nature of rationality, the very question with which I had been involved, not only in my own work, but also in my work with Schumpeter. What opened up was a distinction, not only between economic and noneconomic aspects of rationality, but also, within the latter category, between two different modes or directions of considering the rationality problem. The first concerned a very old problem, even for me, namely the relation between rational (mainly scientific) knowledge and action in the sense of 'application' . . . The concern with psychosomatic problems, and eventually those of mental illness, noted above, raised a different set of questions. . . I suspect that concern with this complex of problems had a good deal to do with my coolness toward Schumpeter's overture, flattering as that was for a young and still insecure scholar." (1970, 1977: 34–35, orig. emphasis; see also Parsons 1973, 2006: 8–14)

## Multiple Rationalities

As we have seen, Parsons' half-hearted attempt to support the book project with Schumpeter concealed underlying transitions in his approach to the rationality problem. In the decades after the publication of *The Structure of Social Action*, however, Parsons did not lose sight of this problem. Quite to the contrary, it reappeared repeatedly in his writings. After the development of the AGIL scheme, the first version of which was presented in the *Working Papers in the Theory of*

359 *Action* (Parsons et al. 1953: 180–269), Parsons also started to address the problem  
 360 of rationality through the construction of analytical schemes or models satisfying  
 361 the AGIL requirements.<sup>3</sup>

362 In *Economy and Society: A Study in the Integration of Economic and Social*  
 363 *Theory*, published in 1956 and coauthored by Neil J. Smelser, Parsons returned to  
 364 the relation between sociology and economic theory (see also Smelser 1981). It  
 365 should therefore not come as a surprise that Parsons also returned to the problem of  
 366 rationality and rationalization. In *Economy and Society*, he particularly highlighted  
 367 the relationship with the adaptive requirements of social systems: “we would like to  
 368 reformulate the process of rationalization as the tendency of social systems to  
 369 develop progressively higher levels of structural differentiation under the pressure  
 370 of adaptive exigencies. Adaptive exigencies are not . . . given only in the external  
 371 situation, but involve the *relation* between the system and the situation. One aspect  
 372 of this adaptive relation in every social system is a certain pressure to actualize the  
 373 value system which is institutionalized in the system” (Parsons and Smelser 1956:  
 374 292, orig. emphasis). For Parsons, processes of rationalization thus now referred to  
 375 processes of adaptation of social systems to the environment, which were elicited  
 376 by cultural pressures ensuing from the value system of these social systems.  
 377 Rationalization also referred to subsequent processes of structural differentiation,  
 378 which facilitated the implementation of these cultural value systems.

379 Referring to Weber, Parsons also discussed the existence of “a plurality of  
 380 possible value systems.” Parsons and Smelser wrote: “Given tension between  
 381 system and situation, . . . economic production itself is a mechanism which helps  
 382 to meet the adaptive exigencies of the system. This is the basis on which we have  
 383 treated the economy as differentiated relative to the society’s adaptive function.  
 384 Mobilization of societal resources for adaptive functions, however, occurs on more  
 385 than one level” (1956: 292). Structural differentiation thus allowed for the genesis  
 386 of different rationalities. These rationalities were now seen as value patterns of  
 387 differentiated subsystems, which defined “ideal types of action” (Weber). The form  
 388 of “economic rationality,” which dominated in the economic subsystem, consti-  
 389 tuted a straightforward expression of this societal rationality.

390 In *Economy and Society*, it is argued that “in the American case . . . there is good  
 391 reason to believe that economic functions are ranked highest” (1956: 176). But  
 392 Parsons and Smelser did not specify why this adaptive function had gained primacy  
 393 within the value system of “the total society.” Neither did they address the question  
 394 of the coherence of the plurality of systemic rationalities nor value systems and thus  
 395 of value integration in Western and especially American society. In later works,  
 396 however, Parsons addressed several aspects of these questions. In a range of  
 397 publications, he described the fundamental patterns of orientation in modern

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<sup>3</sup>As is probably well known, AGIL is an acronym composed of the initials of what Parsons claimed were the four analytic dimensions of any system of action: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance. For an instructive history of the elaboration of this scheme, see Sciortino (2015).

Western society in terms of “instrumental activism” or “worldly instrumental activism” (e.g., Parsons 1973, 1991, 2007: 144–147). In this characterization, *instrumental* indicates that human action does not find its ultimate aim in itself but is treated as instrumental to some interest or task imposed from outside its own sphere of interest. In modern society, Parsons maintained, the emphasis on transcendental religious goals has been replaced by a strong emphasis on individuals as final reference point (hence *worldly* instrumental activism). Accordingly, modern society is seen to exist for the benefit of independent individuals. It tends to be judged in terms of its effectiveness in satisfying the independently given wants of individuals. By contrast, the *activistic* component refers to the system/environment relations of society and its subsystems and points to the formation of value preferences that stimulate social systems to engage in an internal transformation of, and control over, objects in their environment. Modern society is not concerned with adaptation to the world but with adaptation of the world to society's needs. It is concerned with mastery or control over the world (see also Weber 1920, 1988: 17–206).

In short, Parsons introduced a multidimensional concept of rationality in the 1950s. But he also believed in the existence of an overarching value system that could guide and control the different rationalities. The value system of instrumental activism gave preference to the different adaptive functions, to the adaptive upgrading of action, while “value generalization” defined the relation between different rationalities. These rationalities ensued from specifications of the same overall value system. Against this background, Parsons' emphasis also gradually shifted from the economy as the adaptive subsystem of the social system to education and the rationality system as the adaptive subsystem of the fiduciary system (see also Luhmann 1968, 1973: 14–17; Baum 1976).

## Cognitive Rationality

In his late work, Parsons argued that the value pattern of “instrumental activism” found its most clear-cut expression in two recent phases in the evolution of Western society (e.g., Parsons 1971: 86–121). He pointed, on the one hand, to the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century with its emphasis on economic production, instead of on the extraction of natural resources. On the other hand, the interest in scientific knowledge, which became dominant in the second part of the twentieth century, also expressed this value pattern. For Parsons, both the industrial and the “postindustrial” types of society were exponents of a similar value pattern. Both the industrial revolution and the educational revolution (i.e., the realization of mass higher education) were manifestations of adaptive value patterns. The adaptive stress that gave primacy to economic production also legitimized the concern with the “cognitive complex” within modern society, i.e., the development and dissemination of scientific knowledge. Both the forms of economic production and knowledge acquisition were (or had) to be subsumed under a more generally

439 conceived valuation of enhanced adaptive capacity in the contemporary society. In  
 440 this regard, the analyses and reflections presented in *The American University*  
 441 (Parsons and Platt 1973) can be seen to provide a complement to those first  
 442 presented in *Economy and Society* (Parsons and Smelser 1956).<sup>4</sup>

443 In *The American University*, Parsons' theoretical focus is on what he called the  
 444 value component of cognitive rationality: "the term 'cognitive' has a cultural  
 445 reference whereas that of the term 'rational' is primarily social. Cognitive rational-  
 446 ity is a value-pattern linking the cultural and the social levels which are not  
 447 reducible to one another" (Parsons and Platt 1973: 38). Parsons, moreover, stressed  
 448 the distinction and the affinity between the value patterns of economic and cogni-  
 449 tive rationality in the American society of his time. "As opportunities opened up,  
 450 the normative pressure of the value-system worked to encourage concern with  
 451 rationality, not only in the economic direction but also in the cognitive and in  
 452 certain others. The link lies in the adaptive function. . . *The same* value-system that  
 453 favored economic development also favored cognitive development" (Parsons and  
 454 Platt 1973: 44–45, orig. emphasis). Interestingly, "cognitive rationality" is now also  
 455 dealt with as one particular mode or type of rationality. Parsons saw the current  
 456 primacy of scientific knowledge and cognitive rationality as constituting one phase  
 457 in the process of rationalization. It was a consequence of the way in which the  
 458 modern, American society itself had become organized.

459 Against this background, *The American University* concentrated on "the modern  
 460 university, especially in its American version," while the university was seen as  
 461 "the current culmination of the educational revolution" and "the lead component of  
 462 an extensive process of change permeating modern society at many levels" (Par-  
 463 sons and Platt 1973: 3). Following Parsons, the "educational revolution," i.e., the  
 464 swift expansion of the system of higher education in the course of the twentieth  
 465 century, facilitated the implementation and actualization of the value pattern of  
 466 cognitive rationality. By enhancing the capacity for rational action, the rapid  
 467 expansion of the academic system had been instrumental in "upgrading" the  
 468 adaptive potential of modern societies, such as the American type of society. In  
 469 the course of the twentieth century, he argued that "higher education, including the  
 470 research complex, had become the most critical single feature of the developing  
 471 structure of modern societies" (1973: vi). Elsewhere Parsons and Platt likewise  
 472 argued: "There is a more or less unconscious sense of affinity with cognitive  
 473 rationality among most of those who share the instrumentally activist orientation;  
 474 this sense of affinity becomes more positive and more explicit in the increasingly  
 475 large proportion of the population which has itself received a higher education"  
 476 (1968: 507).

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<sup>4</sup>For this reason, Smelser originally also was asked to coauthor *The American University*. However, differences of opinion about various lines of analysis imperiled the renewed collaboration. Eventually, Smelser wrote a critical epilogue to the monograph. For a detailed analysis of the making of *The American University*, based upon archival material, see Vanderstraeten (2015). For an illuminative view on Parsons' account of the functions of culture in social action, see Staubmann (2005).

In the aforementioned autobiographical essay, Parsons spoke with reference to Freud, of his return to the problem of rationality in *The American University* as the “return of the repressed” (1970, 1977: 36). Reading between the lines of his autobiographical essay, one may gain the impression that the book or at least its second chapter, which delineates the problem of cognitive rationality, constituted the chapter that he did not write some three decades earlier for the Schumpeter-Parsons Seminar on Rationality. In *The American University*, Parsons clearly opted for a constructivist approach, which focused on the consequences of the expansion of the cognitive complex at the level of the total society. He focused on the ways in which cognitive rationality penetrated and transformed other subsystems of society. But despite the prominence that, in his view, the cognitive complex had gained in modern society, Parsons also relativized its impact. Its primacy was historically contingent, because science was only one of many subsystems in society—which only at the moment occupied a relatively high position in the hierarchy of functions on behalf of the total society.

Elsewhere, Parsons also stated that the culturally sanctioned primacy of active adaptation in modern societies served to legitimate the pursuit of empirical knowledge, which could be used to master the world, and thus to increase rationality and further rationalization. In his own words, “indeed a society, the central values of which are ‘activistic’, is almost driven to the feeling that . . . the pursuit of knowledge is essential to its prosperity and development as a society. Broadly speaking I feel that this activistic component of values has indeed been prominent in the whole of modern society, perhaps particularly the United States, and that these values have given a strong impetus to welcome rationalization in this broad sense and indeed actively to promote it” (1970: 612). On the basis of the workings of this overarching value pattern, he believed that the coherence of the heterogeneous rationalities of the different societal subsystems could be guaranteed. The basic value pattern of instrumental activism ensured the unity of the different rationalities in society as a system.

In a number of ways, much of his late work also departed from the idea that the primacy given to adaptive functions accelerated structural differentiation processes within modern societies. As a consequence, he believed, social systems were increasingly faced with problems of integration. Social differentiation would especially lead to strains and tensions within the “societal community” (see Vanderstraeten 2013). For Parsons, rationalization thus particularly had an effect on systems specializing in the functions of either adaptation (A) or integration (I). Against this background, he discussed in his later, and partly posthumously published, writings several historical “crises” that, alternately, put emphasis on either of these functional requirements. He paid ample attention to the industrial (A) and the democratic (I) revolution in the “long” nineteenth century but also to the educational (A) and the expressive (I) revolution of the twentieth century (e.g., Parsons 2007).

In *The American University*, Parsons and Platt explicitly maintained that “the net impact of the educational revolution is constructive” (1973: 3). While the student revolt of the 1960s and early 1970s put emphasis on the nonrational and expressive

522 aspects of the human condition, Parsons did not believe that a fundamental distrust  
523 of cognitive culture was developing at that time. Parsons and Platt discussed the  
524 disturbances as consequences of the swift expansion of the university system but  
525 also thought of the “permanent institutionalization of the extreme positions prom-  
526 inent in the acute phase of disturbance” (1973: 345) was something very unlikely to  
527 occur. In the long run, “continuity and change” had to go hand in hand in modern  
528 society. As a consequence of his untimely death, however, most of these reflections  
529 have remained incomplete.

## 530 Conclusion

531 Parsons famously characterized himself as an “incurable theorist.” In the course of  
532 his long and productive career, he indeed never stopped reconsidering and  
533 revisiting basic theoretical concepts. On the foregoing pages, it was not possible  
534 to deal in every necessary detail with the lines of continuity and change in his  
535 understanding of rationality. But, at the risk of oversimplifying the nuances of his  
536 analytic approach, it can be maintained that Parsons’ understanding of rationality  
537 shifted from an orientation to the individual economic actor to one that emphasized  
538 the complex structure of the value system at the social level (see also Staubmann  
539 2015). He thereby moved from a “natural” or universalist conception of rationality  
540 to a constructivist one, which particularly put emphasis on the impact of the  
541 “cognitive complex,” i.e., the systems of science and university education, both  
542 in and on modern society.

543 In the years 1939 and 1940, when Schumpeter and Parsons co-organized the  
544 Seminar on Rationality in the Social Sciences at Harvard University, this transition  
545 had not yet taken place. Parsons seemed in these years no longer satisfied with the  
546 concept of rationality, which he had used and developed in his early writings,  
547 including *The Structure of Social Action*, and which had also attracted  
548 Schumpeter’s interest. In his own autobiographical statements, Parsons referred  
549 to institutional changes, viz., his transfer from the Economics to the Sociology  
550 Department at Harvard University, to account for his reticence with regard to the  
551 Seminar on Rationality. On the foregoing pages, I have suggested that new intel-  
552 lectual challenges also triggered his reconsideration of his relation to economics  
553 and economic theory. These intellectual challenges continued after Parsons’ formal  
554 transfer to the Sociology Department and later the interdisciplinary Department of  
555 Social Relations. I have here tried to sketch why Parsons had difficulty participating  
556 in a project that (still) took its point of departure from an economic concept of  
557 rationality. Parsons’ decision “to let it die” can best be understood against the  
558 background of these shifting interests and concerns.

559 In the 1950s and 1960s, Parsons’ micro-sociological account of rationality was  
560 gradually replaced by a macro-sociological one, in which attention was focused on  
561 the social conditions that allowed for the institutionalization of particular value  
562 orientations. In his later work, Parsons dealt with rationality as part of the shared



system of social values, as the institutionalization of particular social norms and expectations—and no longer as the mode of implementation of those values. He also put stress on the functional affinity between rationality and adaptation. Hence, he emphasized connections between rationality and social subsystems specialized in “adaptive upgrading.” It is perhaps too strong to contend that the second chapter of *The American University* constitutes the chapter Parsons did not complete about three decades earlier. But, in his own self-understanding, this analysis of the rise and social impact of cognitive rationality seems to come closest to the largely unwritten chapter of 1940.






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