

Through a detailed presentation of the events of 8–13 March 1979 and drawing on the changes in women's status in Iran during and after the Revolution, Ghamari-Tabrizi demonstrates how the complexity of social, cultural, political, and historical contingencies determined the outcome of the Revolution. He thus avoids a reductionist analysis that regards Islamism as the determining transhistorical ideology of oppression in the Iranian experience.

In short, although Ghamari-Tabrizi provides a scrupulously researched account of the events of the Iranian Revolution and offers a fresh analytical engagement with criticism of Foucault's critiques, he does not include much critical analysis of Foucault's writings on the Revolution. He provides an illustrative understanding of the importance of *Shi'a* Islam in creating and sustaining the revolutionary movement in Iran, but the emphasis on the importance of religious forces seems to neglect the nonreligious aspects of the Revolution. Separating the process from the results of the Revolution, Ghamari-Tabrizi contends that what Foucault learnt and conveyed from the Iranian Revolution was the possibility of political spirituality as a transformative politics exercised outside of the normative universal conventions of the Enlightenment. Unbound from common assumptions about the Iranian revolutionary movement, *Foucault in Iran* is a splendid and unusual piece that fills an important gap in the literature about the Revolution. Scholars of both Iran and Foucault, as well as a broader academic audience, will benefit from engagement with this compelling text.

References

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Author biography

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Talcott Parsons and Winston White,
Values of American Society, Studies in the Theory of Action, edited and with an introduction by Victor Lidz and Helmut Staubmann, Vol. 3, Lit: Zürich, 2016; 311 pp.: ISBN 9783643907783, £62.00 (hbk)

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The Talcott Parsons Papers in the Harvard University Archives are a rich source of information for sociologists. They contain Parsons's elaborate correspondence with hundreds

of colleagues, first drafts of major publications, and several unpublished or unfinished manuscripts. Over the last years, some of this professional correspondence and some unpublished manuscripts have been made public. The book under review is the third volume of the series, 'Studies in the Theory of Action,' in which draft chapters from the Talcott Parsons Papers are published for the first time. As with the previous volumes in the series, the book is edited by Victor Lidz and Helmut Staubmann.

Values of American Society contains several draft chapters intended to comprise the large first part of a volume that would have been entitled simply *American Society*. The drafts were written between 1960 and 1962, thus over 50 years ago. Some were authored by Parsons; others were coauthored with Winston White (who, after an early career in advertising and public relations, had become a student and a collaborator of Parsons at Harvard University). For Parsons, improving the clarity and readability of his notoriously cumbersome language ('Parsonian prose') was an important goal of the collaboration with White. He relied on White's expository skills to convey his ideas to a broader audience. As the editors explain in their instructive introduction, Parsons turned away from the *American Society* project in 1962, when White decided, apparently quite suddenly, to leave the academic profession and accept a 'demanding' position at a large New York City public relations firm.

Parsons's plan for *American Society* took shape in the early 1950s. At that time, America had already been confronted with the Great Depression and the Second World War, while (the first phase of) the Cold War was clearly imposing burdens on its citizenry. But it was also the time of increasing industrialization and economic productivity, greater economic prosperity and growth of consumer markets, the expansion of large corporations and public bureaucracies, greater urbanization and suburbanization, and the rise of 'big science.' This 'new era' was often viewed critically within sociology (as in the works of C Wright Mills, David Riesman, Theodor Adorno, and many others). The *American Society* project needs to be understood against this background. Parsons took an interest in developing a conceptual framework that would allow for an 'objective view' on the highly differentiated, institutionally complex American society of his time.

Parsons regarded a theoretical treatment of values and value systems as a key part of this project. This volume includes five hitherto unpublished drafts on the American value system: two preliminary papers and three more developed draft chapters. A future volume in the 'Studies in the Theory of Action' series will contain the chapters devoted to the primary subsystems of American society, which would have made up the second part of a monograph titled *American Society*. These chapters, too, have never been published before.

In contrast to then prevailing theories, Parsons and White put much emphasis on 'value stability' and 'value unity.' In their opinion, there is a single dominant value system in American society; they also argue that this value system is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, became institutionalized in the American society in the late 18th century, and 'has remained stable up to the present' (p. 138). At various places, this value system is described in terms of 'instrumental activism.' In general terms, instrumentalism implies 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. For Parsons and White, the emphasis on transcendental religious goals has gradually been

replaced by a strong emphasis on individuals as the final reference point (hence, institutionalized individualism). Activism 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 – their environment. Modern society, particularly in its American variant, is not concerned with adaptation to the world, but with adaptation of the world to its needs.

The origins, evolution, and manifold manifestations of this basic value system are elaborated in some detail. It is interesting that Parsons and White also point to phases of ‘upgrading.’ They point, for example, to the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century – and its emphasis on economic production, instead of on the extraction of natural resources. But for Parsons and White the interest in knowledge, which gradually became dominant in the mid-20th century, also expresses this value pattern. Both the Industrial Revolution and the Scientific Revolution are manifestations of instrumental and adaptive value patterns. The adaptive stress which had, in Parsons’s words, given ‘something like primacy’ to economic production was in the early 1960s, when these drafts were written, also legitimizing the concern with the development and dissemination of scientific knowledge. In this sense, both the industrial and (what we are now used to call) the postindustrial or knowledge society are exponents of a similar value pattern. For Parsons, the American society incorporates continuity and change. It builds on increasingly generalized, but not fundamentally different, patterns of orientation.

Parsons and White spent some effort discussing the values of American society in comparative perspective. They briefly look at ‘differences of value-type in the current Western world’ (p. 144); they also address the sociocultural diversity within the United States, especially the value patterns in the South with its ‘large Negro population’ (p. 238). These discussions are rather short, however. They lack the sharpness of detail evident in Max Weber’s comparative civilizational analyses (which clearly served as a major example for Parsons). For Parsons, it probably was clear that much more work needed to be done in this direction in order to bring the *American Society* project to a close in a compelling way. But the bottom line of these comparisons is that the differences are not evidence of a different value pattern, but of different phases of differentiation. ‘Incomplete’ differentiation, for example, between the public and the private sphere (with personal autonomy for the individual) may inhibit the institutionalization of instrumental activism. As a result, Parsons and White also present in the drafts now published in *Values of American Society* a more positive outlook on ‘their’ society than was customary in most of the social-scientific literature of their time.

Several of these ideas are again taken up in Parsons’s later work, although not in the way they are presented here. Even if most of Parsons’s (and White’s) ideas now need to be discarded, this volume constitutes an interesting sign of the times and a central resource for understanding his conception of value systems and their institutionalization. It presents Parsons’s idea of America, his view on the American ambition. This volume sheds, moreover, light on some of the ‘political’ strategies deployed by Parsons in his sociological work. It shows how Parsons not only developed an interest in American religious traditions and democratic institutions, but also in the ways that the social sciences could contribute to America’s self-understanding of its society, including respects in which such self-understanding might inform national policy making. A more

systematic reflection on such strategies might be useful in the current period, which again seems to be characterized by profound sociocultural changes, and in which many observers again speak of a ‘new era.’

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