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Uta Gerhardt **The Social Thought of Talcott Parsons: Methodology and American Ethos**, Ashgate Rethinking Classical Sociology series, Ashgate Publishing, Farnham (UK) and Burlington (US) 2011. xii, 444 pp. ISBN 9781409427674 (hbk); 9781409427681 (pbk). £UK58.50 (website price).

With this study, Uta Gerhardt, professor emeritus of the Max Weber Institute for Sociology at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, has made a most significant contribution to "Parsons' studies". The book is also an important contribution to social science more generally not least because of the way its author deftly traces Parsons' contribution to the development of sociology over the 20th century, via her discussion of his successive theoretical formulations from the 1920s to the 1970s.

Gerhardt's most important contribution in this book is to be found in her compelling account of the inner dynamic of Parsons' social thought, captured nicely for us in the book's sub-title. And the volume is now the most comprehensive account of Parsons' overall development. Gerhardt tells us (see pp. 301-311) that her construal of the *oeuvre* of the "incurable theorist" in "three phases" has already been prefigured in Peter Hamilton's 132-page primer **Talcott Parsons** (1983). In rough terms the first two of these phases can be denoted by what led up to, and developed as a result of, Parsons' most famous publications: **The Structure of Social Action** (1937) and **The Social System** (1951). In the third phase, perhaps the most diffuse if not the most interesting, there are two volumes **Societies** (1966) and **The System of Modern Societies** (1971) written for the Foundations of Modern Sociology series, as well as two later collections of essays **Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory** (1977), and **Action Theory and the Human Condition** (1978). Parsons died in 1979 and in his final decade he was just as productive in publication and theoretical refinement terms as he had been earlier on. Some of his younger colleagues, when confronted by the relentless effort through which he brought new work to publication, stood bewildered. They found it difficult to keep up with him, although he seems to have always remained cordial and appreciative of any questions and observations. Some older colleagues from the 1940s soon became used to the fact that their critical responses to earlier drafts of forthcoming work had already been superseded by new drafts! The size of the Parsons *oeuvre* has meant that few, if any, have approached the comprehensive level that Gerhardt has now attained as evidenced by this book. This without exception is clearly the standard work in "Parsons studies".

Hamilton in his helpful designation of three phases tends to see Parsons' work culminating in a third and final phase in which he gave repeated and extensive refinement to concepts about the human condition "on a philosophically broader level" (Hamilton, p. 29). Gerhardt, while adding her support to Hamilton's "three phase" frame of reference, nevertheless gives a slightly different rendering to this perhaps culminating phase and draws attention to Parsons' own "coming out" about sociology's emergent status in relation to "American ethos". To justify this she not only relates her discussion to the posthumously published study of the American societal community (**American Society** 2007) but reminds her readers of an explicit earlier reference to the concept given on pages 107-108 of **The Social System**.

At that point in his narrative, Parsons is discussing one of his tables that, for purposes of taking his reader with him, has itself been divided in four, its second part spread over two pages. He is mid-way in exegesis of his 4 X 4 diagram when his discussion considers the "Universal-Achievement" cell that is located a few pages back in the first part of the 4 part diagram.

... the "Universal-Achievement Pattern is best exemplified in the dominant American ethos. The combination of universalism and achievement-orientation puts the primary emphasis on universalistically defined goal-achievement and on the dynamic quality of continuing to achieve particular goals. It does not emphasize a "final" goal-state, which once achieved is to be maintained in perpetuity. The combination of universalism with achievement values puts the primary universalistic accent on process, that is, on means-choice and particular goal choice, leaving the goal-system fluid. In some such sense the philosophy of Pragmatism epitomizes this orientation (The Social System 1951 pp.107-108).

Quite apart from a left-field question as to whether Parsons has here, at least in his own terms, anticipated the underlying orientation of Richard Rorty's **Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature** (1979), we can understand how this formulation of the inner dynamic of American ethos as a "combination of universalism and achievement-orientation" deeply frustrated those *American* students studying society who, perhaps provoked by C W Mills' **The Sociological Imagination** (1959) were in fact busy putting "the primary universalistic accent on process ... leaving the goal-system fluid." They didn't have time for such abstract diagrams and convoluted exegesis as presented her by Harvard's "incurable theorist". They were too busy with achieving their own goals, changing the world. In this sense we could ask whether Parsons can be read here to already account, in some measure, for the manner in which his own work, in this self-same volume, would be received, criticized and rejected. And in that sense, Gerhardt's deft sub-titling of her book, makes a telling point about the depth of Parsons' theoretical

adjustments of his own theorising to responses he anticipated from those who might consider his theory, and to do so even before he had written them down!

In that regard I am reminded of how Francois Bourricaud in **The Sociology of Talcott Parsons** (1981) drew attention to Parsons' appeal to Adam Smith's concept of the division of labour when discussing the "double-contingency factor". My point is not to engage in obscure wrangling but to draw attention to the fact that in his theorising Parsons seems to have embodied what he suggests one should expect from such a highly differentiated societal community characterised by the "American ethos". In a culture where institutional individualism prevails, actors become highly skilled in responding to *anticipated* reactions, as they "do their own thing", and a reaction to any response takes place *even before*, and is thus built into, any proposed course of action. And so Parsons could write the following as a general rule about the structure of social action.

The relational problems enter in when alter becomes significant not only passively as a means or condition of the attainment of ego's goal, but his reactions become a constitutive part of the system which includes ego's own goal-striving (The Social System 1951 p. 70).

He could write this even if he appreciated that those reading these words might not have seen themselves as having the time to stop and try to figure out what it might mean.

But there were also earlier, perhaps clearer, indications that Parsons understood the scientific discipline of sociology having a peculiar relationship with "American ethos". His Presidential address to the American Sociological Society of December 1949 was explicit in his suggestion that sociology is indeed an American opportunity.

So how does Gerhardt view "American ethos" which she identifies as the co-relative driver of the "incurable theorist"?

The "American ethos" denotes a desirable society, not empirical America. It highlights equality and achievement that should be all-pervasive.... The "American ethos", lodged with professionalism as in medicine, the law, religion, and the university, respectively, the institutions that stand for the societal community, is a major theme in the late oeuvre. (p.311).

The volume's sub-title is indicative of Gerhardt's razor-sharp understanding of Talcott Parsons' social thought. By twinning these two concepts - methodology and American ethos - she makes a telling suggestion about the way Parsons' theory should now be received by a new generation of scholars. He was not only involved in the complex task of conceptualizing "society" but because of what his theory was trying to capture by analytical concepts (i.e.

society and human action) he was also persistently involved in delineating sociology's disciplinary place among the sciences. Throughout the study, and most notably in her "Epilogue" (pp. 393-398), Gerhardt perceptively notes how Parsons viewed and sought to conceptualize the inextricable inter-relation of the sociological discipline with its academic context, and without in any way trying to subordinate, or reduce the significance of, other social or human sciences.

Now in arguing as she does that the overall coherence can be neatly captured by her twinned conceptualization of Parsons *leit-motif* in the book's sub-title, "Methodology and American Ethos" she has inevitably raised questions as to why it could not have been stated with greater clarity as a key part of Parsons' argument from his earliest academic work. And as much as this question seems to be a powerful criticism, we would have to say that its critical importance only confirms the true value of Gerhardt's interpretation. Was not the emergent "American ethos" merely assumed in Parsons' earliest work so that it simply did not need to be stated in so many words? Besides, Gerhardt argues, it can certainly be detected in its full force, with Parsons' unequivocal rejection of uni-linear evolutionism and its social-Darwinist political spinoffs (see e.g. **The Structure of Social Action** 1937 p.5). Gerhardt's point is that Parsons-the-theorist, like any other actor, acted with a view of what he preferred concerning the prevailing social order within which life was to be lived. And it is with such a supposition about Parsons' own "values" or "personal disposition" that Gerhardt makes her cogent case. She pinpoints "American ethos" as, in (my terms) an integral part of Parsons' commitment with which he took up his scientific work. We note that it is with such a commitment that he viewed science as an independent and inter-dependent system in the system of modern societies and hence an integral component of the very social order with which his own work as sociology's American mid-wife would come to expression.

Gerhardt's argument is completely consistent with what is right there in front of our (collective sociological) noses, staring us in the face. I refer to the first paragraph of the "Vorbemerkung" to Max Weber's **Gesammelte Aufsatz zur Religionssoziologie** - which, as the "Author's Introduction", was included in Parsons' 1930 translation of **The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**. These opening lines indicate Parsons' appropriation of Max Weber and, says Gerhardt, they thereby gives us the clue to how the scholarship of this young Harvard tutor "took off". This is also an early formulation of what she has referred to as "American ethos".

A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and

*in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value. (Max Weber, Author's Introduction to **The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**, London, Unwin University Books, 1930 (translation Talcott Parsons) p. 13.)*

It is with this statement of Weber that Gerhardt begins her analysis of Talcott Parsons. This is where she wants the critical reception of her work to begin. And so it shall.

Talcott Parsons, loyal American that he was, did not write as one who "barracked" (in the Australian sense of the term) for his own country, and certainly not in any narrowed nationalistic sense. He would most likely see Weber's historically oriented statement (i.e. of a line of development having universal significance and value) as a basis for a sociological understanding of why it was that, over the course of the 20th century, the US had been called upon to increasingly use the great potential unleashed from within its highly differentiated societal community to make a crucially important contribution to world peace and security rather than any jingoistic academic endorsement of Woodrow Wilson's view of America's task to "make the world safe for democracy".

*The United States' new type of societal community, more than any other single factor justifies our assigning it the lead in the latest phase of modernization... American society has gone farther than any comparable large-scale society in its dissociation from the older ascriptive inequalities and the institutionalization of a basically egalitarian pattern (Talcott Parsons **The System of Modern Societies** Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall 1971 p. 114)*

The United States was selected out of conviction that it has become - for how long remains to be seen - the leader of the modern system, not in the usual political sense but through structural innovations central to the main course of modern societal development ... This perspective develops from the picture of American society presented by Tocqueville in the 1830s, when its potential was just becoming apparent to the discerning observer... (ibid. p. 122-3).

And we can surmise that it took some time before Parsons allowed himself to explicitly state that sociology's scientific status presupposed this (American) stage of development in science, industrialization and democracy. As a science its task was not only to focus analytically upon the kind of societal differentiation that is characteristic of the US, but this analytical focus needs to keep in mind that, the systemic integration of human action being what it is, the specialist and professional roles inextricably bound to the scientific analysis of society is possible as one kind of social action arising from this differentiated system. The sociological analysis of social structure not only

investigates and conceptualizes various dimensions of the American ethos; as a discipline this is what it (structurally and historically) presupposes. And Uta Gerhardt has very helpfully drawn attention to this crucial inner dynamic shaping Parsons' social thought.

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