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Author(s): BRUCE C. WEARNE

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Talcott Parsons's Appraisal and Critique of Alfred Marshall*

BY BRUCE C. WEARNE

OF all of Talcott Parsons's prolific writings, none is more important than his "first major synthesis," *The Structure of Social Action*, published in 1937. What is the central thesis of *The Structure*? In the preface to the 1937 edition, Parsons refers to "the tracing of the development of a theoretical system through the works of . . . four men":¹

Its interest is not in the separate and discrete propositions to be found in the works of these men, but in a *single* body of systematic theoretical reasoning the development of which can be traced through a critical analysis of the writings of this group, and of certain of their predecessors.²

In 1949 Parsons outlined the following interpretation of the work in the introduction to his first collection of essays:

On the basis of a careful analysis of some of the recent history of social theory, particularly the works of Pareto, Durkheim and Max Weber, [*The Structure*] had maintained the thesis that there had occurred a remarkable process of convergence on the main outline of a fundamental conceptual scheme for the analysis of human social behaviour, a scheme which was called, "the theory of social action."³

¹ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937), p. vi; my italics.

² *Ibid.*, p. v.

³ Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), p. vii.

In the 1949 statement we have *three* names, whereas in the original 1937 interpretation Parsons mentions *four* thinkers. On first glance this would seem to refer to a development in Parsons's interpretation of his intellectual development. The 1949 interpretation is presented again in the preface to the second edition:

The Structure of Social Action analyzed a process of convergent theoretical development which constituted a phenomenon. The *three* principal authors treated in the study are by no means isolated but as contributors to 'the sociological' side of the development, the added perspective of another decade does not diminish their relative stature as high points in the movement. There is an elevated range, not just three peaks, but these three peaks loom far higher than the lesser ones.⁴

This statement appears to imply a process of theoretical reconsideration between 1937 and 1949 which had diminished the stature of the fourth thinker. I suggest, however, that this change had occurred before 1937.

Convergence

In an article printed in 1935 Parsons makes the following clarification in a footnote:

My own views have taken shape *mainly* in the course of a series of critical studies in European sociological theory. The important writers for my purposes may be divided into *two groups*—those starting from a positivistic and those from an idealistic background. I should maintain the thesis that the *two groups* have tended to converge on a *conception* somewhat like that which I shall outline in the present essay. Of the writers starting from a positivistic basis, two have been most important to me—Wilfredo Pareto [*sic*] and Emile Durkheim. Of the other

⁴ Talcott Parsons, "Preface to the Second Edition," in *The Structure of Social Action*, 2nd ed. (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), p. B; my italics.

group, the most important have been Max Weber, George Simmel [*sic*] and Ferdinand Toennies.⁵

This statement suggests that “convergence” was operative in his thought as early as 1935, if not before.⁶ *The Structure* claims to verify empirically that a convergence has taken place.⁷ Another 1935 article also discusses the contributions made by Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber to an understanding of the sociological elements in economic thought.⁸

The same basic elements are present in Parsons’s analyses of both 1935 and 1937. Yet comparing the “convergence” suggested at each date a change is discernable, namely, in the 1935 account it is *two groups of writers* representing *two distinct traditions* of social thought which have converged, while in 1937 it is a matter of *four writers* who, in all essentials, have converged on what is taken to be the same system of social theory.

In the 1935 statement (quoted above), “convergence” was in terms of a positivistic-idealistic classification. “Human action in society” is the concept which gives the classification of social theories a common point of reference. In 1937, on the other hand, positivism and idealism become the two poles of social theory. In the final paragraphs of *The Structure* Parsons comments:

Thus, as long as social thought has remained *divided* between the positivistic and idealistic systems there has been no place for an analytical sociological theory in the sense in which it has just been defined. The possibility of giving it a place is, perhaps, the deepest symptom of the great change in social thinking the process of convergence here traced has brought about.⁹

⁵ Talcott Parsons, “The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory,” *International Journal of Ethics* 45 (April 1935): 282–316, at pp. 282–283, n. 1; my italics.

⁶ See the discussion below of Talcott Parsons, “‘Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature I,” *Journal of Political Economy* 36 (December 1928): 641–661, at p. 655.

⁷ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. vi: “The basis on which the four writers were brought together was rather empirical.”

⁸ Talcott Parsons, “Sociological Elements in Economic Thought, Pts. I–II,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 49 (May 1935): 414–453, 49 (August 1935): 646–667.

⁹ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 774; my italics.

The 1937 account of "convergence" described it as a movement into a single theoretical system of generalized social theory.¹⁰

In *The Structure* Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, and Émile Durkheim are the representatives of the positivistic tradition. In the *Ethics* "convergence" Marshall is absent. The handling of Marshall provides a convenient starting point from which to analyze Parsons's pre-1937 writings. In *The Structure* Marshall is not accorded a similar place to Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber. Marshall's theory takes up less space, and even more importantly Parsons approaches Marshall's contribution in a distinctive way:

And in every case except that of Marshall the attempt will be made to demonstrate that the conspicuous *change in his theoretical views* from those current in the tradition with which the writer in question was most closely associated cannot be understood without reference to the corresponding *change in the structure of his theoretical system* from that dominant in the tradition in question.¹¹

In a footnote on the same page Parsons explains that Marshall is treated as an exception on scientific grounds:

This is because Marshall failed to think through the implications of his own empirical and theoretical departures from the prevailing system for the logical structure of the system as a whole and hence, its empirical implications.

In his pre-1937 writings Parsons has identified his reasons for criticizing Alfred Marshall's theory in this way. But in 1937 Parsons claims that his theory is the fruit of a scientific development. *The Structure* includes a criticism of Marshall. Has this criticism remained somewhat constant, or has it also been subject to the scientific development which characterizes his theory as a whole?

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 719–720.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12; Parsons's italics.

Parsons's major writings on Marshall occur in five articles published in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* between 1931 and 1935. Of these five, the first two, "Wants and Activities in Marshall" (1931) and "Economics and Sociology: Marshall in Relation to the Thought of His Time" (1932), are the most important for appreciating Parsons's attempt to come to terms with, and then go beyond, Marshall's economic theory. The other three, "Some Reflections on 'The Nature and Significance of Economics'" (1934), "Sociological Elements in Economic Thought" (two articles: I [1934] and II [1935]), consider Marshall as one contributor to general economic trends; Parsons concentrates his attention upon the history of economic thought, within which Marshall is the ideal-type of orthodox economics.¹²

In *The Structure* the chapter on Marshall, "Alfred Marshall: Wants and Activities and the Problem of the Scope of Economics," is in its main substance a reprint of the 1931 *Quarterly* article. There have been what Parsons calls minor alternations.¹³ Yet in the second Marshall article (1932) Parsons claims that the two articles *then* went together in a relationship of one continuous development.¹⁴ In 1932 he explained the development of his critique in these terms:

In the last issue of this *Journal* I undertook to analyze Marshall's writings with a view to culling out certain vital elements to be found there which were logically separable from his "organon"

¹² Talcott Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 46 (November 1931): 101–140, at p. 101: Marshall "is overwhelmingly the most eminent representative in his generation of the orthodox school, so that their case may almost be said to stand or fall with his work."

¹³ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 129, n. 1.

¹⁴ Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," pp. 101–102. Parsons definitely anticipates the further development of his argument. On p. 132, n. 2, he states that there are certain sociological issues that he cannot enter into at that time. He does not state that this is the first part of a two-part series until the second article is written. Unlike the two-part series he wrote for the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in 1934–35, it is possible that publication of the second Marshall article was not settled at the time the first article was submitted. See Parsons, "Sociological Elements in Economic Thought I," p. 414, n. 1.

of economic theory strictly defined. . . . The present paper will broaden the scope of the discussion by inquiring into the relations of Marshall's ideas to those of other writers. Moreover having in mind two alternatives to Marshall's own approach to the problems he was interested in, it will discuss his position critically.¹⁵

The 1931 and 1932 articles on Marshall appear to go together in the following terms: the first is concerned with the *logical* structure of Marshall's thought focusing upon the nucleus of his economic theory, his organon. Having discovered two strands of Marshall's thought which are logically separable, the way is opened for the *critical* discussion of Marshall's thought. The insoluble difficulties raised by "wants" and "activities" in Marshall are then related to the formulations of Vilfredo Pareto and Max Weber.

We can detect that with the critical article on Marshall there has been an intensification of the problematics for Parsons's own thought. When he moves from a *logical* analysis of Marshall's thought to a *critical* examination of his position, we catch a glimpse of convergence. Parsons confirms this, when in 1970 he writes that at this time he was working on a "Marshall-Pareto-Weber convergence."¹⁶ Thus the second Marshall article could be read as an initial attempt to work out "convergence." We shall have to deal with the argument of that article to ascertain why, from the standpoint of 1937, he considered his earlier convergences to have been failures, or at least of lesser importance.

According to Parsons, the development of his argument, as this is documented by his pre-1937 writings, is more than mere expansion and more than mere change; the development of the logic of Parsons's theory is intrinsically tied to his broadening of the scope of his discussion of economics. But

¹⁵ Talcott Parsons, "Economics and Sociology: Marshall in Relation to the Thought of His Time," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 46 (February 1932): 316-347, at p. 316.

¹⁶ Talcott Parsons, "On Building Social System Theory," *Daedalus* 99 (Fall 1970): 826-881, at p. 828.

merely expanding the parameters in which a discussion takes place can never introduce a critical component into the discussion. It may mean that a critical component has been introduced, but its entry is, to say the least, problematic. It would seem that the development of a critical perspective and the broadening of the scope of an economic discussion go together hand-in-hand. We shall have to try to ascertain how Parsons makes the connection. How is his own theoretical development to be located and specified in the midst of such an expanding and critical enterprise?

Parsons's chapter on Marshall in *The Structure* is, to a large extent, a reprinting of his analysis of the logical structure of Marshall's thought. The *logical* validity of Parsons's argument has remained somewhat constant. Thus, though the critical article initially represents a broadening of the scope of a discussion which, initially, was concerned with the logic of Marshall's thought, this does *not* mean that the scope of logical discussion itself has broadened. The scope of Parsons's critical discussion has broadened on the basis of an *unchanged* logical analysis. When we come to the presentation of Parsons's argument in *The Structure* we notice that the second article on Marshall is not included. There is a broadening of the initial *logical* argument in the sense that it functions in *The Structure* as part of a larger argument, the critical scope of which has significantly broadened since the *initial* critical argument was written.

The important point in our examination of Parsons's *logic* occurs when Parsons claims to broaden the scope of his discussion by introducing the possibility of "convergence." Between 1935 and 1937 there was a change in Parsons's argument concerning the way in which the major components of his argument were arranged. We can thus conclude that unless we know something about the initial attempt to formulate a Marshall-Pareto-Weber convergence, we cannot know the logical significance of the development between "1935" and "1937" for the final form of the convergence argument in *The*

Structure. And Parsons's appraisal and critique of Alfred Marshall's thought is somehow at the heart of this theoretical development.

Despite Parsons's 1937 view that *The Structure* charts "convergence" in a pure process of scientific evolution, an *empirical analysis* of his writings will show that there is much more at stake in his theoretical development than simply rational progress and logical extension.

In the little-known article on "Thrift" in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, which, together with other Parsons entries on "Calvin," "Service," and (Sir Samuel) "Smiles," has never been recorded in any of Parsons's bibliographies, it is asserted that "at the basis of every doctrine of what is economical and rational must lie some view of the chief end of man."¹⁷ But if early in his career Parsons had ever considered that "religious beliefs" were of a prescientific and presuppositional character, and thus of critical use in setting off one theoretical approach from another, that view most certainly changed. A clear example of Parsons's retreat from discussing questions of a religious character is to be found in his early article on Alfred Marshall. He noted critically that "At the basis of [Marshall's] economic thought lies a metaphysical postulate."¹⁸ Yet when this article is reprinted in *The Structure of Social Action* the minor changes have led to the deletion of this "metaphysical" statement.¹⁹ This subtle change in critical emphasis highlights the ambiguous place of Marshall's theory in the development of Parsons's argument. Conversely, the change needs to be understood in terms of Parsons's ongoing appraisal of Marshall.

The aim of the following discussion is to show how the theoretical development took place and to clarify the apparent

¹⁷ Talcott Parsons, "Thrift," in E. R. A. Seligman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 15 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1930–35), 14: 623–624.

¹⁸ Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 132.

¹⁹ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 158.

ambiguity in Parsons's thought with respect to Alfred Marshall. Parsons's appraisal of Alfred Marshall has an important place at the center of Parsons's theoretical development. This appraisal has, hitherto, not received the attention that it deserves.

In *The Structure* Parsons outlines his ultimate commitment in this way:

The god of science is, indeed, Evolution. But for those who pay their obeisance in a true scientific spirit, the fact that science evolves beyond the points they have themselves attained is not to be interpreted as a betrayal of them. It is the fulfillment of their own highest hopes.²⁰

And as we look over his pre-1937 writings we can appreciate that Parsons considered his own theoretical development to have been subject to the rule of this jealous god. We can appreciate that Parsons viewed his contact with Alfred Marshall's modern utility theory in this light. It appears, at least superficially, that Parsons's subsequent concern with Weber, Durkheim, and Pareto at the expense of Marshall is due simply to a process of theoretical development in which Marshall has been surpassed and left behind. The following analysis seeks to investigate the place Marshall's theory has occupied in the development of Parsons's own system.

The Development of Parsons's Analysis

"*Wants and Activities in Marshall*"—*The Logical Argument*. Parsons maintains that Marshall's economic thought consists largely of two strains of theoretical reflection.²¹ Parsons wants to unravel them because they are, in his view, logically separable.²² The first is a core which represents the theory derived

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²¹ Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 102.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

from economic analysis. The second, a body of strictly theoretical doctrine, woven into this core, concerns the progressive development of human character—economic wants and want-satisfaction in relation to human activities.²³ Of this Parsons observes: “It is only in terms of this peculiar combination that Marshall’s espousal of free enterprise, indeed his economic doctrine as a whole, can be understood.”²⁴ In Marshall’s synthetic theory, economics is the study of *mankind* in the ordinary business of life.²⁵ This designation is of great interest to Parsons because it highlights Marshall’s deep interest in the relationship between theory and human social activity. Parsons conceded the validity of Marshall’s economics if it is taken to be a theoretical explanation of an *aspect* of social life. Parsons attempts to show why Marshall’s economics became a *general theory* of social life, by analyzing the sociology which underlay Marshall’s thought.²⁶ The study of wealth (utility theory) and the study of man (the evolution of human character) are brought together in one theoretical framework. Parsons claims that he has penetrated beneath the logical structure of Marshall’s argument to the method by which he has effected a fusion. Parsons claims to have uncovered the source of Marshall’s theoretical problems.²⁷

Parsons argues in opposition to those who have interpreted Marshall as a hedonist.²⁸ On the contrary, says Parsons, “the ordinary business of life” does not refer to pleasures and pains because, by this phrase, Marshall is referring to distinctly human economic activity. Marshall’s critics have failed to appreciate how Marshall tried to keep his argument together.

For Marshall the core of utility theory is abstract. This organon forms the principal basis of continuity with both his

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 139.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132 (final paragraph, sec. V, and also n. 2).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139, n. 4.

predecessors and his successors in the orthodox tradition. On this basis Marshall has attempted to bring utility theory up to date.²⁹ Yet, says Parsons, Marshall also distrusted long trains of deductive reasoning.³⁰ As a consequence of this distrust Marshall was kept from recognizing the analytical component which wends its way throughout the entirety of his economic theory. Marshall recognized the abstract character of utility theory, yet he did not recognize that the study of man was analytical:

Again, much controversy has raged as to whether the economic man is a concrete reality or merely a methodological tool. On this point there is no doubt of Marshall's attitude. He expressly repudiates any abstract methodological assumption of an economic man of any sort. He asserts quite emphatically that he is talking about real people as they actually act in the business of everyday life.³¹

For Marshall, economics "takes man just as he is in ordinary life."³²

Yet despite the fact that Marshall repudiates any abstract methodological assumption about "economic man," he nevertheless gives the evolutionary theory of character development a central place in his theory.³³ Consequently, the theory of character development is ascribed a peculiar and mystical quality of concreteness in Marshall's economics.³⁴

The analysis of Marshall's modern utility theory attempts to show how his beliefs and his utility theory are intertwined in one argument. Consequently, in a logical discussion of Marshall's writings, Parsons does not propose to criticize Marshall's liberal belief in individual freedom.³⁵ Instead this belief is

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 136, n. 2, quoted from Marshall's *Principles*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124 ("individual freedom"), p. 128 ("unilinear evolution").

analytically isolated from the rest of Marshall's argument, an unravelment of extraordinarily difficult proportions. In his critical article on Marshall, Parsons does criticize the method by which Marshall has applied his belief to his theory, yet in the present discussion Marshall's beliefs are considered as a theoretical element concerning evolutionary theory. For all its deficiencies, Marshall's argument is not less than a theory. It is simply methodologically deficient. Marshall had, in his own way, come to take hold of the right problem; but he had gotten hold of it in the wrong way.³⁶

In economic theory, Parsons clearly sides with the unorthodox. He is very interested in the nonorthodox elements of Marshall's orthodoxy. With such an aim Parsons attempts to get inside the thought of the archetype of orthodox economics. Parsons notes that Marshall in his acceptance of free enterprise was not an uncritical adherent of the system of capitalism. While considering socialism the most serious threat, Marshall gave his support to free-enterprise only after having suggested his own drastic modifications to the system. His was no unmitigated struggle for existence in a Hobbesian state of nature.³⁷ On the contrary, he was critical of the Doctrine of Maximum Satisfaction to which he nevertheless gave his modified allegiance.³⁸ Given his suspicions of long deductive chains, Parsons argues that Marshall could have accepted it only on the grounds of it being a "broadly valid generalisation."³⁹ Marshall's upholding of free enterprise is logically tied to his aversion to socialism which would have a "sterilizing influence on those mental activities which have gradually raised the world from barbarism."⁴⁰ The modern man is more rational than the primitive creature of wants and customs.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128, n. 7, quoting from Alfred Marshall, "Letter to the London Times," Mar. 24, 1891.

Modern man is *involved* in activities; the primitive is *bound* to custom. The development of character is, for Marshall, the absolute goal of evolution, and the activities of modern man give eloquent testimony to this. It is in this way that Marshall's doctrine of unilinear evolution turns economic history into the history of the development of free enterprise.⁴¹ At this point Marshall has allowed his theory to have a religious foundation:

And it is fundamentally because he assumes these activities to be ends in themselves that he is an adherent of the unilinear concept of social evolution. At the basis of his economic thought lies a metaphysical postulate.⁴²

The logic of Marshall's economic theory involves him in an attempt to justify his study of wealth by an appeal to what he considers to be the *facts* of mankind. Actually, says Parsons, Marshall's appeal to the facts is an attempt to weave analytical and concrete elements together in one theory. Having obtained his orientation to theory from Whitehead, Parsons argues that theory is primarily analytical. The so-called facts of mankind are not just facts. They are also, at least, the facts of the *study* of mankind. Yet Marshall assumes that the facts of mankind are of a concrete character.

The point at which Marshall falls into the fallacy of misplaced concreteness is the same point at which he was rationalizing the inadequacies of his system in terms of his beliefs. Parsons claims to have shown that Marshall's desire to be rational has been transformed into a rationalization. Though Marshall's theory conveys the impression that it is based on hard concrete fact, Marshall's facts are present within some theoretical context. This ensures that Parsons can criticize it *as a theory in both of its aspects*.⁴³

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 132. The last sentence of this quotation is omitted from the corresponding passage in *The Structure of Social Action*.

⁴³ Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 140.

The implication is that belief, if included in theoretical argument, should be accepted as an *analytical* element and not a *concrete* one. In this way the inclusion of "belief" in theory will conform with the general method by which all other theoretical elements have been included. In his desire to buttress his liberal aspirations, Marshall has hidden the belief (metaphysical postulate) which lies at the foundation of his theory.

What is wrong with Marshall's appeal to the facts? Simply this: he gives the impression that some of the facts can exist outside of any theoretical framework. He has fallen prey to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In short, he has failed consistently to apply the canons of science to his theory.

"Economics and Sociology: Marshall in Relation to the Thought of his Time"—*The Critical Argument*. In focusing upon the noneconomic elements in Marshall's thought, Parsons now claims to be shifting the discussion from an analysis of economic theory to a construction of a sociological scheme which departs radically from the Anglo-American tradition.⁴⁴ The logical analysis of Marshall's thought is the first stage in constructing such a scheme. Parsons has now identified his difficulties with orthodox economics. The next step involves showing how these difficulties are related to *general* problems concerning the relationship between economics and social theory. For this he now introduces the theories of Weber and Pareto. These two are introduced as two thinkers who are outside the Anglo-American tradition.

Max Weber is introduced into the discussion of Marshall's difficulties as a possible source of theoretical clarification:

The issues with which this discussion is to be concerned can perhaps best be raised by pointing out a striking relationship which Marshall's ideas of "free enterprise" bears to the doctrine of another recent writer on modern capitalism, Max Weber,

⁴⁴ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 346.

who is the representative of a totally different school of thought.⁴⁵

Parsons clearly intends to continue his discussion of Marshall's other theory by steering the analysis away from economics.⁴⁶ In taking another direction altogether he refers the reader to Weber's essay *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, his own English translation of which had been published in 1930:⁴⁷

This essay while containing the core of Weber's theory of capitalism is only a fragment of the whole, which he unfortunately never formulated in one place. For a fuller analysis of it see the present writer's article . . .⁴⁸

The fuller analysis of Weber's work is found in Parsons's *Journal of Political Economy* articles of December 1928 and February 1929. It stemmed from Parsons's observation that Weber had left a mass of specialist investigations and had not formulated any systematic conclusions by the time of his death. Parsons notes that Weber, in comparison to Sombart, never developed a unified theory of capitalism. Parsons's 1929 article was an attempt to piece the fragments together.

In spite of the fact that a very large proportion of his sociological work was devoted to this problem [i.e., capitalism], he left only a number of fragments which from our point of view are to be regarded as special investigations. It is thus unavoidable that in piecing these together a certain element of construction should enter in.⁴⁹

In the footnote to the above quotation Parsons refers to those of Weber's works which bear upon the problem of capitalism.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁴⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1930).

⁴⁸ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 317, n. 1.

⁴⁹ Parsons, "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature II," *Journal of Political Economy* 37 (February 1929): 31-51, at p. 34.

He refers to the three volumes of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, which include *Die Protestantische Ethik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, and *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*. The latter part of this last-mentioned work had been published in English in 1927 as *General Economic History*, translated by Frank H. Knight. This translation is noted in the footnote, so it is indeed strange that in 1932, in his attempt to relate Marshall's view of free enterprise to Weber's view of capitalism, Parsons does not refer to this other English translation of Weber's writings. Add to this the fact that Marshall himself had come into contact with German economics, especially that of Roscher,⁵⁰ and we note that Parsons is determined to steer his analysis in a noneconomic direction. He is not only steering a course which allows him to avoid the complexity of Marshall's one-at-a-time method;⁵¹ he is obviously steering clear of the economic side of the debate which was in progress around the time that the 1904-5 version of *Die Protestantische Ethik* was published.⁵²

Having broadened the scope of his discussion of Marshall, Parsons claims to be introducing a critical element into the discussion.⁵³ What does Parsons mean by the term "critical"? At the outset of his second article on Marshall, Parsons links his critical discussion of Marshall with the methodology of *problem-formulation*:

The present paper will broaden the scope of the discussion by inquiring into the relations of Marshall's ideas to those of other writers. Moreover, *having in mind two alternatives to Marshall's own approach to the problems he was interested in*, it will discuss his position critically.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Comment by J. M. Keynes in A. C. Pigou, ed., *Memorials of Alfred Marshall* (London: Macmillan, 1925), p. 11.

⁵¹ Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 140.

⁵² Max Weber, *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

⁵³ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 316.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; my italics.

Having taken a critical approach to Marshall, Parsons also claims that his approach to alternatives is not a plea for the unqualified acceptance of the doctrines of either Pareto or Weber. He refers readers to an earlier article in which he had discussed "some of the difficulties in Weber's position."⁵⁵ The article referred to is the second part of a two-part series "Capitalism in Recent German Literature." Introducing these two articles, Parsons wrote:

The purpose of this paper is not primarily to subject these theories to a critical examination, but to put them before American readers in a more condensed and systematic form than that in which they are available in German, and to project them onto the background of their relations to the general development of social thought. What there is of criticism will be largely incidental to these main tasks.⁵⁶

Thus in 1928 Parsons had stated that his purpose was primarily educative—serving an educative function among the American readership. Criticism was incidental. In 1932, when referring his readers back to the earlier work, the logic of his presentation implies criticism even if a statement of "difficulties" is something other than theoretical critique. Parsons's appraisal of Marshall is related to his attempts to formulate a general theoretical approach. As such it is linked intimately with his on-going appreciation for Max Weber. We will deal first with Parsons's review of the concept of capitalism, and then examine the influence which Vilfredo Pareto came to exercise over the contours of his theory.

Parsons on Capitalism in the German Literature. Parsons reads Sombart's theory as an attempt to strike a balance between two extremes. Thus Parsons does not need to criticize him in any comprehensive way.⁵⁷ He only need direct his criticism at

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Parsons, "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature I," p. 642.

⁵⁷ As he suggests is possible in *ibid.*, p. 644, n. 3.

Sombart's onesidedness to show how he failed to strike a balance. Where Sombart's analysis of the spirit of capitalism highlights the social suppression of human creativity, and where his historical investigations would pinpoint the development of "inventive activity that swept Europe" in the industrial revolution, his views are taken as read. On these points Sombart has recognized the historical increase of true freedom.⁵⁸

Sombart's view is that modern technique is both rational and scientific. This came about when, in the early capitalistic era, the *traditional* principle, which had held down the development of technique, gave way to the principle of *rationality*. And still modern science, based upon objective scientific reasoning, had not come into its own. It had made a start with men like Leonardo da Vinci, whom Parsons identifies as an "exception." Inventive activity was held in check by the spirit of enterprise which came to characterize the capitalistic era. It was not until much later that "the rational way" *converged* with the wave of inventive activity to give birth to Modern Science.⁵⁹

Parsons reads Sombart as continuing on in a line of theory about capitalism which had not been fully completed. The development of the argument in the first article strongly anticipates the introduction of Max Weber into Parsons's analytical scheme of things.

Parsons accepts Sombart's theory as an ideal-type by which he can analyze Weber's attempts to formulate a theory of capitalism. What then is Parsons's approach to the theory of capitalism? Parsons clearly does not accept the *content* of Sombart's theory, but as a theory it is utilized as an embodiment of the ideal of unity. Weber is seen in terms of Sombart's contribution. Sombart's contribution is seen in terms of Marx's theory of historical materialism.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 654.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 655.

How then does Parsons come to terms with Marx's theory of historical materialism? He accepts the view of Benedetto Croce, who maintained that historical materialism should be considered as an heuristic principle rather than a theory of the forces of social evolution.⁶⁰ In short, historical materialism is an ideal-type in the sense that, when it is used, the investigator is trying to inject some order into his analyses. This is confirmed when Parsons, accepting Sombart's view of the Marxian theory of value, considers it to be an ideal-type of a hypothetical capitalistic society to be used in comparison with the real economic system of capitalism. This enables Parsons to make sense of Marx's theory:

The latter view is much the more favorable to Marx and the unity of his system, and brings him into much closer relations with Sombart and the general currents of thought dealt with in this paper. *Of course this interpretation would admit that the content of Marx's theory was largely taken over from Ricardo, but would maintain that the logical use to which it was put was much different.*⁶¹

But Parsons has also located Marx's thought in terms of the typically German modes of social theory since Kant and Hegel. Marx is located in relation to the pendulum-swing of German idealism. Parsons notes Marx's indebtedness to Ricardo, a "pure theorist."⁶² Thus it is clear that in Parsons's analysis Marx's "economic interpretation of history" has a very special place. This theory is implicitly related to both Hegel *and* Ricardo.

Karl Marx is a central figure in Parsons's analysis of "capitalism" in the recent German literature. But Marx also appears to represent an intersection-point for the entire history of social thought. At the beginning of his analysis Parsons has organized his argument with the assumption that Anglo-

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 645, n. 9. Parsons here leaves himself "open" to the possibility that Croce's interpretation may be invalid yet goes along with it at a very crucial point. See p. 658, n. 23.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 658, n. 23; my italics.

⁶² Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 109.

American economic thought and German social science are two totally separate traditions.⁶³ Parsons does not consider Marx's thought as a convergence of the two major traditions of Western social thought. Systematically, he could have drawn this conclusion. The implications of such a conclusion would have completely altered his analysis of Sombart and Weber. But his silence seems to indicate that despite Marx's participation in both traditions of social thought, an "economic interpretation of history" represents a *divergence* of these traditions. Marx's thought is thus considered as two diverging traditions held together in one theory! Admittedly, Parsons feels obligated to give his full attention to the major theorists of the previous generation, and subsequently he will search their writings to discover convergence. In locating "divergence" in the generation immediately preceding "convergence," Parsons, despite his rejection of Hegelian philosophies of history, does not completely shake off all such philosophies. "Convergence" is the central concept in Parsons's *philosophy of the history of social theory*.

Having outlined how Parsons's general method implicates Karl Marx, how does Parsons approach Weber's theory of capitalism?

Parsons accepts the contribution of Max Weber on the basis of his historical interpretation of Karl Marx's theory of capitalism. *Karl Marx was the originator of a process of theoretical development which was in theory brought to culmination when Max Weber transcended the stage reached by Werner Sombart*. Parsons accommodates Sombart's interpretation of the Marxian theory of value as an ideal-type into his own position, and then for his concept of ideal-type he turns to Max Weber. Though Marx and Sombart diverge quite fundamentally in their ethical judgments on capitalism, their lines of theoretical development lead to Weber in the long run. Weber, in Parsons's view, has penetrated to the ethical framework in terms of which

⁶³ Parsons, "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature I," p. 641.

Sombart and Marx had both launched their criticisms of capitalism.

Rather than a criticism of the ethics of Protestantism, *Die Protestantische Ethik* attempts to uncover the historical background to the ethical judgments upon capitalism which Weber had found in his day. This ethical judgment had become pronounced in the thought of Sombart. Parsons wrote:

Weber's attempt to explain capitalism in terms of a particular set of ethical values at once brings out his attitude to the problems of the economic interpretation of history. The essay in which this view was presented was intended to be a refutation of the Marxian thesis in a particular historical case by proving that capitalism could only be understood in terms of an ethics which preceded it in time. The interesting thing is that Weber puts the question in this way: that either a materialistic or a spiritualistic interpretation or a compromise between them must be accepted. There is no other way of looking at the problem. Here he is on common ground with Sombart.⁶⁴

In this way Max Weber comes to represent the culmination of the recent developments in German social thought. Parsons has isolated the problem which Weber formulated in its definitive form. "There is no other way of looking at the problem." Thus with Weber, as he provides the real possibility of synthesis, the dialectic between Marx and Sombart has been transcended. Yet, as a social scientist, Weber had not completed what he had started out to achieve. His work remains to be completed. Though his theory is the culmination of the process begun by Marx, his categories are in need of further systematic development. In this way Max Weber comes to represent the ideal-type of the social scientist: he is the *developer* of social theory. This is a view which Parsons held to over the years. The incompleteness and fragmentation of Weber's theory is, according to Parsons, entirely compatible with *clarity*

⁶⁴ Parsons, "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature II," p. 40.

of direction.⁶⁵ Parsons wants to follow in the *direction* suggested by Weber. That is his intention.

Weber has isolated the value judgments which lie behind the various conflicting theories of capitalism. He has also located the ethical preconditions which coincided with the universal growth of free enterprise in the West. Thus he has been able rationally to distance himself from ethical systems which have also lain at the bases of previous social theories. His is a strictly rational approach in which a *scientific* concern for the problems of modern society has come to expression. He is an internationalist in his social theory because his researches extend over the whole of human history. Like Sombart his aim is theoretical, seeking for a "consistent and unified system of concepts to be used in the analysis of social phenomena."⁶⁶ But, unlike Sombart, his analytical concentration is not upon a single line of development.⁶⁷

In Parsons's view, Weber embodies the "spirit of human freedom" in science. Weber insists upon the ideal of objectivity for his method.⁶⁸ He accepts systems of values as given, attempting no ultimate judgment or criticism of them.⁶⁹ Yet reason can show no favor as it sheds its light upon all ethical systems. In the historical development of Western society an iron-bound process of ever-increasing rationalization prevails.⁷⁰ Parsons considers that a synthesis is possible in the direction Weber provides, yet explicitly distances his own analyses from the pessimism he perceives at the heart of Weber's position.⁷¹ With a high-sounding note of confidence he had also repudiated Sombart's pessimism, claiming that

⁶⁵ Talcott Parsons, "Max Weber, 1864-1964," *American Sociological Review* 30 (Apr. 1965): 171-175, at p. 171, col. 2.

⁶⁶ Parsons, "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature I," pp. 643-644.

⁶⁷ Parsons, "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature II," p. 31.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32, n. 27.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

“the ideal society” is still possible.⁷² Optimistic, Parsons can now set to work with confidence. The purpose of social science should be to throw light upon the problems of modern society and especially modern capitalism.

Parsons has found his theoretical basis for future development within the thought of Max Weber. A certain amount of “construction” may enter into his re-presentation of Weber’s fragmented writings, yet he claims that he has sure ground for the future of social theory. As he maintains his scientific labor in *the spirit* which Weber epitomized, he has enough to go on.

Parsons on Pareto. Parsons’s writings on Pareto show a systematic concern for the underlying methodological principles which guided this theorist. Rejecting the view that Pareto’s thought is a mere “hodge-podge,” Parsons argues that there is indeed method in Pareto’s system of analysis.⁷³

The inclusion of Pareto into Parsons’s scheme of things in the second Marshall article revolves around Pareto’s stress upon the importance of nonscientific and subjective ends in rational activity. In particular, Pareto’s method emphasizes the role of nonlogical action in the investigation of social life. Pareto’s theory revolves around the twin concepts of “logical” and “nonlogical” action.⁷⁴ Importantly, Pareto stresses the abstract nature of economic theory and thus would be unlikely to fall for the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.⁷⁵

What then is the central concern in Parsons’s discussion of Pareto in the second Marshall article? It would seem that at the time of writing he was still formulating his ideas about Pareto’s thought. This article may represent an early attempt to work out a Marshall-Pareto-Weber “convergence,”⁷⁶ but if it

⁷² Parsons, “‘Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature I,” p. 653.

⁷³ Talcott Parsons, “Pareto’s Central Analytical Scheme,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 1 (1936): 244.

⁷⁴ Talcott Parsons, “Pareto,” in Seligman, *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 12: 377.

⁷⁵ Parsons, “Economics and Sociology,” p. 341.

⁷⁶ Parsons, “On Building Social System Theory,” p. 828.

is, "convergence" could function only as a residual category. There is no explicit discussion of "convergence" and the only common elements in the three writers is their concern with economics and sociology. It would seem that the possibility of a Marshall-Pareto-Weber convergence "dropped out" after Parsons subjected his own argument to a Pareto-like analysis.

But what is the immediate effect of having interwoven Pareto and Weber into his discussions about Marshall's problems? A rather restrained and sober argument about Marshall's logic is transformed into a polemical exercise in which Marshall and also the American institutionalist movement⁷⁷ are weighed in Parsons's scientific balance and found wanting. On scientific grounds, Weber and Pareto present theories which are "open" to further development. Marshall's predicament derives from his close-mindedness and his ethically superior provincialism.⁷⁸ Weber and Pareto are much more compatible with the ideal of scientific objectivity.⁷⁹ English philosophy is a dead-end,⁸⁰ and Marshall has not really understood what he was doing:

But the study will have served its purpose if it has shown that [Marshall] cannot be interpreted otherwise than as taking a position of the highest importance on the fundamental questions he professes to ignore.⁸¹

Now, having judged Marshall so severely, Parsons is yet willing to be charitable. In criticizing the logic of Marshall's theory and then interweaving these two other thinkers into the discussion, Parsons is able to conclude that it was not *more* knowledge that gave Weber and Pareto their advantage over Marshall: "On the contrary, it is their strictly theoretical insight; in other words, their clarity of thought on fundamental

⁷⁷ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 339, n. 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 321 and pp. 330 ff.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 345; cf. p. 335.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 337-338, n. 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

problems.”⁸² This, he says, has been the point of the entire analysis. But if Parsons thinks that Weber and Pareto have found a fundamental insight into the task of sociological analysis, could not this point have been made just as well by highlighting their scientific insights by simply discussing the logic of their respective theories? Why is comparative method so important? Parsons has shown in his “logical” article on Marshall (and also in his articles on capitalism) that he is quite capable of discussing the contributions of important social thinkers one-at-a-time. But in rejecting Marshall’s “extraordinarily difficult one-at-a-time method” of economic analysis,⁸³ Parsons also appears to be opting for a mode of scholarly discussion in which he attempts to organize his general reflections on a particular topic by means of *comparative analysis*. Thus the topic has changed. Now the “critical discussion” is in terms of the respective contributions which Weber and Pareto have made to the development of a comprehensive sociology. This is how Weber and Pareto come to be drawn as having an “advantage” over Marshall. Parsons does acknowledge that there may well be some hidden factor of a nonlogical kind which has kept Marshall from facing up to the demands of scientific objectivity; Parsons interprets Marshall’s inability to face up to the obvious as a sure sign of scientific evasiveness.⁸⁴ And when Parsons presents the unorthodox Pareto and Weber as possible alternatives to the Anglo-Saxon tradition (in which he also locates himself⁸⁵) he does not rule out the possibility that still further comparisons with other thinkers would furnish helpful results:

I choose these two, Pareto and Max Weber, not because I wish to hail them as the only possible alternatives to the Anglo-

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁸³ Parsons, “Wants and Activities in Marshall,” p. 140.

⁸⁴ Parsons, “Economics and Sociology,” pp. 335–336.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 329. In discussing the anti-intellectualism of England and America, he notes that “we” have never produced a *sociological* anti-intellectualism such as has appeared on the continent and is represented by Pareto. It would seem that this could function as a future possibility on Parsons’s horizon at this time.

American tradition of which Marshall forms a part—whether they are cannot be decided within the scope of the present study—but because they both have a peculiar relevance to Marshall's problems.⁸⁶

The critical article on Marshall does not achieve a full-blown Pareto-like analysis. The discussion of Marshall in relation to the thought of his time does suggest a system of sociology as the nonlogical residue of his economic theory. Parsons is quite definite that Marshall's economics can be considered a sociology.⁸⁷

At this time Parsons is moving intellectually (and professionally)⁸⁸ from economics to sociology. This transition appears to be very important for understanding the entirety of his thought. His own contribution to a new theory of society becomes intertwined with the "residual" sociology of Vilfredo Pareto. Looking backward upon the development of his previous writings, Parsons makes the claim that acquaintance with the thought of Pareto coincided with a crystallization in his own thought.⁸⁹ With the second Marshall article he has attained what he claims is a solid scientific basis from which to transcend economics. He claims to have exposed the scientific inadequacies of the Anglo-American tradition of economic thought. Pareto and Weber have a distinct advantage over Marshall in terms of theoretical insight, and the case of the orthodox school of economics may be said to stand or fall with Marshall's theory.⁹⁰

If there is any convergence at this stage of Parsons's development it is a convergence which is somewhat less systematic

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 345–346.

⁸⁸ See Parsons, "On Building Social System Theory," pp. 831–833, and Pitirim A. Sorokin, *A Long Journey* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1963), pp. 236, 241 ff.

⁸⁹ This is the term he uses in "On Building Social System Theory" in relation to his two Marshall essays. The "crystallization" seemed to him to have gone beyond the level of his teachers (p. 828). In *The Structure of Social Action*, a chemistry term, "permanently valid precipitate," is employed.

⁹⁰ Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 101.

than any later one. Parsons's analysis in the "critical" article is not the self-conscious application of Pareto's categories. The attempt to set up some form of correspondence among the three theorists,⁹¹ plus the fact that Pareto's concept of "entrelacement" does not figure in the discussion at this time, would indicate that the mode of argument, though changing, is still heavily influenced by the neo-Kantian mode of argument as he had encountered it in Germany. With time and the intensification of his consideration of Pareto,⁹² *sociological theory* would become the relatively constant *residue* of any Marshall, Pareto, and Weber "correspondence."

Marshall, Pareto, and Weber, as economists, were all dealing with the same problem: the relationship of economics to sociology. But, unlike Pareto and Weber, Marshall was grappling without insight. The problem was unknown to him, grappling as he was from the economic side of the relationship. It was Pareto and Weber whose theoretical insight enabled the fuller development of sociology.

Yet, if Pareto and Weber have a distinct advantage over Marshall, is it not possible that within the parameters of Parsons's thought they will vie against each other for the overall advantage? What had started off as an analysis of the underlying *ethical* motives of contemporary economic theory (the Weberian theme in Parsons's analysis of Marshall) could well end up with the documentation of the relatively constant and universal theme of the entire development (the anticipated Paretian "residue"). It is an open question at this stage as to which tendency will become most prominent in Parsons's thought. It is at least significant that Pareto enters Parsons's scheme at the same time that he is reviewing his own intellectual development up to that point.

Parsons's search for a generalized system in which to present his theory now enters a new phase. This generalizing

⁹¹ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," pp. 319-321.

⁹² Parsons, "On Building Social System Theory," p. 832.

motif still has two fronts: he sets forth his theory against the background of the history of social theory. He wishes to analytically specify the kind of theoretical developments he has discovered in the transition from economics to sociology. And within this framework, Marshall becomes one key figure in the history of economic theory yet is of significance in the transition from economics to sociology, though *not* of central importance to the development of sociology per se.

In delineating the task for sociology, as the analysis of the *value* factor of human action,⁹³ Parsons can substantiate his view as to why Marshall failed to satisfy the unorthodox.⁹⁴ Marshall, the economist, operated with "a striking lack of perspective on [his] general role."⁹⁵ Marshall had failed to face up to questions of a general theoretical nature and had strictly confined himself, his "man-in-the-ordinary-business-of-life" concept notwithstanding, within the boundaries of his special science. Marshall was uncritical of his own values and thus unable to accept values as an analytical element into his own theory.

Theoretical Sociology and Reforming Liberalism

Despite the fact that he had been exposed to Weberian sociology in Europe, Parsons, on return to the United States, was persuaded that he needed to have a deeper appreciation of Anglo-American economic thought. He sat himself under the circle of Harvard economists when Marshall's neoclassical theory was the reigning orthodoxy. And building upon Heidelberg experiences, where he had had a vision of a final theoretical synthesis in the line of Max Weber, Marshall's theory is retained as the primary foil for Parsons's emerging sociology.

⁹³ Parsons, "Sociological Elements in Economic Thought II," p. 665.

⁹⁴ Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 102.

⁹⁵ Parsons, "Sociological Elements in Economic Thought II," p. 666.

Parsons does not give Marx's theory extended treatment at this stage.⁹⁶ Instead, the theoretical insights of Weber and Pareto overcome the provincialism and narrow-mindedness of which Marshall was guilty. Marshall was embedded in the English tradition. Parsons, aligning himself and his theory with the orientation of Weber and Pareto, claims to be promoting a *radical* departure from the Anglo-American tradition of social thought. This new theory is, or should be, truly international. In its global orientation, Parsons's theory claims to avoid the nationalist philosophies of history that had characterized German Hegelianism and English liberalism.⁹⁷ With one deft stroke of his pen, Parsons puts his own theory forward as an example of "balanced rationality." He, an American, aligns himself with a German Social Democrat and an Italian aristocrat who had lived in Switzerland.⁹⁸ Hegel, Marx, and the whole tradition of German historical scholarship since Ranke are left behind. He justifies his implied "transnationalism" by appealing at the court of "scientific objectivity."⁹⁹ Just as Hegel had assumed that the evolution of the *Weltgeist* had taken place solely for the purpose of bringing the Prussian state into being, so Marshall had assumed that the process of social evolution led to its culmination in the late-nineteenth-century businessman and artisan. But in seeking a universal solution to his social scientific problems, Parsons claims to be heading in a different direction.

Though the nationalistic motive had not reached the heights it was to assume after the Second World War,¹⁰⁰ its presence can be detected lurking in the background.¹⁰¹ Though the

⁹⁶ See Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 488–495.

⁹⁷ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 335.

⁹⁸ Pareto was the Marchese di Parigi.

⁹⁹ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 335.

¹⁰⁰ See Parsons's presidential address to the American Sociological Association, "The Prospects of Sociological Theory," *American Sociological Review* 15 (February 1950): 3–16.

¹⁰¹ Parsons, "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature I," p. 642. Alvin W. Gouldner makes a similar point in his *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 148–151.

American motif has not yet emerged at the center stage of Parsons's reflections, it does no injustice to his works if they are interpreted as suggesting that, for Parsons, the future of social theory in the twentieth century lies on the western seaboard of the North Atlantic. England was clearly not to be the place for any sociological "convergence" because, on the frontiers of sociology, Parsons's pioneering work anticipates the new "breakthrough."

Parsons's view of America was shaped through contact with the "Brahmin families" of the eastern seaboard elite and their "noblesse oblige."¹⁰² In early March 1933, a son of one of these families, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, acceded to the Presidency of the United States. Parsons had a great admiration for Roosevelt.¹⁰³ In 1970, he notes that, contrary to his friend L. J. Henderson, with whom he was then having extended discussions, he (Parsons) personally supported the new President. Henderson was a pronounced conservative.¹⁰⁴ But there is one point on which Henderson and the Roosevelts seemed to have agreed. The British model played a very important part in fashioning strategy for their respective contributions to American culture. But whereas Theodore Roosevelt had fashioned American foreign policy with a vision of a future territorial empire after the traditional British model,¹⁰⁵ Franklin Roosevelt had to deal with the consequences of the Versailles settlement of 1919. Relations between Britain and the United States could not be the same after the Great War. But the British model still seemed to hold great attractions for the internal life of the American nation. The Society of Fellows at Harvard, about which Henderson

¹⁰² William C. Mitchell, *Sociological Analysis and Politics: The Theories of Talcott Parsons* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 181.

¹⁰³ James MacGregor Burns in *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956) describes Roosevelt's policies in the light of Machiavelli's "lions and foxes." These were key symbolic components in Pareto's theory of elites. See Parsons, "Pareto," pp. 376–378.

¹⁰⁴ Parsons, "On Building Social System Theory," pp. 832 and 877, n. 20.

¹⁰⁵ Ludwell Denny, *America Conquers Britain* (New York: Knopf, 1930), p. 63.

had been pondering since 1924, was established in 1933. It was modeled upon the prestigious Society of Fellows at Trinity College, Cambridge, England. Along with Henderson, Alfred North Whitehead was numbered among the "group of four" who compiled the report which eventually led to the Charter for the Society.¹⁰⁶

Parsons's preference for a German social democrat and an Italian of noble birth contrasts sharply with his analytical rejection of the inherent bias in the English gentleman's economics. When Émile Durkheim's writings are included in his program a few years later, this present phase, in which Weber and Pareto were interwoven in the discussion of Marshall's difficulties, appears to be but an earlier stage in negotiations for an "analytical concert of Europe."¹⁰⁷ "Convergence" reads as an analytical endorsement of the view that social thought in America must root itself deeply in the Continental traditions.

The various elements of Parsons's discussion work together like pistons in an internal-combustion engine. It is also possible to describe Parsons in the same terms which Keynes had drawn Marshall: ". . . like Watt he sat down silently to build an engine . . ."¹⁰⁸ And Parsons's writings document his attempt to outline his discovery of a new principle, his "engine of analysis."¹⁰⁹ At least at this stage they outline his views as to

¹⁰⁶ The other two were Charles Pelham Curtis and John Livingstone Lowes. See Crane Brinton, ed., *The Society of Fellows* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

¹⁰⁷ T. B. Bottomore also links Parsons's view of equilibrium (and that of other functionalists) to the typically American opposition to the Axis states, the USSR, and Communism. See his review article, "Conservative Man," *New York Review of Books* 15:6 (1970): 20-21.

¹⁰⁸ Pigou, *Memorials of Alfred Marshall*, p. 23: "the great working machine evolved by the patient, persistent toil and scientific genius of Marshall. . . ." In comparison to Jevons, who "saw the kettle boil and cried out with the delighted voice of a child," Keynes says that Marshall "sat down silently to build an engine."

¹⁰⁹ It is clear that Parsons used the same imagery to describe theory as a "system" long before his Marshall essays were published. See his "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature I," pp. 643-644. In "'Capitalism' in Recent German Literature II," p. 33, he describes Weber's view of economic theory as propositions relating to ideal-types as "not very different from its conception as an 'engine of analysis' which has become common in English theory of recent times."

how to begin to go about making the discovery. And for his "pistons" to work together in some kind of harmony he needs a flywheel. In his appeal to the self-evident ideal of "scientific objectivity"¹¹⁰ he found the required momentum. If Marshall's thought is somewhat "out of phase" with Weber and Pareto, the sociological theory embedded within Marshall's economic theory pulls in the opposite direction. In this way Parsons's discussion obtains critical "traction" as his theory forges ahead in a distinctly *sociological* direction. As the engine gets moving and begins to gather speed, so increases Parsons commitment to, and confidence in, his own sociological framework.

Marshall's modern utility theory provides a negative indication of the direction in which Parsons would like his own theory to head. Marshall's thought gives a convenient starting point from which to develop sociology. Parsons appears to have no use for English thought on the grounds that English thought shuts out sociology. It is considered because of its historical importance,¹¹¹ just as the British Empire had been considered as a primary model for the future Pax Americana, and Cambridge University had become a model for the Harvard Society of Fellows initiatives in the 1930s. For Parsons, Marshall remains valid as a model even if "he failed to satisfy" the unorthodox.¹¹² Parsons, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, writes that it is important to shine a bright light upon the whole structure of English social thought and openly acknowledges that Marshall's doctrines are considered for this purpose. As Parsons develops a sociology which transcends economics, so he develops a broad, international frame of reference that eschews any form of English narrow-mindedness epitomized in Marshall's economics. With his broad and unbiased approach he can now incorporate Marshall's thought back into sociology. From Parsons's scientific point of view,

¹¹⁰ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 345.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Parsons, "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 102.

Marshall's economic theory is considered as a sociology.¹¹³ But, in Parsons's sociology, America, *on the authority of Pareto and Weber*, has conquered Britain.

Any Weber-Pareto-Marshall "convergence" is thus heavily weighted against Marshall. Parsons views the *ethical difficulties* which Marshall encountered from the standpoint of the *scientific problems* formulated by Weber and Pareto. Pareto and Weber have transcended any ethical-traditional dilemmas by formulating Scientific Problems which require Scientific Solutions.

The difference between "convergence" in the *Ethics* article of 1935 and "convergence" in *The Structure* are not fundamental differences. They are differences only in degree—the framework for a Pareto-like analysis of the recent history of social thought has been established in his thought by the time he came to write "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory." The fundamental change in Parsons's concept of "convergence" comes about when Parsons began to *systematically* apply Pareto's concepts to his own analyses. But in *The Structure* Parsons returns to a consideration of Marshall and here there is a dual purpose in Parsons's utilization of Marshall's thought. First, Marshall becomes useful for an internal comparison within the parameters of Parsons's own argument. Marshall provides a point from which Parsons can appeal to "scientific objectivity" from *within* the logic of his own argument. Second, Marshall provides a point from which comparison may be made between what is emerging as a radically voluntarist theory of action and those other theories still influenced by orthodox utilitarianism. Traditional methods and radical departures are set in stark contrast to each other.

In *The Structure* Parsons maintains his intention to consider

¹¹³ Parsons, "Economics and Sociology," p. 346.

Marshall's thought as a sociology.¹¹⁴ In this way economic theory is deprived of its tendency to expand into a general sociology.¹¹⁵ Instead it is given a place as a special social science within one overall analytical framework.¹¹⁶ Sociology is an analytical discipline coordinate with all other disciplines in the social sciences. Yet it articulates the analytical ground rules for social theory in all its phases. Once sociology has been defined, then economics, politics and psychology can find their place.¹¹⁷

The attempt to work out a Marshall-Pareto-Weber convergence failed. From the point documented in *The Structure* this can be read as an earlier stage in the experimentation with the theoretical engine of analysis. Previously there had been some form of balance between economics and sociology in Parsons's theory. The original balance may indeed have favored sociology, and with his explicit identification of himself as a sociologist the direction of his thought is established. Durkheim's view of society as *reality sui generis* provided Parsons with a further opportunity to reappraise his understanding. Whereas Durkheim has initially applied his concept to society, Parsons with methodological self-consciousness also applies it to the *study* of society. Now the question of the relationship between sociology and economics can be raised as a specifically *analytical* question. Any further developments are still only anticipations in the final chapter to *The Structure*, though he does not rule out the possibility that this voluntaristic theory of action could one day be operationalized into a set of simultaneous equations. In Parsons's theory the concept of *society as reality sui generis* is accepted alongside the view that the action frame of reference is itself an *analytical sui generis*.

¹¹⁴ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 12–14, 165–177.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173; cf. "Wants and Activities in Marshall," p. 346.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 757 ff.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 768.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that Parsons considered that Marshall's theory was an attempt to effect a synthesis between his evolutionary beliefs and his economic analysis. Beliefs or "ultimate values" are, to Parsons, *analytical* categories and are to be welcomed into the scientific enterprise on that basis. The requirement that scientific explanation, like everything else, develops according to an evolutionary unfolding cannot allow beliefs to control the theoretical system. Marshall's synthesis did not allow him to focus analytically upon the "value factor" but Weber, Pareto, and Durkheim had moved much further in this nonsynthetic direction.

In his attempt to come to terms with the Western intellectual tradition, Parsons's theorizing is involved in an ongoing process of redefinition. Positivism has failed. Idealism has not (yet) developed a scientific theory of society, even though the sociological giants of the last generation, Weber and Durkheim, are numbered among the philosophical giants of the Kantian tradition.

Where can one turn after the failures of the previous generation? Parsons's answer to this problem is to redefine the failure. At the commencement of *The Structure*, conscious of his English-speaking audience, Parsons turns a quizzical eye upon Herbert Spencer. The failure of Spencerian sociology should not be considered pessimistically as the end of the road. It should be seen as a challenge. The failure of Spencer's system, and with it the systems of Marshall and others who live in his shadow, provides a problem about the history of social science that needs to be solved scientifically. The death of Spencer's sociological positivism is indicative of an enduring principle far more powerful than any theory:

Spencer was, in the general outline of his views, a typical representative of the later stages of development of a system of thought about man and society which has played a very great part in the intellectual history of the English speaking peoples,

the positivistic-utilitarian tradition. What has happened to it? Why has it died?

The thesis of this study will be that it is the victim of the vengeance of the jealous god, Evolution, in this case the evolution of scientific theory.¹¹⁸

So saying, and with this conviction, Parsons starts out on his new path to outline the structure of social action. It is a conviction so strong that he does not consult Marshall's successor, Lord Keynes. Yet, paradoxically, it is a conviction that leads him after many years and in the context of post-World War II reconstruction, to reconsider the relationship of Economy to Society. While "revisiting" Alfred Marshall in the 1950s, Talcott Parsons read Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, published in 1936, for the first time.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁹ Parsons, "On Building Social System Theory," p. 845.

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