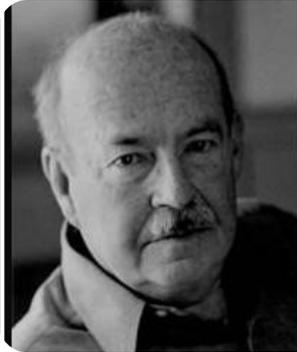


## Talcott Parsons: An assessment

### Paper 1: Fundamentals of Sociology – Sociological thinkers – Talcott Parsons: Social system, pattern variables.



Empirical interest will be in the facts so far as they are relevant to the solution of these problems.

(Talcott Parsons)

Talcott Parsons (December 13, 1902 – May 8, 1979) was an American sociologist of the classical tradition, best known for his social action theory and structural functionalism. Parsons is considered one of the most influential figures in sociology in the 20th century. Based on empirical data, Parsons' social action theory was the first broad, systematic, and generalizable theory of social systems developed in the United States.

Some of Parsons' largest contributions to sociology in the English-speaking world were his translations of Max Weber's work and his analyses of works by Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Vilfredo Pareto. Although Parsons is generally considered a structural functionalist, towards the end of his career, in 1975, he published an article that stated that "functional" and "structural functionalist" were inappropriate ways to describe the character of his theory. From the 1970s, a new generation of sociologists criticized Parsons' theories as socially conservative and his writings as unnecessarily complex.

### Systems of social action

Social actions are guided by the following three systems which may also be called as three aspects of the systems of social action Personality system: This aspect of the system of social action is responsible for the needs for fulfilment of which the man makes effort and performs certain actions.

In Parson's view each of the three main type of social action systems-culture, personality and social systems has a distinctive coordinative role in the

action process and therefore has some degree of causal autonomy. Thus personalities organize the total set of learned needs, demands and action choices of individual actors, no two of whom are alike.

## The functional pre-requisites

Parsons argues that every system has certain needs. As long as the needs of a system are fulfilled by the various parts (structural components) of the system, equilibrium would result. The contribution of parts towards fulfilment of needs is called function.

According to Parsons, there are four 'functional pre-requisites' that are necessary for (characteristic of) all systems – adaptation (A), goal attainment (G), integration (I) and latency (L). Together these four functional pre-requisites are known as the AGIL scheme.

## Actors and the Social system

There are various ways in which Parsons linked the personality to the social system. First, actors must learn to see themselves in a way that fits with the place they occupy in society. Second, role expectations are attached to each of the roles occupied by individual actors. Then there is the learning of self-discipline, internalization of value orientations, identification, and so forth. All these forces point toward the integration of the personality system with the social system, which Parsons emphasized. However, he also pointed out the possible mal-integration, which is a problem for the system that needs to be overcome.

The most important works of Parsons include: *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), *The Social System* (1951) and *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1951), *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (1971).

## Parsons – A critique

- Parsons completely subordinated the individual (agency) to culture (structure). Parsons' theory is suitable only for macro analysis as it takes into account only the patterned aspects of social reality. Parsons' theory is not suitable for micro sociological analysis.

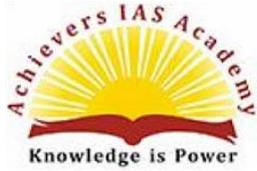
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- ✚ Parsons was criticized by his contemporary, C. Wright Mills for his grand theory. Mills believed that a grand theory was not based on fact but was the product of sociologists attempting to impose their will and interpretation upon data.
- ✚ Robert K Merton argued that a theory can be productive when while being a general theory it is specific enough to produce a testable hypothesis. The most important criterion of a testable hypothesis is its potential falsifiability. Merton asserted that Parsons' theory is too general that it cannot be falsified.
- ✚ Viewing Western civilization as the pinnacle of modern society, Parsons declared the United States as the most dynamically developed society, and for this, he was attacked as an ethnocentrist.
- ✚ Critics argue that he has shown too much of a preoccupation with order and equilibrium. This has rendered his theory status-quo oriented. Social conflict and social change have not been given adequate importance in this scheme. As a result, Parsons' theory of social system is sometimes criticised as a veiled status quoist ideology.
- ✚ His theory is suitable only for the analysis of large and stable social systems like America, Scandinavian countries, etc. Parsons' theory fails to account for the developments taking place in third world countries of Asia and Africa which are marked with chaos and conflict.

Despite these criticisms there is no doubt that Parsons' work constituted a major contribution to the general body of material that social theory is made of. His ideas are now part of the intellectual stuff that social theorists who came after him have inevitably had to address. Even more deliberately than this, a number of social theorists have taken on the task of trying to identify the weaknesses within Parsonian functionalism in order to move functionalist theory into its next stage, for example, Jeffrey Alexander has made a very significant contribution to the development of neo-functionalist social theory during the 1990s.

## Previous year Questions

1. Describe the functional prerequisites of social system as given by Talcott Parsons. Examine in the context of a university as a social system.
2. How is social equilibrium maintained in Parsonian framework?
3. Examine the relevance of Parsonian Social System in the present society.
4. Write short note on the following, keeping sociological perspective in view:  
Universalism vs. Particularism.



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5. Give conceptual meaning of social system. What is cognitive consonance between 'pattern variables' and 'paradigm'?
6. Write short note on Cybernetic Hierarchy of Control.
7. Write short note Talcott Parsons' idea of 'moving equilibrium'.
8. Write short note: Relevance of pattern variables in the study of social change.
9. Write short note: Talcott Parsons' concept of social system.
10. Bring out a comparative analysis of Marxian and Parsonian views of social change and examine the relevance of each view for social development in the contemporary India.
11. Socialization and social control are complementary to each other in maintaining social order.' – Elucidate your answer with appropriate illustrations.
12. Write short note: Social system and the Pattern Variables.
13. Write short note: Functional problems of the social system.
14. Discuss Talcott Parsons' contribution to the analysis of social system.
15. Discuss Talcott Parsons' contribution to the analysis of social change.
16. Write short note: The idea of functional indispensability.
17. State Talcott Parsons' contribution to theory of social action. What are the limitations of this theory?
18. Critically examine AGIL model of Talcott Parsons. How far is this model capable of explaining social changes in society?