

On the Other Side of Interests: The Rise of Values and their Transformation into Disinterest

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Abstract

The creation of the notion of “classical theory” in the United States was part and parcel of a radical reformulation of the theory of the nature of the actor, carried out by Talcott Parsons. This involved the recasting of core concerns in European sociology turning on the notion of “values” in such a way as to support Parsons’s Manichean attempt to cordon off sociology from the specter of utilitarianism, which he conceived to threaten the young shoot of sociology from both the right and the left. We here show how Parsons creatively misappropriated his sources in order to support his conviction that the modern world has a new form of legitimate domination based on the disinterested service of professionals; the notion of “values,” one that sociologists still take seriously, comes from his reformulation of the conception of the motivational structure of the actor to facilitate an unquestioning acceptance of protestations of disinterest on the part of the structurally empowered.

“The most striking feature of recent sociological thought has been a slow, and even as yet not frequently clear, realization of the concrete importance of the principal factor lying to the other side of the economic, the ‘value’ factor.”

-Talcott Parsons

1. Introduction

Whether it is a good thing or a bad thing, the historical development of sociology seems marked by tidal waves of system building. When these waves come in, some damage is done to existing structures, and there is a general feeling of being lifted up, an excitement that leads us to renew the attack against unsolved problems. When the wave goes out, and we sink back to earth, we do not always know how to distinguish the remnants of our previous structures from the flotsam left wedged between fenceposts and the like.

And whether it is a good thing or a bad thing, we are now at a period of very low tide. We feel that we are standing on dry ground and can go back to our everyday business. But scattered about are ripped up planks with rusty nails sticking out. This chapter is about one rusty nail: the notion of the opposition of values and interests as intrinsically opposed wellsprings of human action.

This was the cumulative result of two waves. The first wave was a tremendous one, the introduction of *values* into the human sciences, first in Germany, but making its influence felt elsewhere as well. The second had less global impact, but was crucial in the United States, and this was the coterminous (retrospective) birth of “classical” sociology and of the theoretical system of Talcott Parsons.

Here, we chart how the notion of values became central for the cultural sciences, and the way it was first imported into American sociology. We then trace how Talcott Parsons quite deliberately attempted to restructure the concept of values, to aid in his project of charting out a place for sociological theory that would run parallel to, but somewhat higher than, the field of economics. We then point to the explanatory costs of our remaining within the Parsonian redefinition of the notion of values, particularly their effect on the development of our theory of action.

2. The Rise of Values

2.1 *The Is and the Ought*

The idea of values was born in mid-nineteenth century German philosophy.¹ European thinkers before then did not doubt there was *something* that made certain objects or actions superior to others. But until then, that *something* was never “values.” The term was imported to solve a particular set of problems that confronted the intellectual world at the time of the formulation of the first coherent sociological approaches to action (here see Gebhardt 1989: 36). We give a condensed version of this history, a version that, while necessarily simplistic, is not contested at the level of precision required. We shall see that “values” arose to solve a problem having to do with *validity*, and never lost this central determination.

For German philosophers, Immanuel Kant’s Inaugural Dissertation (1986 [1770]: 157) broke apart the Leibnizian-Wolffian system that had unified the seemingly different worlds of

¹. Sources on the history of the concept include Hügli 2004, Steinbrenner 2005; Werkmeister 1970; Galewicz 1990; Guyer (2014) and Kuhn (1975) also have useful discussions. Joas (2000) provides the best reconstructive treatment.

the sensible and the intelligible, phenomena and noumena. This reopened a Platonic chasm that was deeply disturbing to philosophers. Kant's own solution came over a decade later and, while formally impressive, was unsatisfying to many. In his view, the world of the senses—which tells us what *is*—has a complex, and, to some degree, only “as if”, relation to the intelligible world, where (among other things) we, as actors, must determine what we *ought* to do.

One response to this re-awakened divide, taken most famously by Hegel, was to follow Plato and embrace the dialectic. Hegel's dialectic, however, was not only ontogenetic—pertaining to the nature and development of ideas, and hence to how we philosophize them—but also phylogenetic, and connected to a remarkable philosophy of history. To Hegel (e.g., 1975 [1837]), history was the development of the Spirit of Humanity, instantiating itself in different societies, and actualizing itself in culture (broadly understood). The different aspects of human social life were different moments in the developmental fulfillment of the potential of the human spirit (alternately, The Idea). Thus history—at least, the history of any people fortunate enough to *have* a history, which means that their institutions are *progressing* towards a fuller actualization of humanity—is linked to the developmental realization of different cultural spheres.

This was an influential contribution, but it was only one species of a more general German conviction that there was a great philosophical significance to history. The widespread view of history as the unfolding of the potential of the human spirit allowed the German philosophers to approach what was universally acknowledged to be a key feature of the modern world, namely increasing differentiation, from a standpoint other than that of British and French thinkers. The latter (e.g., Herbert Spencer) tended to focus on *functional* differentiation, adopting an evolutionary perspective soon to be identified with Darwinism. But for the German

philosophers and historians, this differentiation was, first and foremost, a phenomenon regarding the perfection of different *cultural* spheres—for example, art, religion, philosophy—that might become increasingly differentiated with cultural development, but that always existed in potential as a consequence of the essence of the human spirit.

This solution was widely believed to return the *is* and the *ought* to harmony. In the case of Hegel’s philosophy, one could trust that the only reason that something *was*—that it was real—was that it expressed “The Idea.”² But while it was certainly more sophisticated than the positive ethics making headway in France and England (in which quasi-biological laws were supposed to tell us, on the basis of facts about human and social beings, what we should do), this solution had a somewhat similar root assumption: there was something in reality (*is*) to which we could safely pin an imperative (*ought*). It was this assumption that critics were to attack.

Most famously, Schopenhauer (1969 [1844]) acidly summarized this entire development as a simple return to the “ontological” proof of God that, in the middle ages, had demonstrated that all was right with the world. Because it was inherent in the essence of the concept of God that He exist, He must. The *is* and the *ought* were thus joined because they *ought* to be so joined! It was difficult for more analytically inclined thinkers to accept such an assumption, even if they saw the importance of cultural development, and wished to bridge the Platonic chasm. They took a different path.

2.2 Lotze and Values

The “return to Kant” involved, among other things, an increased acceptance that the

². “What is universally valid is also universally effective; *what ought to be*, as a matter of fact, *is* too; what merely *should be*, and is *not*, has no truth” (Hegel 1949 [1803]: 289).

realms of the *is* and the *ought* were not easily blended (see Beiser 2014; Rose 1981). The notion of values became key in the attempt of the neo-Kantians to grapple with this bifurcation. And the central thinker here is universally acknowledged to be Hermann Lotze.³ Lotze (1885 [1856-1864]) burst on the scene with a remarkable work attempting to combat what he saw as an increasingly aggressive materialism. The influential claims of Schelling and Hegel that such materialist science was limited or ignorable because all expressed the “Idea” seemed to Lotze childish and obscurantist. Yet he did not shirk from the attempt, as he put it at the end of one of his later works, to again “seek in that which *should* be the ground of that which is” (Lotze 1884 [1879]:536).

Moreover he, like many others of his generation, rejected the orthodox Hegelian dynamic—that the real *is* the rational—which, he decided, came from a misreading of Plato. The Greek language, argued Lotze (1884 [1880]: 441; 1885 [1856-1864]: II, 327) had no word for *validity* outside of existence. Hence, Plato was not saying that ideas “existed” in the sense of being in time and space; rather, Plato was saying that ideas possessed a validity *regardless* of their actualization. Validity offered a replacement for the ontological proof, a way to demonstrate the objectivity of our beliefs without denying the difference between the realms of existence and non-existence (Lotze 1884 [1880]: 499f; also see Gebhardt 1989: 38). If this notion of “validity” is obscure, Lotze (1884 [1880]: 440) wrote, that is because it is a primitive, or an underivable term, one which stops a regress. We may ask why someone says that “2×2 is 4,” but if they respond, “because it is true,” we cannot then ask them why truth is valid (Rose 1981).

³. A recent, though somewhat idiosyncratic, treatment is found in Woodward (2015).

Unlike the Hegelians, Lotze did not insist that any valid idea had to (eventually) exist as mind. However, he posited a third realm to connect the two existential realms of subjectivity and objectivity, the intelligible and phenomenal worlds—the realm of values. Whence came by Lotze this notion of “values”? It is widely agreed by intellectual historians that the term entered philosophy from political economy, which, since Adam Smith, had been increasingly oriented around the idea of “value” (Steinbrenner 2005: 590, 601; also Meinong 1894: 5; 1912-3: 2). The economic realm had appealing analogic characteristics for thinking more generally: the value of an object might be the subject of broad consensus without this detracting from its ultimately subjective nature (see Tarde [1969 / 1898: 74f]).⁴

Yet *value* is not the same as *values*; to say that something had *worth* did not imply the diversification in referent that we were to find with the notion of values. The key innovation was the development of a new noun-form of the term, one that bore a plural. In this new conceptualization, the value of an object, and the reason that a person might value it, were both grounded in the object’s relation to “*values*.” Further, the notion of values differed from other ways of approaching the goal-directed nature of action by turning on this Lotzian idea of validity. Thus one of the influential value theorists, Alexius Meinong, argued that the value that some object O has for a subject S lies in the fact “that S takes an interest in O,” “and the magnitude of the value is essentially determined by the magnitude of the interest” (1912-3:7). However, it is essential that the object *deserve* the judgment made: if the subject thinks that O is

⁴. Even more, in political economy, “value” was already used as a means of abstracting and generalizing; thus Marx (1906 [1867]: 42n3) noted that “In English writers of the 17th century we frequently find ‘worth’ [related to the German *Wert*] in the sense of value-in-use, and ‘value’ [related to French *Valeur*] in the sense of exchange value. This is quite in accordance with the spirit of a language that likes to use a Teutonic word for the actual thing, and a Romance word for its reflexion.”

z (for example, that it is “beautiful”), then we are not indifferent to the question of whether, in the real world, O actually *is* z —if it is “worthy” of the predicate (11f).

This notion of values was attractive because it offered a better ground for the analysis of the cultural spheres than either the seemingly tendentious derivations of all from some implicit kernel of “the essence of Man,” or from a fixed set of human drives. Lotze’s solution still turned on the cultivation of human potential (*Bildung*), but required no strong assumption as to the nature of the telos towards which this development headed. From here, Lotze (1885 [1856-1864]) derived not only an ethics, but a conception of the major types of personality oriented to these different values and their different realms: the scientific, the economic, the aesthetic, the religious, the socio-political—an adumbration that was to reappear with only minor changes in the influential work of Spranger (1928 [1914]) and Weber (1946 [1915]). And this linking of values to the typology of realms was probably one of the reasons that it became of such interest to the new social sciences; for one, Marianne Weber (1975: 67) writes of Max’s heated discussions with peers about Lotze.⁵ For if there was some overall logic to the organization of these values, that logic could be the basis for a re-appreciation of the integrity of the human condition.

2.3 *The Revaluation of Values*

In any case, this notion of values assumed a pivotal position into neo-Kantian thought in the early twentieth century, and then increasingly permeated European intellectual life, beginning in Weimar Germany. There, it promised to be the needed idealistic moment that could

⁵. Max, with his typical impatience, was sure that Lotze was unscholarly, tedious, and emotional.

counterbalance the potential flat brutalism of the “new objectivity” characterizing the age.⁶ The notion of values provided as a way of defining one’s commitments, a quasi-transcendent ethics that was wholly a matter of one’s one decision.

From there, the notion of values spread outwards. In America, values became important for the pragmatists. Some, like William James (1982 [1902]: 4f), chose to build on the German distinction between facts and value-judgments. Others, like Dewey (1918), tried to transcend this divide. Eventually, even Durkheim (1953 [1911]) felt obliged to try to incorporate this distasteful structure into his own theory. The reason for this surprising adoption of Germanic terminology, argued his bitter opponent, Gaston Richard (1994 [1923]: 252), was the following: “For as long as this ‘axiology’, to give it its most convenient name, remained an American or Austrian doctrine, Durkheim and his school ignored it....The theory of value judgment or value concept with its implications so favourable to a measured individualism was, however, gradually penetrating into France.” Durkheim tried to take the teeth out of the notion by first, collapsing the distinction between judgments of value and judgments of fact (based on the trivial notion that a statement of valuation could be factual—if person *P* values object *O*, then “*P* values *O*” is a true fact). Second, he attempted to tame the explosively polytheistic potential of values by rooting all values as different manifestations of the one true divinity, social morality.

In Germany, in contrast, much of the appeal of the notion of values was its promise to help in the struggle with the increasingly differentiated cultural spheres—to try to bring order

⁶. Thus the central, fascinating make character of Lion Feuchtwanger’s classic 1930 “novel of the age” (*Zeitroman*), *Success*, an art critic with a taste for the transgressive and authentic, implicitly courts the central female character, an objective-seeing, liberated woman, by laying out his scale of values [*Stufenleiter*; later, *Skala*] in terms that would have made sense to a philosopher of the time (1989 [1930]: 52; 519).

where dissolution seemed paramount. It was this effort that characterized the philosophers who were most influential for sociology, namely the “Southwestern” school of neo-Kantians. As we shall see, they established the issue of value as perhaps *the* central issue for sociological theory.

2.4 *Values and the Human Sciences*

German sociology was caught up in the debates about what were called the cultural (or “human”) sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), paradigmatically history, which were, it was believed, sciences of humans as actors (as opposed to as mere organisms). These sciences, unlike the new natural sciences, could not but deal with meaning, and therefore, it seemed, issues of values and valuation. If there was a split between existence and validity, there would seem to be a corresponding split in the nature of our cognitive relation to the world, with the natural sciences on one side, and the human sciences on the other. The question then was whether and how these fields had a claim to any sort of objectivity, or whether they were more akin to the arts. It turned out that the problems that the philosophers had set for themselves provided solutions that the sociologists could adopt. And this is because the key problems for sociology were widely believed to involve foundational issues of concept formation.

The decisive initial work here was done by Wilhelm Windelband, who had studied closely with Lotze (e.g., Windelband 1921 [1914]: 208). And Windelband was to be the central figure in what is known as the “Southwest School” of German philosophy—the circle that influenced Max Weber. Windelband (1915 [1882]: 19) was greatly concerned with one aspect of differentiation—the fact that the various sciences had successfully split off from philosophy, leaving it no clear ground and object of its own. Drawing on Kant’s conception of philosophy as a sort of appeals court for reason, Windelband argued that philosophy still had a job—to judge

the principles of the *other* sciences. In particular, philosophy could organize and critically assess the values that underlay each of these disciplines, as well as the logical problems that arose therefrom (for example, the puzzle of the implications of seeing truth itself as a value; see, e.g., Windelband 1921 [1914]: 215; Frege 1891; 1977 [1918]; Lask 1912).

It was for this reason that others agreed with Windelband (1921 [1914]: 208) that “the idea of value is now the centre of any further discussion.” The idea that every endeavor might be defined by some set of values seemed to provide a possible answer—and a grave challenge—to the status of the cultural sciences. Certainly, if some sort of value defined every field, how could one hold it against the cultural sciences if they too were concerned with value?

Even more, the notion of value promised to solve a difficult technical problem in the philosophy of history having to do with concept formation. There was increasing consensus that history, in contrast to the natural sciences with their *generalizing* concepts, needed *individualizing* concepts. Windelband’s student, Heinrich Rickert, made the key contribution. Rickert (1910-11: 10) accepted, first of all, that values are necessary for a meaningful life, and such values must be *valid*. But valid values do not only ground an individual’s life—they can also ground the historical sciences and their individualizing concepts.

We may define a general term—a species—using purely external concepts. Thus we define a mammal as any animal the female of which nurses its young via mammary glands. However, we denote a particular individual, one mammal among others, by a *name*, and identify one as such because of the *value* we place on it (Rickert 1902: 380). The historian, too, can identify particular concepts—for example, “Goethe,” or “impressionism”—on the basis of the values they have for the historian (1986 [1929]: 83). If the same values that animated the historical actors in question are shared by the historian—and these are *valid* values—then the

resulting claims may be objectively valid (1986 [1929]: 64, 89, 106, 126, 196-9, 205). But this required, Rickert was forced to conclude, that values must lie “*beyond* subject and object” (1910-11: 12), in some third realm [“*dritte Reich*”] of non-actual meaning configurations (Rickert 1910-11: 22; 1929: 596). Only thus could two different investigators be able to be sure that they formed their concepts in relation to the “same” values.

It might seem odd to reach objectivity via this roundabout way, but to Kantians, the view that the “transcendent” formed the ground of possibility for a science was a familiar one. It was thus hardly shocking when this notion of “value relevance” was imported into sociology by Rickert’s friend Max Weber—who simultaneously convinced many that the sociocultural sciences could be objective by completely refraining from value *judgments*. There remains debate as to the degree of Rickert’s influence over Weber (e.g., Oakes 1988, Burger 1976; Bruun 2007; Sica 1988: 128n66), but even if Weber had developed his position independently of Rickert, he seemed convinced that his friend had solved the key problem that he (Rickert) had set out to solve. (It is for this reason that Weber could confidently refer the reader to Rickert for the specificities of what his own approach to value-relatedness entailed.)

Weber was, as intellectual historians agree, wrong—Rickert’s solutions were more or less irrelevant for Weber’s own concerns, as the latter attempted to use the notion of values in a quasi-Nietzschean way. For Weber, the situation of the scientist was similar to that of any other actor: “he weighs and chooses from among the values involved according to his own conscience and his personal view of the world [*persönlichen Weltanschauung*]” ([1904] 1949: 53; 1922: 150). No objective validity was required for these values, only the subjective conviction of the

actor (Hügli 2004: 562).⁷ Weber's passionate and confident delivery of his ideas only increased the centrality of the issue of values to those puzzling over the nature of sociology.

For this reason, when discussing concept formation and idea of "value-relevance," Weber (2012 [1917]: 317; also see 323; Weber 1949 [1904]: 105) made it clear that in his view, "the term 'value relation' simply represents the philosophical interpretation of that specifically scientific '*interest*' which governs the selection and formation of the object of an empirical inquiry" (italics in original). Even outside of this context, Weber (2012: 413f) often equated values and interests; thus he expressed doubts that "the 'absolute validity' of certain 'values' (what we [that is, Weber] would call 'interests') could be taken to be more than simply a limiting possibility....." Again, Weber (1949 [1905]: 156; 1922: 259) argued that "It is our *interest* which is oriented towards 'values,' and not the objective causal relationship between our culture and Hellenic culture, which determines the range of cultural values which are controlling for a history of Hellenic culture" [emphasis in original]. To the extent that Weber *did* see values as being different from interests, it was that the former were a more metaphysical species which he usually distrusted. Thus in his letter to Friedrich Gottl (29 March 1906), Weber (2012: 388) writes that he does "*not* accept that 'value' stands on the same level as 'interest' or 'importance'....Under all circumstances, 'valuation' takes us into another world."

There were, however, times when Weber wished to evoke this quest of another world, the capacity for a soul to choose to devote itself to serving something transcendent, and in this context, Weber's use of the term *values* was less hesitant. But it is worth emphasizing that to

⁷. "We can indeed espouse these values only when they appear to us as values.....However, to *judge* the *validity* of such values is a matter of *faith*," and "certainly does not fall within the province of an empirical science" ([1904] 1949: 55). The secondary literature on Weber is too big to survey; we point the interested reader to Turner and Factor (1984, 1994).

Weber (1946 [1915]), it was obvious that while someone could pursue one of these values, this was hardly necessary. Indeed, the differentiation of value spheres that made possible any dedicated pursuit of one value was a relatively recent phenomenon. While any person now had the possibility of following the command of a value—“put down your nets and follow me”—not all would. Further, those who did heed this call were forced to renounce other values. In contrast to the philosophers who attempted to encompass and organize the differentiated cultural spheres, Weber used the notion to accomplish the exact opposite: to account for the irresolvable contradiction of differing values. Weber expressed this with uncompromising directness and evidently relished brutality: “You serve one God, and offend the others” (Weber 1946 [1919]: 151).

Weber's central exposition of this idea came in his “Religious Rejections of the World” (1946 [1915]). Here and elsewhere, Weber accepted the general notion that the process of Western modernization involved the increasing clarification, and separation, of the cultural values, and their increasing identification with institutional spheres. To Weber, these values were “means of orientation”—master codes that could orient a person who wished for a meaningful and mature life, termini to the questions of “why” we do what we do (also see Rickert 1910-11: 28). The increased differentiation of these values meant that there was less and less of a chance for a “wholeness” of life, and more and more unavoidable conflict (antinomy) between those following the different values.

Weber's use of *values*, however, was inconsistent and somewhat incoherent, as there was a wide gulf between his use of the term when it came to his epistemology and his use for his theory of social change. Regarding the latter, Weber might speak here of “cultural values” (e.g., 1976 [1920-1]), implying that their definitions were shared across persons in some place and

time. Rickert had argued that the human scientist was necessarily oriented to these cultural values in the process of concept formation. But Weber, though relying on Rickert's language to discuss his epistemology, emphasized that the values that guide the researcher are fundamentally *individual* and bereft of any transcendent quality. It is simply that Weber could find no other word to describe this sort of orientation.⁸

Weber, more than anyone else, returned to the core economic idea of *competing ends* and argued for their fundamental incommensurability. Fascinatingly, when brought into the United States by Talcott Parsons, Weber's approach to values was claimed to *solve* the very problem that, to Weber, was the core reason for theorizing values—irresolvable antinomies.

3. The Introduction of Values to the United States

3.1 *The First Generation*

It is not that the notion of “values” was unknown in America before Parsons's work; indeed, we must understand his project as one that had to *undo* the conception of values that had been developed by the Chicago school. Previous to their work, many sociologists (when they were not reformers or social workers) were influenced by Herbert Spencer. Most important here was Franklin Giddings, the leader of the Columbia sociology department. Giddings (1896: 147-50) spoke of “social values,” but meant something that were merely the collectivized version of individual desires. (“They are social values, and are analogous to the subjective values of the

⁸. This is literally true. Max had written to his wife (10 Apr 1902) that he had been reading Rickert, which he thought excellent—“apart from the terminology (‘value’)” (Weber 2012: 374); within a few months, he was to attempt to fix this problem. In a recently discovered and translated set of notes marked “Rickert's values,” Weber (2012: 413) writes, “As a test, one can try *whenever* R[ickert] speaks of ‘values’, to replace that term by ‘___’.” He never filled in the blank.

individual mind.”) For example, people generally value their group (Americans like American things), they value cohesion, and they prize certain “abstract conditions that are favourable to social integrity and development, and to certain modes of effort that are intended to extend or to perfect the social type.” Here he specified the triad of the French revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity.⁹

This was a somewhat more glorified conception of values than that found in Spencer, who tended to use the term in a more economic sense (and frequently spoke of “values” where an American would use “value,” as in “the values of these goods”). But it still sat within a quasi-economic framework. Thus Giddings insisted that “Social values are the grounds of rational social choice.” Just as a rational individual chooses what he individually values, so too society (when it is being rational).

In contrast, the new Chicago school was oriented not to England, but to Germany, for its theoretical inspiration and its leader, Albion Small, was convinced that remaining with the template of *Homo oeconomicus* had become “a bar to knowledge” (Small 1905: 42). Small was impressed by Gustav Ratzenhofer. Ratzenhofer argued that we could best understand social action and systematize our knowledge of social institutions by focusing our attention on the *interests* of actors—interests here understood in a very general sense. Small agreed, arguing that this allows us to begin with the central issue of how actors understand their situation, what they are trying to do, and what means are available to them (1905: 637, 641).

Thus at the turn of the century, values were being discussed in Columbia from an

⁹. He also pointed to the importance of three “modes of effort”: “missionary effort, philanthropy, and education. These characteristic manifestations of the modern spirit are an expression of the passion of the highest social types to extend themselves among the lower races, and among the poor, the unfortunate, and the ignorant.”

economic perspective, and interests at Chicago from a non-economic perspective. But the next generation of the Chicago school, most importantly, Mead, Park and Thomas, had all studied with Georg Simmel in Germany (so had Small, but he was of an earlier generation). And Simmel, unlike Ratzenhofer, saw values as central to sociology.¹⁰ Simmel, like most other neo-Kantians in his orbit, saw the “human sciences” and the “natural sciences” as fundamentally distinct due to the opposition of their respective objects of study: *culture* as opposed to *nature*. Simmel emphasized that values were found only in the human sphere, that of culture and of meaning. Thus he ([1907] 1978: 59) began his *Philosophy of Money* by noting that “the order in which things are placed as natural entities” assumed “their equality before the law of nature.” “But we [humans] are not satisfied with this indifferent necessity. Instead, ...we arrange them in another order—an order of value.” For Simmel, the great puzzle is how humans, through their relations to treasured objects, create a realm of values that partakes of aspects of both subjectivity and objectivity.

This vision was the foundation of the first important American sociological theorization of values, in the extremely well-regarded work of W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki on *The Polish Peasant*. Their famous definition, frequently recycled in early twentieth century sociology, runs as follows: “By a social value we understand any datum having an empirical content accessible to the members of some group and a meaning with regard to which it is or may be an object of activity. Thus, a foodstuff, an instrument, a coin, a piece of poetry, a

¹⁰. Simmel also relied on the conception of interests to define the *content* of sociation; Simmel reviewed one of Ratzenhofer’s works, but may not have read the work that Small discusses (Swedberg 2005:57). Ratzenhofer was no simplistic, commonsensical, fuddy-duddy—he had a somewhat mystical understanding of all reality as different degrees of organization of some primordial force, a not-uncommon view in the nineteenth century (1898: 24-27).

university, a myth, a scientific theory, are social values.... The social value is thus opposed to the natural thing, which has a content but, as part of nature, has no meaning for human activity, is treated as ‘valueless’; when the natural thing assumes a meaning, it becomes thereby a social value” (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918: Volume 1, 21).

What should strike us as surprising is how *concrete* values were: they were *things* in the world, and what made them different from objects was simply that they were valued, brought under the umbrella of cultural meaning as opposed to natural indifference (Znaniecki 1934: 34, 41, 80, 84, 93, 155). Faris (1928: 278) gives an example: “At the party Romeo meets Juliet, and very shortly the girl becomes to him a beloved object, a value.” Cooley’s (1918: 284) take was somewhat different, but also concrete, and stemmed from what an organism was trying to *do* in a given situation. Given this foundation, Cooley (1918: 311) rejected the assumption that pecuniary values were an inherently lower form than all others, or that other values could not be translated into money terms. “Chastity,” he noted drily (1918: 313; also 338), “is sold daily by people not radically different in nature from the rest of us.”¹¹

While Thomas and Znaniecki (e.g., 1918: Vol 3, 24, 52, 69; Vol. 5, xvii) saw that some of these values might correspond to larger institutional groups—sometimes called “complexes” or “fields”—the core of their approach was that values were not defined by *trans-individual* organization, but by subjective *meaning*. But there was another approach to values that influenced American social science, specifically, social psychology. This was the work of Eduard Spranger—one of Weber’s opponents in the “value-judgments debate” (see Spranger

¹¹. “I notice that if there is anything attractive about a man he soon learns to collect pay for it. And not less is it true that the need for righteousness finds expression in a willingness to pay a (reasonable) price for it in the market-place.”

1996 [1913]). Spranger had built upon the many similar systems of cultural spheres to chart out what he called “forms of life” [or “ways of living”; *Lebensformen*], which he understood as correlative to autonomous institutional spheres of value. Thus there is the economic sphere, but also an “economic type” of man (Spranger 1914: 433; [1914] 1928: 250; 1925: 280). This is of course an ideal type, but one that we recognize in the character structures of those about us.

This approach was in short order Americanized—the translation was titled *Types of Men*—and turned into a widely used scale by Allport and Vernon (1931). It consisted of a set of items both wildly abstract (do you prefer this sort of world to that?) and astoundingly concrete (do you prefer reading *Scientific American* or *Arts and Decorations*?), and was one of the most highly used psychometric instruments for a half century after its introduction (Kopelman, Rovenpor, and Guan 2003).¹² It is this approach that was revived in the work of Shalom Schwartz and that later re-entered sociology (Cieciuch, Schwartz and Davidov 2015). Yet the core theoretical interpretation of this tradition was dramatically altered, by the remarkable recasting of values by someone who claimed to be following Spranger’s nemesis, Max Weber. This was Talcott Parsons.

3.2 *Values and Disinterest*

Despite defining himself as an importer of the Weber circle/Southwest school, with whom he had studied (Camic 2005: espec. 260n14), Talcott Parsons’s work largely ignored the

¹². Another, excessively creative, adaption, came from G. H. Mead’s student (and collaborator of Parsons’s), Charles W. Morris. Morris (1973 [1942]; 1956: 122) attempted to tie Spranger’s system to William Sheldon’s (e.g., 1954) influential but bizarre scheme of somatotypes (with the largest categories being ectomorph, endomorph and mesomorph). This approach remained less influential than that of Allport and Vernon.

central problematic of their approach (the division between the natural and human sciences). Instead, Parsons initially put forward a vision that would have amused Weber, a conception of a difference between individual- and community-orientations, one closer to the French sociology that turned on the distinction between egoism and altruism. Further, Parsons's idea of values had more in common with that dominant in anthropology at the time, than with that of the sociology of his day.

Although many conceptions of "culture" at the time, even in anthropology, emphasized the disarticulated nature of its many parts (Camic 2005: 247), "values" nicely could be used to give insight as to the differences between one culture and another, even at the risk of homogenizing the cultures. Thus in American anthropology in the early 20th century, the notion of "values," or "cultural values" (e.g., Brown 1932), though often combined with some idea of differentiation into spheres (e.g., Sapir 1924: 401-429), was primarily used to support arguments about cultural relativism.

For example, Malinowski (1922: 25)—with whom Parsons studied, and whose vision of culture influenced him (Parsons 1977: 23; Martel 1979: 610; Camic 2005: 248)—emphasized that the goal of ethnography is "to grasp the native's point of view," noting that "in each culture, the values are slightly different; people aspire after different aims, follow different impulses, yearn after a different form of happiness" (for another example, see Benedict 1959 [1934]: 246). In his initial approach to values, Parsons was (as he later admitted [1977: 280, 283]) oriented to this relativism, only transforming the cross-cultural relativism of anthropologists into (within-European-culture) historical relativism. Thus he (1991 [1932]: 191f) reported to his American readers that "it is the specific role of 'values' which is characteristic of German sociology...they introduce a highly important element of relativism into sociology. They encourage the

conception of a society dominated by such a system of values as a closed, complete whole, sharply differentiated from others, rather than as a transitory stage in a continuous process.”

Again, Parsons (1934: 532) argued that “The qualitative variation in history of ultimate values...is one of the fundamental facts of empirical experience....And...there is no escape from the conclusion that really consistent empiricism leads inevitably to *Historismus*.”¹³

This equation of the role of values with relativism was odd and inaccurate as a characterization of the German thought Parsons claimed to represent (this despite the undeniable presence of historical relativists in Germany). But Parsons made more specific, detailed, and wildly incorrect statements about Max Weber’s theory of action and values. In particular, as noted by other critics, Parsons attempted to downplay the centrality of interests for Weber’s approach to action.

Pope, Cohen and Hazelrigg (1975) have pointed out (also Lizardo and Stoltz 2018) that Weber often (e.g., 1946 [1915]: 280; 1978: 202) deliberately spoke of “ideal or material interests” to demonstrate that he did not think that there was a fundamental difference between the two in terms of human motivation. But Parsons (e.g., 1975: 668), who always assumed that those who talked about interests “really” were thinking of material ones, was determined to revise Weber to split the material from the ideal. In a sharp critique of H. M. Robertson’s interpretation of Weber, Parsons (1991 [1935]: 62) insisted that “Weber sees what Dr. Robertson does not...his deeper, sociological analysis of the concrete phenomenon resulted in the discovery of another element of a totally different order....This is not the pursuit of self-interest,...but is rather a case of ‘objective,’ ‘selfless’ devotion to worldly tasks, which is

¹³. While Parsons was later to turn against historicism, at this point, he thought it not only unavoidable but in keeping with the approaches of both Durkheim and Pareto.

‘disinterested’ as opposed to the ‘interest’ of the other element.”¹⁴

Nothing like this can be found in Weber’s work; Weber never used terms like ‘disinterested’ except to indicate that the analyst might be *conceptually* indifferent to certain issues.¹⁵ Given that Weber saw himself, and was seen by his fellows, as a Jeremiah putting forward an ethic of passion under the steely control of a rational mind, the whole notion that he valorized disinterested action is close to absurd. Rather than opposing *interested* to *disinterested* (*value related*), as we saw above, Weber often identified the two. Indeed, discussing the advantages that an aristocracy holds for producing leaders who can *live for* politics as opposed to *living off* of politics, Weber (1994 [1917]: 112) noted that “It is not that [the aristocrat] lives in some kind of economically ‘disinterested’ sphere [*ökonomisch ‘interessenleeren Raum’*]. No such thing exists.” Why, given the flagrant textual evidence against this position, did Parsons believe it necessary to claim that Weber’s use of values was connected to a theorization of disinterested behavior? To do this, we must understand Parsons’ goals.

3.3 *The Parsons Project*

Parsons’s project, as he himself (1975: 666; also see 1977: 132) later emphasized, was to “clarify certain problems of the relation between economic theory and sociological theory.” His great

¹⁴. Again, Parsons (1991 [1936]: 276) claimed that Weber’s idea of the “calling” “is essentially a case of ‘disinterested’ application to a task for its own sake, apart from any consideration of reward.”

¹⁵. “Disinterest” is a fascinating concept—it fits a general emphasis on understatement that characterizes Anglo cultures and that is lacking in most European languages (Wierzbicka 2006). Thus while *disinterested* is much more common in English than *uninteresting*, the reverse is true in German (*uninteressiert* as opposed to *uninteressant*). But even the German terms most closely related to *disinterest* are rare in Weber. A characteristic use of the closest equivalent is found in Simmel (1977 [1905]: 54), who notes that “In his relationships with others, the individual tries to find the best expression for affection and reserve, indifference and interest [*Gleichgültigkeit und Interesse*].” Finally, while Weber might note that mystics might have a *selfless* orientation, this is not the opposite of *selfish*.

achievement along these lines was his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (first published in 1937; a second edition was published in 1949). Here Parsons (1968 [1949]: 728) aimed to simultaneously accomplish three tasks: to synthesize work on the theory of action, to introduce theoretical consensus within sociology, and to demarcate sociology from its sister disciplines. Good fences make good neighbors, and economics in particular had a powerful and ambivalent fascination for Parsons. While it served as an excellent model for the sort of epistemic approach that should guide sociological theorizing, *economism* in sociological analysis would be dreadful. To Parsons, such an overextension of economic logic was the basis of utilitarianism, and utilitarianism logically implied what he called the “Hobbesian problem of order.” Hobbes (1909 [1651]: 41) had declared that in the state of nature, there was no “common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man” in question. Parsons (1968 [1949]: 90) concluded that this meant that action would be defined by the passions: “discrete, randomly variant ends of action.” It was the *unordered* nature of these ends that Parsons believed to be the source of the trouble.

In Parsons’s (1968 [1949]: 765-8) reconstruction, Hobbes had charted the (analytic) emergence of *Homo oeconomicus* and the resulting troubles, which are solved by *Homo tyrannicus*. But this solution creates a second problem (illegitimate domination), as well the grounds for a second social science (political science). This second problem in turn is solved by the emergence of “common-value integration.” Integration does three things. First, it allows for *legitimate* domination. Second, it orders the otherwise “random” individual passions. Third—and perhaps most important—it implies a third social science, sociology, in need of a master

plan.¹⁶

Given his attachment to Weber, one might think that Parsons would then focus on the legitimation of domination. If sociology really only needed to separate itself from political science, such a focus on legitimation would be reasonable. But Parsons was fundamentally concerned with making a partition between sociology and economics (Camic 1987: 428f), one that initially (e.g., 1935c: 299) took a rather simple form: on one side, egoism, and on the other side, altruism (later, see Parsons and Smelser 1956). On one side, interests, and on the other side, values.

Getting this from Weber required a fair amount of distortion and misreading. In particular, Parsons had to make the values not only *different* from interests (in the way that we might say that values are somewhat more general than interests, or how we might oppose material and ideal interests)—they were to be their *opposite* (see Camic 1989: 50, 76; Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope 1975: 235f; Warner 1978: 1338f).¹⁷ Thus value-driven action had to be *disinterested* action.¹⁸ It was for this reason that he continued to claim that, according to Weber, attributing *legitimacy* to norms implied “taking a given type of attitude toward the norms

¹⁶. Most charmingly, Parsons (1968 [1949]: 774) returned to the “pessimism” of a disorganized Hobbesian world—but recast it in terms of the then-current state of sociology, with as many competing schools as there were warring bodies in Hobbes’s state of nature. Thus the fundamentally sociological theory of common value orientations was itself the common orientation that sociology would use to solve its *own* problem of order.

¹⁷. This is literally true, at least, in Parsons’s later work, where (1977: 310) he proposed that “the ‘pressure’ of interests tends to be ‘centrifugal,’ with a built-in tendency to escape the ‘control’ of values, whereas the tendency of the value-pattern’s pressure is obversely ‘centripetal.’”

¹⁸. Again, this is literally (and shockingly) true: in his translation of *Economy and Society*, Parsons (in Weber 1947: 134; also 1978: 39) translated *wertrational*—value-rational, the action that comes from a nonconsequentialist orientation to prized values—as “rationally disinterested loyalty,” while goal-rational [*zweckrational*] was rendered as “expediency.”

involved which may be characterized as one of disinterested acceptance” (1968 [1949]: 661). He recognized that Weber’s usage was not always parallel to his own. But, he (1968 [1949]: 659) insisted, “the essential meaning is clear...In the terminology of this study it is preferable to say that these motives may be classified as disinterested and interested.”

Could such a partition be established, it would chart out a region for sociological investigations that was out of the reach of economic analysis. Thus Parsons (1935b: 663) claimed that “The most striking feature of recent sociological thought has been a slow, and even as yet not frequently clear, realization of the concrete importance of the principal factor lying to the other side of the economic, the ‘value’ factor,” and that (1935b: 655) “the distinguishing characteristic of this factor is its radical¹⁹ difference from the pursuit of individual economic interest.”

Parsons’s monumental book, *The Structure of Social Action*, then extended this implausible argument to writers other than Weber. Speaking of Durkheim’s theory of norms, Parsons (1968 [1949]: 414; also 463) emphasized that “There is the same disinterestedness, the same divorce from the attitude of calculation of advantage.”²⁰ And Parsons (1968 [1949]: 164) claimed that the “disinterested ethical attitude...is characteristic of Marshall’s ideal economic man.” (While Marshall highlighted the role of altruistic motivations for economic action, he never uses the term “disinterest” in his *Principles*.) This also was Parsons’s take on Tönnies’s distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*; “the keynote of *Gesellschaft*,” wrote

¹⁹. He protests too much; in the first part of this two-part piece (1935a) he uses the word *radical* two dozen times; in the second part (1935b), another dozen.

²⁰. It certainly is true that Durkheim argued that the moral attitude was an *impersonal* one, and that it was divorced from interest. However, the notion that Durkheim associated egoism with economic calculation is a bit odd.

Parsons (1968 [1949]: 657; also 658), “is the ‘rational pursuit of individual self-interest.’” (Note that Parsons is not quoting this phrase from Tönnies; given that Tönnies’s starting point was a bifurcation of two types of constellations of relations of mutual advantage, he would never make such an association.²¹ But Parsons [e.g., 1977: 33, 256] frequently used this phrase in inverted commas as if he were quoting someone else.)

The most extraordinary of Parsons’ various intellectual misreadings was his insistence that he could mash the cynical Vilfredo Pareto into his scheme. Lawrence Henderson, a pivotal influence for Parsons at Harvard, started a famous Pareto reading group, and Parsons attributed much of his development to this experience. Retrospectively, however, it is unclear what on earth Parsons was actually reading. Pareto, more famous as an economist, also ventured into sociology, with goal of making whatever limited contributions were possible to a positive, scientific sociology. Certainly, Pareto did propose that the relation of sociology to economics paralleled the relation of non-rational to rational action (e.g., 1935 [1923]: IV, 1442, §2079). But there was nothing specifically *normative* about this non-rational action. The core of Pareto’s argument was that people are frequently non-rational if not downright irrational, guided by relatively simple feelings, but they develop irrelevant and misleading justifications for their actions.

However, not all people were the same. Pareto identified two different mental urges, the first, the “persistence of aggregates,” and the second, the “instinct of combinations.” By the first,

²¹. Tönnies (1957: 33) began, “This study will consider as its subject of investigation only the relationships of mutual affirmation. Every such relationship...consists of assistance, relief, services, which are transmitted back and forth from one party to another and are to be considered as expressions of wills and their forces.” This work, so far as we know, only uses the term *interest* once in a way at all compatible with Parsons’s usage, and this in a passage irrelevant for Parsons’s claims; 1957: 123, also see 229; 1922: 109).

he meant more or less the tendency for people to prefer not to rethink old habits and to stick with whatever thoughtways they have. By the second, he meant the joy found in devising new tangles of ideas. The personality difference between those who disproportionately preferred the former to those who disproportionately preferred the latter mirrored a more general difference between sheep and wolves. Far from using market analysis to demonstrate that the wealth distributions are inherently legitimate, Pareto believed that they arose from eternal processes in which some worked dutifully, and scrimped and saved, only to have the fruits of their labor plucked away by the more ruthless and far-seeing (1935 [1923]: IV, 1647ff, § 2313-4).

Yet Parsons claimed that this distinction was actually one between “a type of action in which ideal ends are predominant and is characterized by subordination of individual and immediate interest to them,” and one characterized by “absorption in immediate and tangible interest” (Parsons [1933] 1991: 107). The notion that the sluggish, habit-guided sheep were pursuing ideal ends is one that would have led Pareto to wry amusement. Rather than having the slightest sympathy for such an attempt to oppose values to interest, Pareto used the “prattle” about “values” as an example of anti-scientific, metaphysical, absurdity (e.g., 1935 / 1923: I, 21, 30, 58, 61f; III: 1413 / 2022]). Such supposedly ideal ends and principles (like claims to serve “equality” or “solidarity”) were, Pareto repeatedly insisted, merely ways of “cloaking” or “dressing up” such feelings or wishes “with a logical varnish” (e.g., II: 502/854; II: 680/1146; II: 520/889; II: 612/1015; III: 990/1543; III: 1314 /1884), in part to satisfy the “demand for abstractions” (II: 646/1088).

For example, “The sentiment that is very inappropriately named equality is fresh, strong, alert, precisely because it is not, in fact, a sentiment of equality and is not related to any abstraction, as a few naive ‘intellectuals’ still believe; but because it is related to the direct

interests of individuals who are bent on escaping certain inequalities not in their favour, and setting up new inequalities that will be in their favour, this latter being their chief concern” (735/1227; also II: 733/1222). When political actors loudly claimed to treasure equality “when it turned to their interest to do so,” there were but “a few ‘intellectuals,’ defective in energy, knowledge, and good sense, who take the declamations of the types named above seriously” (II: 684f/1152). While Parsons claimed that values were necessary for social equilibrium, Pareto (II: 727 /1207) proposed that this was true of *interests* (II: 501f/851; III: 1406/2009; IV 1541/2202). Given that the prevailing tone of Pareto’s work is amused disgust with hypocrisy (e.g., II:626/1050), Parsons’s entire interpretation can charitably only be described as *chutzpadik*.

Just as Parsons tried to arrange all his chosen allies around this notion of *disinterest*, he simultaneously worked to unify all his opponents beneath the standard of “interests.” These opponents were, to Parsons, utilitarians—interlopers who took a way of thinking that was well and good on the turf of economics, but ported it over into sociological territory. To Parsons (1968 [1949]: 110), Marx was simply one more in this line of the British utilitarian tradition (also see 1961: 94). For this reason, Parsons ignored what Marx himself and all his followers considered his signal contribution—his theory of historical/dialectical materialism—and treated Marx as proposing a “doctrine of interests” (1968 [1949]: 491; also 490). (The notion that interests is a central theoretical term from Marx is still accepted as self-evident by American sociologists.)

In sum, Parsons constructed an opposition that was not quite the same as the opposition of egoism and altruism that both Durkheim and Marshall employed, for altruism was, as both noted, very often inspired by emotions like love or enthusiasm. Such feelings did not fit the particularly *modern* conception that Parsons was developing, one that pitted self-interest against

disinterest. And such feelings tended to be both *concrete* and *particular*, while Parsons was convinced that values had to be *abstract*.

3.4 Stratification and Abstraction

The abstraction of values became widely accepted in sociology, as it promised to solve a number of the problems that theorists were struggling with. First, this abstraction helped justify the increasing conviction (highlighted by Parsons) that values should be objects of *consensus*. Thus although values had been introduced into German social thought as a way of explaining *difference* and *conflict*, Parsons was successful in transforming them to align with the anthropological conception in which values were that which were *shared* within some culture. This, of course, flew in the face of the well-established tradition (originating in Spranger) of looking at interpersonal *differences* in values. Milton Rokeach (e.g., 1973) solved this contradiction by holding that values were indeed *shared*, and that we differed merely in the *weight* which we place on each. This vision had a strong elective affinity for a new approach in which subjects filled out pen-and-paper tests: it was simple to value everything, since all the value claims were costless. One could “value equality” without having to give a penny to anyone else.

It was this disconnect between such measured values and actual practices that was later to bring the approach into disrepute. But at the time, the abstraction of values seemed, at least in the realm of theory, to *increase* their power. As Spates (1983: 35) pointed out, this abstraction allowed theorists to claim that values had an extremely wide range of influence—“they ‘controlled’ norms, and norms ‘controlled’ behavior.” This was hardly surprising: the less it was possible to bring empirical disproof to claims, the more likely sociologists were to ramp

them up. But there was another reason for the “idealization” of values (as Rokeach unashamedly put it)—other, that is, than mere insulation against disproof. Rokeach (1973: 22) gives a clue when he complains that interests could never serve as “generalized plans for conflict resolution.” This is because *interest* is “obviously a narrower concept than value. It cannot be classified as an idealized model of behavior or end-state of existence. It would be difficult to argue that an interest is a standard or that it has an ‘ought’ character” (Rokeach 1973:22). But values in this new form could solve conflict by bringing an ethical imperative to bear—values promised to transmute “I want *x* but you want *y*” situations into a “we should” situations.

As we recall, Parsons (e.g., 1934: 518) had somewhat strangely insisted on implying that the problem with a world without values (Hobbes’s state of nature) is that people’s ends would be “randomly” oriented. As Parsons knew quite well, the reason Hobbes believed there would be conflict was not that our ends did not overlap, but precisely because they *did*. (Parsons seems to have interpreted randomness in a quasi-statistical sense of exogenous to the system of action.) For as Hobbes (1909 [1651]: 95) said, “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end, endeavour to destroy, or subdue one an other [sic].” The notion that “values” solved these problems by ordering ends never made much sense, and in *Structure*, Parsons concentrated on the more reasonable argument that they solved not the Hobbesian problem of order, but the Hobbesian *solution* of illegitimate domination. Yet, as we noted above, Parsons went beyond what was necessary for this (Weber’s conception of the legitimacy of domination would have done well), and attempted to base political rule in *generalized* value consensus. Why?

His purposes are easier to see in the next theoretical compendium that he produced, one that (though unpublished at the time) served as the guiding principles of his theory up until his

1951 *Social System*. In his discussion of values, here Parsons (2010 [c 1939]: 114; also 128, 153) noted that we “value” other people—and, in a way, we value *all* those we interact with. “Hence a valuation of a plurality of different individuals at the same time inherently implies a *relative* valuation, a *ranking* of them, however roughly. The question must always arise whether B or C is the more respected.” What is crucial is that “the evaluations by A and B of their associate C must come somewhere near agreeing....But this implies in some sense an integrated set of standards according to which the evaluations are, or are supposed to be, made” (1949 [1940]: 167). For what is being allocated here is not simply “respect,” but *stuff*—for example, money and property, and, indirectly, health and happiness. Some have more than others, and if we did not agree on our rankings of others’ worth, we could not agree that life chances had been correctly distributed. In other words, Parsons wanted not merely to legitimate the rule of some, but the entire stratification order by which some persons are, in effect, considered more valuable than others. As he later put it, he had always believed “that the institutionalization of stratification, or more precisely of relations of inequality of status, constitutes an essential aspect in the solution of the problem of order in social systems through the legitimation of essential inequalities” (Parsons 1977: 327). “But such a scale of ranking cannot be agreed upon unless there are, in an adequately corresponding degree, *common standards* according to which the judgments are arrived at, or by which they are determined when called into question” (2010 [c 1939]: 114).

Such common standards, concluded Parsons (2010 [c 1939]: 115), can only arise if they are derivable from a “common value system.” This sort of legitimation of a stratification order could not be achieved via the presence of concrete objects that were valued, nor by “forms of life”—the previous, relatively concrete, sociological approaches to values that we saw in inter-

war American sociology. Rather, as Parsons later emphasized, the justifications had to be *abstract*.²² “In the nature of the position of cultural components in this system of action, the reference to ‘justification’ must call on more generalized considerations, must tend toward the pattern of universalism.” Indeed, this is one of the reasons why Parsons believed that *values* had to be understood as antithetical to *interests*. As he continued, “justification must continually invoke ‘general principles.’ On the other hand, ‘appeal to interest’ must invoke considerations more special to the particular characteristics and circumstances of the units or classes of them” (Parsons 1977: 356). The opposition of values to interests, in other words, was homologous to that of universal to particular.

Of course, simply because this conception of values *could* be taken to legitimize stratification in no way demonstrates that this is *why* Parsons formulated this more abstract conception of values. However, a closer look at the context of Parsons’s work demonstrates that he quite specifically and deliberately *did* understand the disinterested nature of valuation as key to the legitimation of authority, as his focus on disinterest was tied up with his understanding of professionalism as a new, specifically modern, form of legitimate domination characterized by beneficent disinterest.

3.5 Professions and Modernization

Historians of sociological theory (e.g., Gerhardt 1998: 142; 2002; Wenzel 1990) have noted that Parsons worked out his later theory—one that turned on the “pattern variables” that

²². “The more differentiated the system, the higher the level of generality at which the value-pattern must be ‘couched’ if it is to legitimate the more specific values of *all* the parts of the social system” (Parsons 1977: 307).

classified social formations—by developing an ideal-typical vision of the process of modernization, one in which the professions played a pivotal role. The professional occupied one pole of each variable Parsons developed, being the actor whose ethic was *affectively neutral*, whose status was *achieved*, whose job involved the *universal* application of *specific* competences, and, most important, who possessed a *collective* orientation. In Parsons's (1977: 41f; also 354; Parsons and Smelser 1956: 33) own words, this scheme “originated as an attempt to formulate a theoretical approach to the interpretation of the professions.....The professional orientation was, as I initially put it, ‘disinterested’...in the sense in which the physician professes to be above all concerned with the welfare of the patient.” But evidence of Parsons placing key analytic weight on the professions for his understanding of modernity comes earlier than this work (cf. Parsons 1977: 132).

In an article on the subject of “Service” written for the 1934 *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Parsons (1991 [1934]: 47f) wrote that “All societies depend to a greater to less [*sic*] degree on the disinterested performance of service and maintain specific ethical sanctions of it, either as an end in itself or as contributory to some higher end even farther removed from self-interest.” Parsons briefly traced a speculative developmental process in which the mutual service of members of a kin group could become extended to a larger target, one “impersonal and indefinite,” while at the same time, the range of obligations “becomes specific and limited to definite functions.”

And it was *professionals* that Parsons saw as those most able in modern society to provide this supposedly functionally necessary disinterestedness (1949 [1939]: 186). Whether or not we accept that professionals provide these functionally necessary services for society, they certainly provided the functionally necessary wedge for Parsons to disprove utilitarianism and

vulgar economism (also see 1949 [1940]). Parsons later made clear (1977: 33, 43, 55, 57) that he at least retrospectively cast the world as divided between capitalists and socialists, each claiming to negate the other, but both agreeing on the predominance of interests, merely arguing over whether to privilege individual or collective interests. The professions were an existence proof of the falsity of *both* these contenders (Joas and Knöbl 2009: 54), as professionals used their superior bargaining position in a specifically *disinterested* way, demonstrating the power of norms over conduct.²³

The very existence of professionals, and the fact that they obviously constituted the core of the new society, thus appeared to Parsons a fact of the greatest theoretical importance. In particular, as Gouldner (1970: 154-7) claimed, their existence could be used to ground the legitimacy of the postwar American capitalist order. At least, this was what Parsons himself later explicitly emphasized, as he struggled with the fact that in the twentieth century, there had been “a shifting of burden of proof”—all inequality was guilty unless proven functional (1977: 326).²⁴ The relevance of the professions was that they *visibly* were a form of legitimate stratification—the “competence gap” of the laity, coupled with the disinterest of the professional, highlighted “the incapacity, for a very wide variety of reasons, of all members of a societal community to take effective responsibility for the protection and furtherance of their own rights and interests, hence there is a necessity of ‘entrusting’ these interests to persons or groups on

²³. In a response to a controversial book by University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins (1936: 2, 37), who scathingly indicted professional education as something only good for waking up slumbering football players, Parsons (1937: 365) insisted that “encouragement of the professions is one of the most effective ways of promoting disinterestedness in contemporary society.”

²⁴. In his earlier work, however, Parsons was probably more oriented to grounding the legitimacy of sociology than that of American society as a whole (Camic 1989: 47).

which such responsibility is focused” (Parsons 1977: 342).

Alexander (1983: 267; also see 49f, 266) is thus quite correct to argue, in his analysis of Parsons’s treatment of the professions, that Parsons was “unable...to identify professional self-interest in an instrumental, means oriented way.” This was not an irrelevant oversight, but a key plank allowing him to disprove utilitarianism. In other words, Parsons’s theory of values went hand in hand with the requirement that we take professionals’ claims to be disinterested—to enter the profession only to serve others—at face value.

This inability to see professionals as anything other than disinterested service providers was not found among previous sociologists. Cooley (1918: 335) explicitly noted in his discussion of values that “all technical classes, in one way or another, [employ] the institutions in their charge for their own aggrandizement. If the clergy have done this, we may assume that other classes will also: indeed it is mostly unconscious and involves no peculiar moral reproach.” Indeed, even Marshall—who came closest of all of Parsons’s sources to reflecting the sort of moral sensibility Parsons was desperately trying to derive—noted that professionals were in a stronger position than their clients to exploit the relationship (1961 [1890]: 568).²⁵

Thus Parsons’s requirement that we accept the professions of professionals at face value was not a result of lack of thought: it was what allowed him to use the rise of the professions as a key piece of evidence demonstrating the failure of economism and the need for a culturally-focused, values-based, sociology. We might, however, still imagine that it was idiosyncratic or

²⁵. “Many of the professional classes are richer, have larger reserve funds, more knowledge and resolution, and much greater power of concerted action with regard to the terms on which they sell their services, than the greater number of their clients and customers” (VI, iv, 6). The *coup de grace* comes from Thomas and Znaniecki (1918: Volume 3, 60f), who commented that the “individual whose character is formed by a modern professional group is the narrowest type of Philistine the world has ever seen.”

irrelevant for *other* sociological work. However, even if Parsons did not single-handedly revise American sociologists' theory of the action system in such a way as to confuse rationalizations and motivations, he certainly not only was the apogee of such a tendency, but also gave us the vocabulary to make such analytic distortions extremely difficult to uncover. We go on to give a brief example, from what was, for Parsons, the ideal typical case of professionalism, namely medical education.

3.6 *Disinterested Doctors*

The medical profession was, as Alexander (1983: 266) said, Parsons's "principal case study" in *The Social System* and the doctor was, to Parsons, "the archetype of the professional" (Freidson 1970: 96). Indeed, Parsons had planned to do an ethnographic/interview study of the medical profession and of medical socialization, and did around a year's worth of empirical work (Joas and Knöbl 2009: 54), but abandoned it due to his emotional response to the deaths of his two inspirational doctor-figures, his brother and his father-in-law (Parsons 1977: 33f, 38, 43, 62). Closer attention to this example demonstrates both the problems with Parsons's willingness to accept professional accounts at face value, and the distortions that such a willingness has produced in sociological knowledge. Here, given the absence of Parsons's own study, we propose to consider one of the most famous sociological studies of medical professionalization, Bosk's 1979 *Forgive and Remember*. Thanks to Bosk's updating the book later (2003 [1979]) and his confessions of some errors of judgment, we are able to peer behind the interpretation (and the justifications) and see a bit more of the data.

According to medical sociologist Elliot Freidson (1975: 36), Parsons assumed that doctors, among other professionals, would police themselves. But Freidson's own study had

found that rather than correcting errors, “as a political and economic community of interest, the profession has been concerned with defending its privileged position by presenting a united front to the outsiders,” and hence suppressed information on errors (244). Bosk (2003 [1979]) wanted to see if the picture was indeed so grim, and he concluded that, in fact, surgeons were uniquely oriented to moral lapses on the part of their trainees, including what Bosk creatively called “Quasi-normative errors”—when the rule being broken was actually an idiosyncrasy of the attending physicians: the “fault is that of *hubris*,” not accepting that the “personal preferences of superiors are translated into absolute rules of conduct for subordinates” (64f). The notion that turning one’s own wishes into others’ commands is a normative, even quasi-normative, action is hardly obvious upon the face of it. It is an even more successful alchemy than the Weber-Simmel notion that one’s own desires become a law for *oneself*. But this transmutation becomes even more implausible when Bosk (226) later reveals that the key surgeon in question thought it was delightful to begin a general meeting by making derogatory comments about “slopes, gooks, and dinks” to the Asian anesthesiologist, racist jokes to the black nurse, and holocaust jokes to the Jewish and German descent underlings (for the former, suggesting that one of his relatives was now a lampshade, and, for the latter: “I haven't seen this much blood since your relatives greeted the chief rabbi of Berlin during the war”).

How could one account for such sadistic actions toward underlings? Bosk (222) tells us that “Senior surgeons...believed that residency was a stress test,” and so actions that might, to the uninitiated, seem mere bullying actually had a functional justification. But this generalization is untrue in two ways. First, as Bosk admitted in a footnote (224n3), some attending physicians bullied and others didn’t, and the latter “often had nothing but contempt” for the former. Second, we have no reason to be confident that Bosk knew much about what the

physicians “believed” about the nature of residency; the fact that an attending might *account* for his behavior (he tried to humiliate *P*) with an appeal to this theory (“I do this because...”) is not a fact about belief, it is a fact about accounting. Yet Bosk (208) concluded that what he had found was that his physicians were “eager to inculcate into their young recruits the values in which they believe so strongly.”

Bosk’s naiveté in the face of confident authority is not surprising; the fault was not in him, but in his very theoretical terms, and in the rejection of the previous Chicago school conception of values. Although such a claim may seem difficult to support, we have an extremely good comparative case: Becker et al.’s earlier (1977 [1961]) study of medical education. They employed the pre-Parsonian conceptions of values (36), and they had no such interpretive distortions. They saw that key value held by medical students was *responsibility*, for it was this that the students were trying to maximize (those with more responsibility are superior to those with less) (237, 259f).

In this way, Becker et al. contrasted the aspects of the career that were *meaningful* to the doctors with the behavioral *justifications* that authority figures might use. Becker et al. (421) noted that the justifications for actions might vary by audience, and that actors might seize upon one set of values in one sort of situation, and a different—logically contradictory—set of values in a different situation in which these seemed more useful (430).²⁶ Becker et al. had no difficulty understanding the authoritarianism of the medical school (48) and that some faculty were abusive (281, 286), while still examining different types of mistakes (226; also see Freidson

²⁶ For this reason, Becker—unlike Bosk—successfully answered the question of whether the ideas drilled so assiduously into the heads of students at school persisted when they left. The answer is no, not because doctors are lower forms of life than other humans, but because “values learned in school persist only when the immediate situation makes their use appropriate” (433).

1975: 128).²⁷

But most of post-war sociology built into the theory of action a form of self-accounting in which the professionals excelled—a way of explaining actions by recourse to functions and abstractions, as opposed to concrete norms. This made it difficult to distinguish justifications made *after* action from whatever cognitions might have come *before* it. By accepting as their core moral orientation a distinction between values and interests, collective and individual, altruistic and egoistic, and, even more, mapping this onto the distinction between themselves and their negative reference group (i.e., economists), sociologists have hampered any efforts to develop a plausible theory of action.

4 Conclusion

It seems somewhat strange, but there has indeed been a dramatic difference in thoughtstyle between American economists and sociologists. This was not the distinction between interest and disinterest that Parsons tried to establish, but one about the relation between the individual and the collective. Both economists and sociologists widely accept that, given a set of individuals in interaction and interdependence, new characteristics or phenomena may emerge. To economists, it is obvious that precisely because these are emergent, they need not be attributed to the subsumed individuals. An equilibrium price of a good may emerge in a market, but this does not demonstrate that this is precisely the value placed on the good by all participants, even by all who choose to make a purchase.

²⁷. Similarly, Freidson (1970: 153) noted that most sociological studies of medicine treated “with either silence or embarrassment” the finding that, to doctors, another important value, by any literal understanding of this term, *was* high income.

But sociologists, still guided by the French intuition that the social average was realer than the individuals themselves, reasoned antithetically—that which emerged, at least if it was of sufficient social importance, not only must be held and prized by the individuals, but also be their deepest core. Thus it seemed intuitively plausible that complex commitments to abstractions could be fundamental and shared within a society. The undeniable anthropological evidence of intercultural variance further bolstered the assumption that these orientations would be the product of common patterns of socialization.

It might well be that some sort of understanding of such cultural values could be empirically justified. But Talcott Parsons tied the project of identifying culturally variable orientations to action with professions of disinterest—with rhetorical claims that made a partition between egoistic interest on the one side, and pro-social disinterest on the other. But this opposition between the concepts of *interest* and *value*—the notion that there are *two fundamentally different species* of orientation—is, as Luhmann (2000: 181, 183) has argued, “an extremely artificial, evolutionarily improbable arrangement, that we cannot impute to any premodern society.” It seems both an unreflective embrace of certain justification patterns characteristic of modernity, and a more specific result of Parsons’s intervention and his deliberate attempt to build a form of sociology that could imitate the theoretical approach of economics, while segregating the two.

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