

# Talcott Parsons

(1902-1979)



# One Page Summary of Parsons

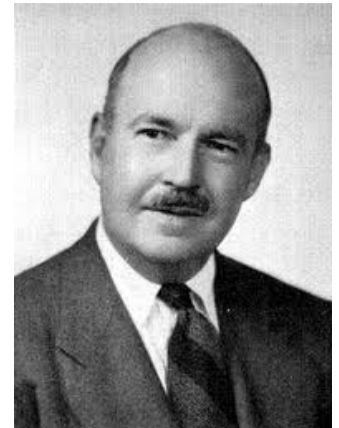
- ***How is Social Order Possible?***

(Structural-functionalism) Two Answers:

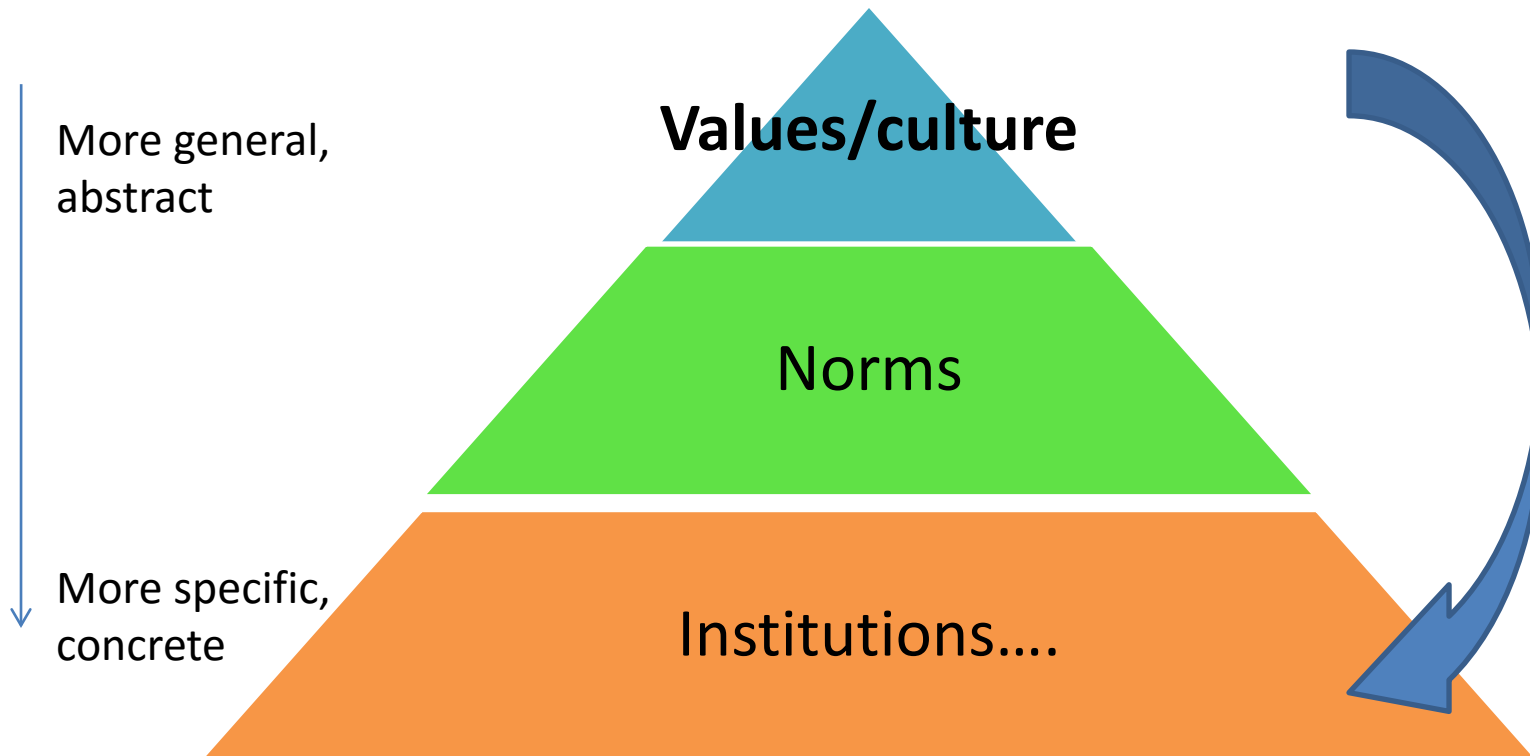
1. **Socialization** (internalizing values)
2. **Social Control** (using punishments)

Other questions:

- Why do people get out of line? - “I don’t know”
- What accounts for historical change? – “I don’t know that either; that should be studied empirically”
- “I have little to add that Weber hasn’t already said....



# Parsons control hierarchy



**Values govern norms, which then govern institutions. In Parsons' schema, institutions are derived *from* values. Actors make choices, but these choices are always constrained by societal values and norms. Society at some level has to constitute a *common value system*.**

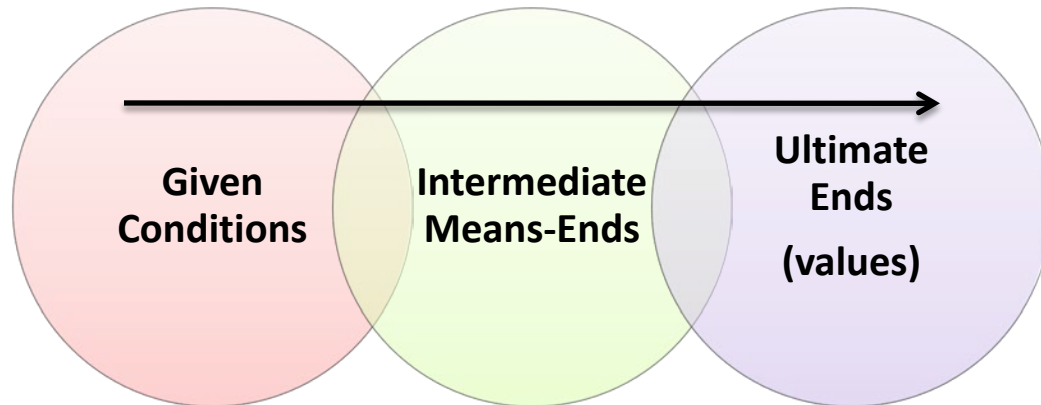
# “Social System”

A social system is defined as:

- **“the system generated by any process of *interaction*, on the socio-cultural level, between two or more ‘actors.’ “** (Parsons and Smelser 1954)
  - These ‘actors’ can be individual persons or collective agents
  - The ‘whole person’ does *not* interact! We interact through **roles**: the entire personality is never incorporated into or relevant to any single role.
  - Actions are not *ad hoc*, but form *systems of expectations* relative to various types of *situations*.

# Action-Systems

- **Action systems** consist of finite, means-ends chains. Each act can serve as a means to several different ends, and conversely.
- Different disciplines study different aspects of action:
  1. **Sociology**: the realm of ultimate values
  2. **Politics** : coercive rationality in **intermediate sphere**
  3. **Economics**: economic rationality in **intermediate sphere**





# Four Functions of Social Systems

- All social systems must solve these **four functional problems**:
  - 1. **Adaptation to the environment (Economy)**
  - 2. **Goal Attainment (Politics)**
  - 3. **Integration (Law, Family, Education)**
  - 4. **Latency, i.e. Pattern Maintenance (Culture, or Socialization)**

<b>A</b>  Economy	<b>G</b>  Polity
<b>I</b>  Integration (Family)	<b>L</b>  Culture



# Functional vs Structural Differentiation

- These functions are **conceptual** rather than **concrete (i.e. empirical) distinctions**.
  - One institution may perform several functions, or one function can be served by many institutions/organizations.
  - However, Parsons argues that societies *tend* toward **structural differentiation**, i.e. that different institutions arise to handle different functional problems.

A Economy	G Polity
I Integration (Family)	L Culture



# Systems, sub-systems, sub-sub-systems...

<p><i>A(a)</i> Investment-Capitalization Sub-System</p> <table><tr><td><i>a</i> *guarantee of liquidity (e.g. stock exchange)</td><td><i>g</i> prod. of prod. capacity</td></tr><tr><td><i>l</i> *flow of credit and capital</td><td><i>i</i> long-term vs short-term balance</td></tr></table>	<i>a</i> *guarantee of liquidity (e.g. stock exchange)	<i>g</i> prod. of prod. capacity	<i>l</i> *flow of credit and capital	<i>i</i> long-term vs short-term balance	<p><i>A(g)</i> Production Sub-System</p> <table><tr><td><i>a</i> financing</td><td><i>g</i> marketing</td></tr><tr><td><i>l</i> technical prod.</td><td><i>i</i> prod. coordination</td></tr></table>	<i>a</i> financing	<i>g</i> marketing	<i>l</i> technical prod.	<i>i</i> prod. coordination
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<p><i>A(l)</i> Economic Commitments to...</p> <table><tr><td><i>a</i> long-term productivity</td><td><i>g</i> productivity</td></tr><tr><td><i>l</i> economic values (economic rationality)</td><td><i>i</i> planned allocation of resources</td></tr></table>	<i>a</i> long-term productivity	<i>g</i> productivity	<i>l</i> economic values (economic rationality)	<i>i</i> planned allocation of resources	<p><i>A(i)</i> Entrepreneurial Sub-System</p> <table><tr><td><i>a</i> financing of innovation</td><td><i>g</i> new combinations of factors of prod.</td></tr><tr><td><i>l</i> flow of resources (mobility, flexibility)</td><td><i>i</i> opportunity for innovation</td></tr></table>	<i>a</i> financing of innovation	<i>g</i> new combinations of factors of prod.	<i>l</i> flow of resources (mobility, flexibility)	<i>i</i> opportunity for innovation
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# Five 'Pattern Variables'

Five dimensions of values/norms:

- **1. Universalistic vs. particularistic**
- **2. Specificity vs. diffuseness**
- **3. Achievement vs. ascription**
- **4. Neutrality vs. affectivity**
- **5. Self vs. collectivity**

# Five 'Pattern Variables'

## 1. Universalistic vs. particularistic

- Relation to your child = particularistic
- Doctor's relation to patients = universalistic

## 2. Specificity vs. diffuseness

- Doctor's purpose is specific; the purpose of your friend is more diffuse.

## 3. Achievement vs. ascription (inherited)

- Winning a gold medal = an achievement
- Inheriting the royal crown = ascription

## 4. Neutrality vs. affectivity (emotional)

- A judge is impartial (neutral)
- Your relation to your family is emotional (affective)

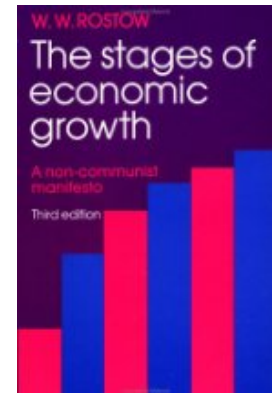
## 5. Self vs. collectivity

- Commitment to others (altruism) = collective orientation
- Beating the competition = self orientation

# Modernization Theory

## Basic Tenets:

- Modernization is driven by **economic/industrial development** and **institutional differentiation**.
- Modernization includes **urbanization**, the expansion of **education**, changing norms favoring **achievement over ascribed status**.
- All countries go through stages of development, (analogous to biological 'development')
- **Causes of "backwardness" are internal:** Tradition, cultural values, and political institutions block modernization process
- Poor countries should copy the U.S.



# Criticisms of Parsons



C. Wright Mills

- **“My purpose ... is to help grand theorists get down from their useless heights”**; “The basic cause of grand theory is the initial choice of a level of thinking so general that its practitioners cannot logically get down to observation.”
- “One could translate the 555 pages of *The Social System* into about 150 pages of straight-forward English. The result would not be very impressive”

# Criticisms of Parsons



C. Wright Mills

“When we consider what a word stands for, we are dealing with its *semantic* aspects; when we consider it in relation to other words, we are dealing with its *syntactic* features. **Grand theory is drunk on syntax, blind to semantics.** The grand theorists are so preoccupied by syntactic meanings ... they are so rigidly confined to such high levels of abstraction that the ‘typologies’ they make up ... seem more often like an arid game of Concepts than an effort to define systematically ... the problems at hand....”

# Criticisms of Parsons



Alvin Ward Gouldner, 1920-1980

Alvin Gouldner

1. **“Parsons does not want to be understood, not even by his colleagues.** His papers are more like private memos than publications. We can explain this sociologically as a result of the prestige of his Harvard affiliation and a breakdown in social controls within academia.”
2. **His categories have not proven useful.** His only criterion is that empirical cases fit into *at least one* of these categories (i.e. they are ‘exhaustive’). However, the following categories are also exhaustive: having red-hair/not-having-red-hair, or balding/not-balding...!! Just because the same category would apply to people, horses, and dogs, doesn’t mean that they are insightful.

# Criticisms of Parsons



Nicos Mouzelis

- Parsons makes a mistake by nesting the *AGIL* schema within each sub-system (A-G-I, and L). The reason is that these sub-systems are only analytical or conceptual: they do not refer to actual groups or organizations!
- The 'AGIL' schema refers to problems or 'functions' that face *actually existing* societies, groups, or 'collectivities'. We cannot therefore say that abstractions like 'economy' or 'polity' themselves must also solve these four functional problems!