

**RALF DAHRENDORF, TALCOTT PARSONS,
AND BEYOND : TOWARD A THEORY OF
STRUCTURAL - FUNCTIONAL CHANGE.**

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This article is an examination of the theories of social change of Talcott Parsons and Ralf Dahrendorf. These two theorists were chosen as representatives of two strongly polarized schools of thought: integrationist and conflict theorists. Among the issues which divide these two groups of social theorists, their views on social change are at the core of their differences. This article has two purposes: to examine and criticize the respective theories of social change of Talcott Parsons and Ralf Dahrendorf, and second to examine the possibilities of a synthesis of these two schools of thought.

TALCOTT PARSONS

The discussion in this section will focus upon Talcott Parsons' work, *The System of Modern Societies*. (1) This is the culmination of Parsons' increasing attention to problems of change in the last decade, and represents his first effort to formally integrate a theory of change within the larger body of his structural - functional theory.

Parsons has developed his theory of social change from Emile Durkheim's concept of differentiation. Durkheim's conception of social change as an evolutionary process of increasing social complexity and interdependence is congenial to Parsons' own conception of societies as interdependent systems. Parsons has taken Durkheim's concept and made it more detailed and congruent with the design of his structural - functional theory. As his social system is organized around a four-old structural and functional design, so his concept of differentiation has four concepts. This conception is best seen by using a comparative table rather than verbal description (see table 1).

Parsons defines differentiation in several ways: as a collective term, synonymous with another term he uses interchangeably with it - "progressive evolution"; in a more particular sense as "the division of a unit or structure in a social system that differs in their characteristics and functional significance for the system" (2); and last, as the particular evolutionary process of the polity sub-system. His other three terms are

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⁷J.C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A Documentary Record: 1914-1956* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1958), Vol.II, p. 235.

⁸Richard Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Pageart Press, 1962), p. viii.

⁹Lilienthal, p. 38.

¹⁰Stevens, p. 127.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹²Nadar Sufran, *The United States and Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 3.

¹³William Eddy, *FDR Meets Ibn Sand* (New York: American Friends of the Middle East, 1954), p. 36

¹⁴*The Falk Project for Economic Research in Israel: A Ten Year Report* (Jerusalem: F.P.E.R.I., 1963), pp. 50-51.

¹⁵Public Law 87-195, Part II, Sec. 501.

¹⁶Public Law 87-195, Part II, Sec. 502B.

¹⁷Public Law 92-226, Part II, Sec. 511.

¹⁸Lilienthal, p. 763.

¹⁹Elmer Berger, *An Analysis of the Zionist Jewish Agency Structure* (New York: American Council for Judaism, 1963), p. 34

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹See the budget of NEW and HUD for February 1979.

²²For more information on Economic Development in Israel, see: *American-Israel Economic Horizons*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2-4 (New York: American Israel Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1978), p. 52.

²³For more information, see: Public Law 87-195, Part II, Sec. 501 and Sec. 502B.



more clearly defined. "Adaptive upgrading" is the process of evolutionary development in the economic sub-systems. "It is the process by which a wider range of resources is made available to social units, so that their functioning can be freed from some of the restrictions on its predecessors." (3) Parsons would consider the development of mass-production techniques, mechanization, and automation as examples of adaptive upgrading. "Inclusion" is the process of differentiation applied to systems of social norms. Specifically, this means the limitation and redefinition of social norms associated with a given role or social institution and the reallocation and creation of new social norms for a new role or institution. "Value generalization" is the process of redefining value systems to a higher level of generalization so as to enable them to encompass a broader number of social situations. Simply put, this is the process of redefining values or principles in more abstract, less particularized terminology and concepts." (4)

Having established this four-fold model of differentiation, Parsons devotes the major portion of his book to an historical exposition of this process of change as it applied to Western civilization since the Middle Ages. Maintaining the symmetry of a four-fold process of differentiation, Parsons outlines a four-age sequence of historical development. While Parsons' four-fold model of social change infers that each of these ages involves four phases of development, he only touches upon each of them except for what he considers the crucial differential process in each age. (5) While these crucial aspects recall his "evolutionary universals" from an earlier essay, they are not congruent with them. (6) Parsons centres his attention on three "revolutions" in the history of modern Western Civilization: a "religious" revolution in the seventeenth century, a "democratic" revolution in the nineteenth century, and an "educational" revolution in the twentieth. The first leads to a separation of the societal community from the state, the second, the separation of the polity from the state and societal community, while the last (currently underway) is the process of separation of the values subsystem from the societal community.

Each of these critical phases of subsystem differentiation Parsons places within a dialectical framework. In the "religious revolution", the process of differentiation involved the emergence of a distinct subsystem of norms (legal systems) through a "thesis-antithesis" development of the societies of France and Holland, with the "synthesis" emerging in English society. (7)

In the second period, the dialectical struggle occurs between Great Britain and revolutionary France, with the United States representing the "democratic" synthesis. (8) Parsons does not overtly develop the current

dialectical struggle, though he suggests that it might be between the United States and the Soviet Union. (9) Both societies have developed systems of mass education (the crucial development of the current age), although Parsons has kept the Soviet Union beyond his definitional boundary of Western Civilization. He makes a cautious sort of prediction that the present "search for societal community" is the focus of the current evolutionary process..... one whose completion is still a century or more away. (10) The symptom of societal strain resulting from this process in contemporary societies is intellectual alienation, a result of the weakening of community ties and increased geographic mobility. (11)

A Critique of Parsons' Change Theory:

The fundamental criticism of Parsons applies not only to his theory of social change, but to his entire intellectual style. The core of Parsons' thought remains what was begun in *The Structure of Social Action* and fully developed in the *Social System*. Throughout, Parsons' logic rests upon allegory and symmetry, and is limited by it. Viewing society as a system analogous to a biological system, and deciding that this homeostatic system operates in a four-function manner, it follows, for Parsons, that there must be four basic structural subsystems, four forms of social evolution, and four corresponding historical stages. Whatever is gained in logical symmetry is lost in empirical applicability.

Granting that Parsons' historical exposition outlined in *The System of Modern Societies* is sketchy and far from complete, his insistence upon a four-phase model of historical development follows the dictates of symmetry rather than any close congruence with historical fact. (12)

TABLE NO. 1
THE PARSONIAN SOCIAL SYSTEM

Subsystems	Structural Components	Aspects of the Developmental Process	Primary Function
Societal Community	Norms	Inclusion	Integration
Pattern Maintenance or Fiduciary	Values	Value Generalization	Pattern Maintenance
Polity	Collectivities	Differentiation	Goal Attainment
Economy	Roles	Adaptive Upgrading	Adaptation

From: THE SYSTEM OF MODERN SOCIETIES, P.11.

If the necessity of a four-fold model of social change and a four-epoch sequence of historical development is eliminated, what remains is a model of social change of limited applicability. For instance, there is nothing within Parsons' theory which precludes the possibility of the degradation of a social system back to a more undifferentiated state.

In fact, Parsons believes that this is exactly what occurred during the Feudal Period. (13) While the Feudal Period lies beyond the boundaries wherein Parsons' historical model applies, this raises the question of just where his boundaries do lie. Parsons does not clearly define any systematic limits to the applicability of his historical model.

Within his theory of differentiation, Parsons introduces a dialectical model of change. This I believe is a development of his concept of "Vested interests" and "Social change proceeding against resistance" which he introduced in *The Social System*. (14) In good Hegelian style, the synthesis of one period becomes one of the antithetical elements of the next. Hence, England, the "synthesis" of the first revolution, becomes one of the antithetical elements of the next, whose "synthesis" is the United States. At this stage, Parsons balks at the implications of his own dialectical logic which would dictate that the United States is presently one the pair of antithetical elements. Parsons refuses to speculate upon this point, failing to openly identify the United States' opposite in the dialectic (though he hints it might be the Soviet Union). Even less, he avoids any speculation upon the eventual synthesis. His dialectic currently places the United States in the position of being the most advanced society, but it will have to be violated if it is remain so.

Finally, Parsons' model of change ultimately implies a lapse back into a static model. In his essay "Evolutionary Universals in Society", Parsons states that the process of differentiation within a system increases its adaptability. (15) If this principle is applied to the current version of differentiation which Parsons has incorporated into his structural-functional theory, it predicts a "finished" stage with a society containing four fully-developed, autonomous, and inter-dependent subsystems, with an adaptive capacity so broad as to preclude the possibility of further critical system strain, and hence, further system transformation. Such a society would in no way resemble Marx's classless utopia. Parsons believes that an "intensive drive" for the total abolition of systems of social stratification would "likely shatter society into an indefinite number of truly 'primitive' small communities". (16) Rather than egalitarianism, the completion of the historical process outlined in *The System of Modern Societies* sees the replacement of an "ascriptive hierarchy" for a "functional" one, the legitimated result of a "Competitive educational process". (17) Parsons' utopian vision recalls Hamilton's "aristocracy of ability", not Marx's classless society.

TABLE NO. 2

THE PARSONIAN VISION OF THE PROCESS OF MODERN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE WESTERN WORLD

Stage of Development	Evolutionary Universal	Process of Differentiation	Dialectical Elements	Synthesis	Action Groups
Primary Stage: ("Premodern Europe")	Emergence of Money & Market	Separation of the economy from the political and societal	Northern city states & Italian city state	England and France	"Urban Nobility (Upper Middle class)
Seventeenth Century: "The Religious Revolution"	Universalistic legal systems	Separation of the societal community from the government	France and Holland	England and France	Protestant bourgeoisie & dissident religious groups
Nineteenth Century: "The Democratic Revolution" (and Industrial Revolution).	Bureaucratic organization & system of government.	Differentiation of the polity from the societal community	Britain and France	United States	Workers
Twentieth Century: The Educational Revolution.		Differentiation of the societal community from the values system.	United States & ??	Students	

This chart is constructed from the text of **THE SYSTEM OF MODERN SOCIETIES**. The processes of differentiation are simplified and in actuality the process fully illustrated would involve differentiation from each of the previously defined elements of the society. The third stage is the least clearly articulated stage in Parsons' theory of development and does show the redundancies illustrated when compared to the second stage. While Parsons lists four evolutionary universals, they are not congruent with the stages of development.

RALF DAHRENDORF

Ralf Dahrendorf sees social theory as "Janus-headed", on one side providing a structural conception of society, and on the other a vision of social conflict and change. (18) It is not Dahrendorf's intention to replace structural-functional theory so much as it is to supplement it with a theory to account for social change. (19) For such a theory he turns to Marxism which he radically alters to make it more useful as a heuristic device to analyze social conflict in contemporary post-industrial society. He criticizes both Marx and Parsons as utopians: Parsons for maintaining a "best of all possible worlds" view of the present; Marx for holding a utopian vision of the future. Dahrendorf rejects the Marxian model of social evolution through a series of revolutions to a classless utopia. (20) Nor does Dahrendorf find use for Marx's concept of class related to the means of production. (21) He replaces it with a concept of class which is tied to "power relationships" and to a dialectical model of conflict between those who hold a disproportionate share of power within any given social situation and those who do not. (22) Class and conflict are interdependent terms. There is no class without conflict. This point is crucial for Dahrendorf's theory, and he goes to great lengths to emphasize it.

He also goes to great lengths to clearly distinguish his concept of class from the concept of stratum. Strata implies hierarchically-arranged structural relationships, interdependence and order, qualities which Dahrendorf wants to keep strictly separate from his concept of class. (23)

Dahrendorf greatly broadens Marx's concept of conflict. Marx confined the concept of conflict to social and political revolution; Dahrendorf broadens it to include revolution as one end of a spectrum of behavior which extends to include discussion and arbitration on the other end. (24) In turn, this spectrum of conflict behavior corresponds to a continuum of conflict outcomes, ranging from conflict repression on one end through various forms of conflict regulation to conflict resolution on the other. In actuality, conflict regulation is the only outcome possible; repression and resolution are pure states which are "sociologically meaningless". (25)

Finally, though Dahrendorf rejects the possibility of developing social predictions from patterns of social conflict, he does suggest that there is a trend in the continuing process of social conflict toward less violence (conflict intensity) through the development of increasing numbers of social mechanisms for regulating conflict. (26)

A Critique Of Dahrendorf's Conflict Theory :

Dahrendorf is guilty of many of the shortcomings he finds in Marx and in structural-functional theory. While he criticizes Parsons for failing to provide a dynamic vision of society, he loses sight of the fact that his own

theory, by positing class conflict as a constant feature of society, places it on a static rather than a dynamic base. Second, his rejection of Marxian utopianism in the process of streamlining Marxian theory removes one of the advantages Marxian theory has: its use as a predictive tool.

In many ways, Dahrendorf has not only streamlined Marxian theory, but has shifted it from the radical side of social theory which strives to alleviate the inequality of modern societies into the conservative side of social theory, which seeks order in society. As Parsons sees social inequality as endemic and necessary to society, so Dahrendorf concedes its immortality. As class conflict is a permanent feature of society, so also is the inequality which engenders it.

If Parsons' theory of social change as differential evolution is simplistic, so is Dahrendorf's theory which sees all social change as conflict. Not all social conflict has only two sides. For example while the Russian Revolution in one sense provides a dialectical struggle between the Czar's government and the revolutionaries, it is inadequate to explain the free-for-all which eventually broke out among the revolutionary groups after the Czar was overthrown.

Finally, Dahrendorf's axiom that structural theory and conflict theory are mutually antithetical, though mutually necessary ways to explain society suggests a "principle of social indeterminacy" which is not self-evident, as Dahrendorf believes. As Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy states that it is impossible to measure the velocity and position of a molecule simultaneously, so Dahrendorf suggests that a theory which could examine social structure and social change simultaneously is equally impossible. While Heisenberg's principle has stood the test of time, it is easy to carry analogous concepts too far. Societies are not molecules, any more than they are machines or some kind of animal.

While it is true that the attempts made so far to explain social change and structure together (notably by Neil Smelser) (27) suggest that such a possibility will be difficult to achieve, if at all, difficulty in and of itself does not serve as proof that is impossible.

The nature of the difficulty of combining structural and social change analysis into a single theory suggests that conceptual limits are built into the communication system of the social sciences. There are limits to the power of the written word, and to the conceptual and retentive capacities of the human mind.

Written communication imposes a unidimensional limitation on the presentation of social theory. Written communication is linear; concepts translated into written words are forced to arrange themselves along their

linear dimension so that its parts appear "earlier or later" in relation to the beginning or end of the writing (note such ordinary guides to the reader as: "on the page following," or, "as was mentioned above"). Unfortunately, a combined structural-change analysis requires a second dimension. Without it, the theorist is forced to either stop change, so that concepts presented earlier or later are combined into one time referent (synchronous analysis), or else one particular concept or theoretical part is analyzed over time (diachronous analysis).

In this later case, "earlier" or "later" in a piece of writing has a definite sequential meaning, but for one item only. The two traditional stop gaps used by those who attempt a combined structural-change analysis (either present a series of diachronous analysis or synchronous analysis one after another, requiring the reader to combine them mentally) place an excessive burden upon the reader's retentive abilities. (28)

Such limits may presently substantiate Dahrendorf's contention only so long as these limits are assumed to be permanent. I see no reason to assume that they always will be. As algebra was a discrete invention which eliminated severe restrictions on the mathematician's conceptual abilities, so such a conceptual aid might be invented which performs a similar service for the social theorist.

Barring the invention of such a conceptual aid, the other alternative would be to ease the strain on the retentive abilities of the communicant through the use of computer language and technology, making as much use as possible of mathematical models of change as they emerge, and borrowing from mathematical models used in other fields, particularly econometrics.

CONCLUSION

The field of social change theory appears to be not so much at the limits of its present resources as in a state of incompleteness. This is particularly evident in the case of Talcott Parsons,* who only now is beginning to fully turn his attention to the processes of social change. His earlier essays discuss a number of aspects of social change which he has not as yet incorporated in any formal way into the body of this theory. Such concepts as institutionalized rationalization, retrogressive social change, and charismatic revolutionary movements, all briefly outlined in *The Social System* immediately come to mind. (29)

* Parsons died in early 1979.

Ralf Dahrendorf has set a predictive restriction on his own conflict theory which is not necessarily immutable, as the only proof the reader is given that Dahrendorf's theory cannot be used in predictive manner is Dahrendorf's opinion.(30)

Finally, Wilbert Moore, (31) Mervyn Cadwallar (32) and Hornell Hart (33) outline a number of types of social change which could provide a basis for a more sophisticated theory of social change than has yet appeared.

FOOTNOTES

1. Talcott Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*. Englewood cliffs, New Jersey. Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971
2. *Ibid.*, P. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, P/27
4. *Ibid.*, P. 27.
5. Specifically, the emergence of the economic subsystem in the "Premodern" era, the emergence of a "universalistic system of norms" in the seventeenth century, a distinct polity in the nineteenth century, and presently, the on going process leading to the emergence of a distinct values subsystem. Parsons suggests, though never explicitly states, that this values subsystem may be the educational institution.
6. Parsons "evolutionary universals" in his essay "Evolutionary Universals in Society" are "recurrent inventions" which can be independently discovered and rediscovered by various social systems (P. 339); the crucial aspects of development in the respective eras of modern western civilization are historical entities, non repeatable, one time phenomena.
7. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, PP. 61-64, 67-70
8. *Ibid.*, PP. 79-83. Parsons analysis of the "democratic revolution" is confusing. His description of the crucial development of the seventeenth century "the differentiation of the societal community from the government" sounds very much like "the differentiation of the polity from the societal community" which is the crucial development of the democratic revolution. Even more, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis sequence of England - France, and then the United States, is puzzling. Somehow, the American political system, generally viewed as evolutionary result of a century and a half of British rule, is seen as the synthesis of inpart, a Revolutionary France which emerges some years after the American War of Independence.
9. *Ibid.*, PP. 122 - 124
10. *Ibid.*, P. 143
11. —*Ibid.*, P. 100

12. Parsons tenaciousness in employing the most tenuous of analogies to substantiate his analyses is little short of amazing. For instance, in his essay "*The Impact of Technology on Culture and Emerging New Modes of Behavior.*" He develops an analogy between the evolutionary emergence of the digestive, locomotor, and nervous systems and the prominence, respectively, of U.S. Steel in 1900, General Motors in 1930, and IBM in 1960 (PP. 624 - 625). His fixation with the number four is also striking.
13. *Ibid.*, P. 36.
14. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* Glencoe, Ill; The Free Press, 1951, P. 491.
15. Talcott Parsons: "Evolutionary Universals in Society." *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 29 (June 1964) PP. 340 - 341
16. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, P. 119.
17. *Ibid.*, P. 119
18. Ralf Dahrendorf: *Class and class conflict in Industrial Society* Stanford; Stanford University Press. 1959. P. 159
19. *Ibid.*, P. 159
20. *Ibid.*, PP. 64. 153
21. *Ibid.*, PP. 136 - 144
22. *Ibid.*, P. 210
23. *Ibid.*, PP. 74 - 77
24. *Ibid.*, PP 212. 234
25. *Ibid.*, PP 223 - 231
26. *Ibid.*, PP 277 - 281
27. Neil Smelser, "The Industrial Revolution and the British Working Class Family". *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 1 (1967) PP.17 - 35.
28. Should one have any doubt on this point, Smelser's book, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* should dispell it ... the first thirty or forty pages will suffice.
29. Parsons, *The Social System*, PP. 503 - 523
30. Dahrendorf. *Class and class conflict in Industrial Society* P. 150
31. Wilbert Moore, "A reconsideration of Theories of Social Change", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 25 (December 1960), PP. 810 - 818.
Wilbert Moore, *Social Change* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1963.
32. Mervyn Cadwallar, "Three Classes of Social Change", *Pacific Sociological Review*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1958), PP. 17 - 20.
33. Hornell Hart, "Sociological Theory and Social Change", Llewellyn Gross, ed.: *Symposium on Sociological Theory* Evanston, Ill: Row, Peterson and Company, 1959, PP. 196 - 233

**«رالف داهر ندورف وتالكوت بارسونز»
نحو نظرية في التغيير البنائي - الوظيفي
د . يحيى فايز الحداد**

تتضمن هذه المقالة مناقشة لنظريات التغيير الاجتماعي لدى كل من تالكوت بارسونز ورالف داهر ندورف. وقد اختير هذان العالمان باعتبارهما رائدين لمدرستين بارزتين من مدارس الفكر الاجتماعي: النظرية التكاملية (Integrative) ونظرية الصراع (Conflictionist) من بين القضايا التي تفصل بين هاتين المجموعتين من المنظرين الاجتماعيين والتي تشكل محاور الاختلاف بينهما، تلك التي تتعلق بنظرتهم نحو التغيير الاجتماعي. وتهدف هذه المقالة الى:-

اولاً: عرض لنظريات التغيير الاجتماعي لدى كل من تالكوت بارسونز ورالف داهر ندورف، والعمل على نقدها.

ثانياً: البحث عن امكانية الخروج بتركيب (Synthesis) من هاتين المدرستين من مدارس الفكر الاجتماعي.

ومن فحصنا وتحليلنا لأفكار كل من بارسونز وداهر ندورف يتبين لنا أن نظرية التغيير الاجتماعي لم تسنفذ كافة مصادرها الممكنة، وانما هي في حالة عدم اكتمال. و يبدو ذلك واضحاً خصوصاً في حالة بارسونز الذي أخذ الآن فقط في تحويل اهتمامه الى عمليات التغيير الاجتماعي (Social Change Processes). فكتاباته المبكرة تناولت عدداً من مظاهر التغيير الاجتماعي التي لم يقدّم بدمجها في جسم هذه النظرية. وتشتمل هذه الكتابات على مفاهيم عرضها بايجاز في مؤلفة النسق الاجتماعي (Social system) مثل: التفكير المقتن (Institutionalized Rationalization) التغيير الاجتماعي باتجاه التخلف (Retrogressive Social Change) والحركات الثورية الكارزمية (Charismatic revolutionary movements).

وقد وضع داهر ندورف قيداً على نظريته في الصراع، وذلك برفضه فكرة القدرة على القيام بتنبؤات اجتماعية من واقع نماذج الصراع الاجتماعي القائمة. هذا وقد قام ولبرت مور، مارفين كاد ولر، وهورنل هارت بوضع اطار لعدد من نماذج التغيير الاجتماعي التي يمكن أن تقدم أساساً لنظرية في التغيير الاجتماعي اكثر تعقيداً مما وجد حتى الآن.