the other hand, sociologists have tended to become specialists in the technique of research into almost anything; among them methods have become Methodology. Much of the work—and more of the ethos—of George Lundberg, Samuel Stouffer, Stuart Dodd, Paul F. Lazarsfeld are present-day examples. These tendencies—to scatter one's attention and to cultivate method for its own sake—are fit companions, although they do not necessarily occur together.

The peculiarities of sociology may be understood as distortions of one or more of its traditional tendencies. But its promises may also be understood in terms of these tendencies. In the United States today there has come about a sort of Hellenistic amalgamation, embodying various elements and aims from the sociologies of the several Western societies. The danger is that amidst such sociological abundance, other social scientists will become so impatient, and sociologists be in such a hurry for 'research,' that they will lose hold of a truly valuable legacy. But there is also an opportunity in our condition: the sociological tradition contains the best statements of the full promise of the social sciences as a whole, as well as some partial fulfillments of it. The nuance and suggestion that students of sociology can find in their traditions are not to be briefly summarized, but any social scientist who takes them in hand will be richly rewarded. His mastery of them may readily be turned into new orientations for his own work in social science.

I shall return to the promises of social science (in chapters Seven through Ten), after an examination of some of its more habitual distortions (chapters Two through Six).

_Extract._

C. Wright Mills (1959).


Grand Theory

Let us begin with a sample of grand theory, taken from Talcott Parsons’ _The Social System_—widely regarded as a most important book by a most eminent representative of the style.

An element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion or standard for selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in a situation may be called a value... But from this motivational orientation aspect of the totality of action it is, in view of the role of symbolic systems, necessary to distinguish a value-orientation aspect. This aspect concerns, not the meaning of the expected state of affairs to the actor in terms of his gratification-deprivation balance but the content of the selective standards themselves. The concept of value-orientations in this sense is thus the logical device for formulating one central aspect of the articulation of cultural traditions into the action system. It follows from the derivation of normative orientation and the role of values in action as stated above, that all values involve what may be called a social reference... It is inherent in an action system that action is, to use one phrase, 'normatively oriented.' This follows, as was shown, from the concept of expectations and its place in action theory, especially in the 'active' phase in which the actor pursues goals. Expectations then, in combination with the 'double contingency' of the process of interaction as it has been called, create a crucially imperative problem of order. Two aspects of this problem of order may in turn be distinguished, order in the symbolic systems which make communication possible, and order in the mutuality of motivational orientation to the normative aspect of expectations, the 'Hobbesian' problem of order.

The problem of order, and thus of the nature of the integration of stable systems of social interaction, that is, of social structure, thus
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thought, many social scientists do not even know about it, except as notorious hearsay.

Now all this raises a sore point—intelligibility. That point, of course, goes beyond grand theory, but grand theorists are so deeply involved in it that I fear we really must ask: Is grand theory merely a confused verbiage or is there, after all, also something there? The answer, I think, is: Something is there, buried deep to be sure, but still something is being said. So the question becomes: After all the impediments to meaning are removed from grand theory and what is intelligible becomes available, what, then, is being said?

There is only one way to answer such a question: we must translate a leading example of this style of thought and then consider the translation. I have already indicated my choice of example. I want now to make clear that I am not here trying to judge the value of Parsons' work as a whole. If I refer to other writings of his, it is only in order to clarify, in an economical way, some point contained in this one volume. In translating the contents of The Social System into English, I do not pretend that my translation is excellent, but only that in the translation no explicit meaning is lost. This—I am asserting—contains all that is intelligible in it. In particular, I shall attempt to sort out statements about something from definitions of words and of their wordy relations. Both are important; to confuse them is fatal to clarity. To make evident the sort of thing that is needed, I shall first translate several passages; then I shall offer two abbreviated translations of the book as a whole.

To translate the example quoted at the opening of this chapter: People often share standards and expect one another to stick to them. In so far as they do, their society may be orderly. (end of translation).

Parsons has written:

There is in turn a two-fold structure of this 'binding in.' In the first place, by virtue of internalization of the standard, conformity with it

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2 See Appendix, section 5.
tends to be of personal, expressive and/or instrumental significance to ego. In the second place, the structuring of the reactions of alter to ego's action as sanctions is a function of his conformity with the standard. Therefore conformity as a direct mode of the fulfillment of his own need-dispositions tends to coincide with conformity as a condition of eliciting the favorable and avoiding the unfavorable reactions of others. In so far as, relative to the actions of a plurality of actors, conformity with a value-orientation standard meets both these criteria, that is from the point of view of any given actor in the system, it is both a mode of the fulfillment of his own need-dispositions and a condition of 'optimizing' the reactions of other significant actors, that standard will be said to be 'institutionalized.'

A value pattern in this sense is always institutionalized in an interaction context. Therefore there is always a double aspect of the expectation system which is integrated in relation to it. On the one hand there are the expectations which concern and in part set standards for the behavior of the actor, ego, who is taken as the point of reference; these are his 'role-expectations.' On the other hand, from his point of view there is a set of expectations relative to the contingently probable reactions of others (alters)—these will be called 'sanctions,' which in turn may be subdivided into positive and negative according to whether they are felt by ego to be gratification-promoting or depriving. The relation between role-expectations and sanctions then is clearly reciprocal. What are sanctions to ego are role-expectations to alter and vice versa.

A role then is a sector of the total orientation system of an individual actor which is organized about expectations in relation to a particular interaction context, that is integrated with a particular set of value-standards which govern interaction with one or more alters in the appropriate complementary roles. These alters need not be a defined group of individuals, but can involve any alter if and when he comes into a particular complementary interaction relationship with ego which involves a reciprocity of expectations with reference to common standards of value-orientation.

The institutionalization of a set of role-expectations and of the corresponding sanctions is clearly a matter of degree. This degree is a function of two sets of variables; on the one hand those affecting the actual sharedness of the value-orientation patterns, on the other those determining the motivational orientation or commitment to the fulfillment of the relevant expectations. As we shall see a variety of factors can influence this degree of institutionalization through each of these channels. The polar-summation of full institutionalization is, however, anomie, the absence of structured complementarity of the interaction process or, what is the same thing, the complete breakdown of normative order in both senses. This is, however, a limiting concept which

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is never descriptive of a concrete social system, just as there are degrees of institutionalization so are there also degrees of anomie. The one is the obverse of the other.

An institution will be said to be a complex of institutionalized role integrations which is of strategic structural significance in the social system in question. The institution should be considered to be a higher order unit of social structure than the role, and indeed it is made up of a plurality of interdependent role-patterns or components of them.\(^5\)

Or in other words: Men act with and against one another. Each takes into account what others expect. When such mutual expectations are sufficiently definite and durable, we call them standards. Each man also expects that others are going to react to what he does. We call these expected reactions sanctions. Some of them seem very gratifying, some do not. When men are guided by standards and sanctions, we may say that they are playing roles together. It is a convenient metaphor. And as a matter of fact, what we call an institution is probably best defined as a more or less stable set of roles. Within some institution—or an entire society composed of such institutions—the standards and sanctions no longer grip men, we may speak, with Durkheim, of anomie. At one extreme, then, are institutions, with standards and sanctions all neat and orderly. At the other extreme, there is anomie: as Yeats says, the center does not hold; or, as I say, the normative order has broken down. (end of translation)

In this translation, I must admit, I have not been altogether faithful; I have helped out a little because these are very good ideas. In fact, many of the ideas of grand theorists, when translated, are more or less standard ones available in many textbooks of sociology. But in connection with 'institutions' the definition given above is not quite complete. To what is translated, we must add that the roles making up an institution are not usually just one big 'complementarity' of 'shared expectations.' Have you ever been in an army, a factory—or for that matter a family? Well, those are institutions. Within them, the expectations of some men seem just a little more urgent than those of anyone

else. That is because, as we say, they have more power. Or to put it more sociologically, although not yet altogether so: an institution is a set of roles graded in authority.

Parsons writes:

Attachment to common values means, motivationally considered, that the actors have common 'sentiments' in support of the value patterns, which may be defined as meaning that conformity with the relevant expectations is treated as a 'good thing' relatively independently of any specific instrumental 'advantage' to be gained from such conformity, e.g., in the avoidance of negative sanctions. Furthermore, this attachment to common values, while it may fit the immediate gratificational needs of the actor, always has also a 'moral' aspect in that to some degree this conformity defines the 'responsibilities' of the actor in the wider, that is, social action systems in which he participates. Obviously the specific focus of responsibility is the collectivity which is constituted by a particular common value-orientation.

Finally, it is quite clear that the 'sentiments' which support such common values are not ordinarily in their specific structure the manifestation of constitutionally given propensities of the organism. They are in general learned or acquired. Furthermore, the part they play in the orientation of action is not predominantly that of cultural objects which are cognized and 'adapted to' but the culture patterns have come to be internalized; they constitute part of the structure of the personality system of the actor itself. Such sentiments or 'value-attitudes' as they may be called are therefore genuine need-dispositions of the personality. It is only by virtue of internalization of institutionalized values that a genuine motivational integration of behavior in the social structure takes place, that the 'deeper' layers of motivation become harnessed to the fulfillment of role-expectations. It is only when this has taken place to a high degree that it is possible to say that a social system is highly integrated, and that the interests of the collectivity and the private interests of its constituent members can be said to approach* coincidence.

*Exact coincidence should be regarded as a limiting case like the famous frictionless machine. Though complete integration of a social system of motivation with a fully consistent set of cultural patterns is empirically unknown, the conception of such an integrated social system is of high theoretical significance. (Parsons' footnote: CWM).

This integration of a set of common value patterns with the internalized need-disposition structure of the constituent personalities is the core phenomenon of the dynamics of social systems. That the stability of any social system except the most evanescent interaction process is dependent on a degree of such integration may be said to be the funda-

mental dynamic theorem of sociology. It is the major point of reference for all analysis which may claim to be a dynamic analysis of social process.4

Or in other words: When people share the same values, they tend to behave in accordance with the way they expect one another to behave. Moreover, they often treat such conformity as a very good thing—even when it seems to go against their immediate interests. That these shared values are learned rather than inherited does not make them any the less important in human motivation. On the contrary, they become part of the personality itself. As such, they bind a society together, for what is socially expected becomes individually needed. This is so important to the stability of any social system that I am going to use it as my chief point of departure if I ever analyze some society as a going concern. (end of translation)

In a similar fashion, I suppose, one could translate the 555 pages of The Social System into about 150 pages of straightforward English. The result would not be very impressive. It would, however, contain the terms in which the key problem of the book, and the solution it offers to this problem, are most clearly stabal. Any idea, any book can of course be suggested in a sentence or expounded in twenty volumes. It is a question of how full a statement is needed to make something clear and of how important that something seems to be: how many experiences it makes intelligible, how great a range of problems it enables us to solve or at least to state.

To suggest Parsons' book, for example, in two or three phrases: 'We are asked: How is social order possible? The answer we are given seems to be: Commonly accepted values.' Is that all there is to it? Of course not, but it is the main point. But isn't this unfair? Can't any book be treated this way? Of course. Here is a book of my own treated in this way: 'Who, after all, runs America? No one runs it altogether, but in so far as any group does, the power elite.' And here is the book in your hand: 'What are the social sciences all about? They ought to be about man and society and sometimes they are. They are attempts to help us understand
biography and history, and the connections of the two in a variety of social structures.

Here is a translation of Parsons’ book in four paragraphs:

Let us imagine something we may call ‘the social system,’ in which individuals act with reference to one another. These actions are often rather orderly, for the individuals in the system share standards of value and of appropriate and practical ways to behave. Some of these standards we may call norms; those who act in accordance with them tend to act similarly on similar occasions. In so far as this is so, there are ‘social regularities,’ which we may observe and which are often quite durable. Such enduring and stable regularities I shall call ‘structural.’ It is possible to think of all these regularities within the social system as a great and intricate balance. That this is a metaphor I am now going to forget, because I want you to take as very real my Concept: ‘The social equilibrium.

There are two major ways by which the social equilibrium is maintained, and by which—should either or both fail—disequilibrium results. The first is ‘socialization,’ all the ways by which the newborn individual is made into a social person. Part of this social making of persons consists in their acquiring motives for taking the social actions required or expected by others. The second is ‘social control,’ by which I mean all the ways of keeping people in line and by which they keep themselves in line. By ‘line’ of course, I refer to whatever action is typically expected and approved in the social system.

The first problem of maintaining social equilibrium is to make people want to do what is required and expected of them. That failing, the second problem is to adopt other means to keep them in line. The best classifications and definitions of these social controls have been given by Max Weber, and I have little to add to what he, and a few other writers since then, have said so well.

One point does puzzle me a little: given this social equilibrium, and all the socialization and control that man it, how is it possible that anyone should ever get out of line? This I cannot explain very well, that is, in the terms of my Systematic and General Theory of the social system. And there is another point that is not as clear as I should like it to be: how should I account for social change—that is, for history? About these two problems, I recommend that whenever you come upon them, you undertake empirical investigations. (end of translation)

Perhaps that is enough. Of course we could translate more fully, but ‘more fully’ does not necessarily mean ‘more adequately,’ and I invite the reader to inspect The Social System and find more. In the meantime, we have three tasks: first, to characterize the logical style of thinking represented by grand theory; second, to make clear a certain generic confusion in this particular example; third, to indicate how most social scientists now set up and solve Parsons’ problem of order. My purpose in all this is to help grand theorists get down from their useless heights.

2

Serious differences among social scientists occur not between those who would observe without thinking and those who would think without observing; the differences have rather to do with what kinds of thinking, what kinds of observing, and what kinds of links, if any, there are between the two.

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. They never, as grand theorists, get down from the higher generalities to problems in their historical and structural contexts. This absence of a firm sense of genuine problems, in turn, makes for the unreality so noticeable in their pages. One resulting characteristic is a seemingly arbitrary and certainly endless elaboration of distinctions, which neither enlarge our understanding nor make our experience more sensible. This in turn is revealed as a partially organized abdication of the effort to describe and explain human conduct and society plainly.

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.5 I introduce

5 We can also consider it in relation to its users—the pragmatic aspect, about which we have no need to worry here. These are three ‘dimensions of meaning’ which Charles M. Morris has so neatly systematized in his useful ‘Foundations of the Theory of Signs,’ International Encyclopedia of United Science, Vol. I, No. 2. University of Chicago Press, 1938.