

On the Critique of 'Utilitarian' Theories of Action: Newly Identified
Convergences among Simmel, Weber, and Parsons*

Donald N. Levine

Fortuitous travels often spark intellectual innovations of consequence. One thinks of Hobbes in Padua, Marx in London, Freud in Paris, Park in Berlin. For sociological theory in this century one of the most consequential of such trips was the visit of young Talcott Parsons, following his year at the London School of Economics, to Heidelberg in 1925, a visit which led to his doctorate and altered the course of world sociology.

Parsons at Heidelberg

Heidelberg of the 1920s—what a milieu! Lustrous center of the German academic world, it sparkled with such luminaries as Friedrich Gundolf, Karl Jaspers, Emil Lederer, Jakob Marschak, Ernst Troeltsch, Alfred Weber, Heinrich Zimmer, and bright young scholars like Arnold Bergstraesser, Karl Mannheim, and Alexander von Schelting. Salons hosted by Marianne Weber and Else von Jaffé-Richthofen livened the atmosphere, as did students who would later earn fame, including Hannah Arendt, Norbert Elias, Hans Gerth, Hans Jonas, and Hans Speier.

For sociologists, Heidelberg in the 1920s was also a haunted place. Ghosts of two giants who passed away at the end of the war, Max Weber and Georg Simmel, hovered about. It was Parsons's encounter with the spirit of Max Weber in Heidelberg that transformed his intellectual biography. Here he devoured *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, reading it 'straight through—that is, subject to the limits of library hours, since I did not yet own a copy—as though it were a detective story' (Parsons, 1980: 39). Here he attended a seminar on Weber taught by

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference, 'A Legacy of "Verantwortungsethik": Talcott Parsons's *Structure of Social Action* after Sixty Years,' University of Heidelberg Internationales Wissenschaftsforum, June 26-28, 1997. Assistance in the preparation of that paper was provided by David Ciepley and Andrew Kitchen.

a young *Dozent* named Mannheim. Here he produced a dissertation in which, he later commented, 'quite obviously [Weber] was the centerpiece' (Martel, 1977: 4).

Although the departed figure of Weber was hegemonic at Heidelberg, the figure of Georg Simmel also cast shadows. To be sure, Simmel's appointment at Heidelberg in 1908, promoted by Weber and Troeltsch, had been torpedoed, thanks in part to a scurrilous anti-Semitic letter by Dietrich Schäfer; and by the mid-1920s the enormous influence had Simmel exerted on his contemporaries was transmuting into a backstage whisper.¹ Even so, when Parsons later recalled the list of 'important theoretically-inclined social scientists' with whom, on arrival in Heidelberg, he was advised to familiarize himself, he mentioned the name of Simmel right after the brothers Weber (Parsons, 1980: 39). 'Near the time I was a student in Heidelberg,' he also recalled, a Simmelian work—von Wiese's *Beziehungslehre*—appeared and 'had a certain vogue there' (Parsons, 1979, 1993: 42). Although Parsons failed to include Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes* in his doctoral work on capitalism, he acquired a copy of Simmel's *Soziologie* and at some point read and annotated it.

After Heidelberg: Parsons on Weber and Simmel

Immediately after returning from Germany, Parsons began to exert what he later described as 'leadership in the introduction of German sociology into this country' (Parsons, 1979, 1993: 42). This began with the thesis-based article about German scholarship on capitalism, published in the *Journal of Political Economy* in two parts in 1928/1929. When Harvard opened a department of sociology a few years later, he began to teach a theory course that featured Simmel, Tönnies, and Weber along with other European theorists.² His 1934 Encyclopedia article on 'Society' included references to a number of German texts—mostly untranslated—by Simmel, Freyer, von

¹Simmel's role has actually been likened to that of the person behind the curtain, the "prompter" (Christian, 1978: 11). Figures who studied with Simmel or were deeply influenced by him—Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Martin Buber, Norbert Elias, Martin Heidegger, Karen Horney, Karl Jaspers, Siegfried Kracauer, Ortega y Gasset, J. L. Moreno, Alfred Schutz—began to produce distinctive contributions whose core ideas frequently derived directly from Simmel, often without attribution. Regarding the extent of Simmel's earlier influence, see Levine (1997), 184-7.

²The course was Sociology 21, described as 'Sociological Theories of Hobhouse, Durkheim, Simmel, Toennies, and Max Weber.' Students the first year, 1932-3, included Ben Halpern, Robert Merton, Neal DeNood, and Leo Srole (Merton, 1997).

Gierke, Troeltsch, and Zeller as well as Max Weber. As Parsons began to formulate what he described as a convergence of trends in recent European social thought, he included Simmel and Tönnies along with Weber as the ‘most important’ figures of the ‘idealist’ tradition being treated in his synthesis (1935, 1991: 231).

It was, of course, Max Weber who dominated his mind as *the* German theorist to take seriously. Parsons’s autobiographical sketch notes that his doctoral work at Heidelberg ‘crystallized two primary foci of my future intellectual interests: . . . the nature of capitalism . . . and the work of Weber as a social theorist’ (1970,1977: 23). And indeed, beyond the pivotal translation of *The Protestant Ethic* in 1930 and the pathbreaking reconstruction of Weber’s thought in *The Structure of Social Action* (*Structure*), Parsons returned throughout his career to engage Weberian texts, most notably in his introductions to the translations of part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1947 and the *Religionssoziologie* chapter in 1963.

By comparison, Parsons’s engagement with Simmel was miniscule. He dealt with but a single segment of Simmel’s voluminous oeuvre, the programmatic conception spelled out in ‘Das Problem der Soziologie’ in 1894 and revised as the opening chapter of *Soziologie*. Time and again Parsons repeated the same circumscribed formulation: Simmel provided an exemplar of how to define the subject-matter of sociology so as to give it a specific domain, but the way Simmel drew the boundaries of sociology had to be rejected—for reasons too complex to spell out at the moment. Virtually identical language was used in publications issued in 1934, 1935, and 1937 (Levine, 1980: xxviii, n.1).

By the time that Parsons released *Structure*, this terse formulation on Simmel was all he included from a longer draft chapter. Including the whole text would have drawn more attention to Simmel than Parsons wanted to. Parsons revealed a personal reason for this short shrift when he disclosed, shortly before his death, a competitive motive in his decision not to include the section on Simmel: he was vying with Howard Becker to introduce German sociology to the United States, and Becker’s edition of von Wiese’s Simmelian treatise had appeared a few years before (Parsons, 1979, 1993: 42). At any rate, the brief gloss in *Structure* was the last reference to Simmel Parsons ever published, apart from an apologetic note in 1968 about his

neglect of that author—although, we shall see, even after the publication of *Structure* Parsons continued to cogitate about Simmel for a short while.

The different ways in which Parsons engaged with Weber and Simmel become transparent if we analyze his work in the decade after 1927 in terms of the three problem areas identified by Charles Camic—‘three overlapping but relatively distinct thematic areas or clusters, which may also be viewed as approximate chronological phases in the early development of [Parsons’s] thinking’ (Camic, 1991: xxiii).

Capitalist Society and Its Origins

In a dissertation concerned with the emergence of modern capitalism, Parsons found Marx, Sombart, and Weber of compelling interest. They enabled him to counteract the orthodox tradition of Anglo–American thought with its individualistic and rationalistic premises and its assumption of continuous evolution, whose linear suppositions yielded an ‘overhasty optimism’ about ‘progress and freedom’ under capitalist conditions. Parsons found particularly congenial the notion of an economic *Geist* in Sombart and Weber. He embraced their use of that concept to identify the disjunctive ‘spirit of modern capitalism,’ to relate it to modern civilization as a whole, and to adduce it in explaining the historical development of capitalism (Camic, 1991: xxv).

In spite of this interest, Parsons referred to none of Simmel’s accounts and critiques of modern capitalism, let alone his many essays on modern society and culture. This silence ran contrary to what knowledgeable contemporaries understood. Max Frischeisen–Köhler, for example, associated Simmel’s *Philosophie des Geldes* ‘with those penetrating efforts which were carried out, at approximately the same time, by economists like Sombart and Max Weber, students of religion like Troeltsch, and others—[scholars] who undertook to grasp the ‘spirit of capitalism,’ in a shared rejection of historical materialism, through incorporating economic life into the total context of our intellectual culture and through laying bare its deeper psychological, moral, and religious presuppositions’ (Frischeisen–Köhler, 1920: 20). Weber himself is known to have been engrossed by the *Philosophie des Geldes* on the eve of producing *The Protestant Ethic* and, in both editions of that famous essay, Weber directly linked Sombart’s conception of the spirit of capitalism to Simmel, suggesting that

'[Sombart's] argument here connects with the brilliant depictions provided in the last chapter of Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*'.³ Parsons, by contrast, confessed that he 'was unable to make any serious use of [Simmel's] philosophy of money' (Parsons, 1979, 1993: 43).

Studies in the Development of the Theory of Action

As Parsons continued his studies, his attention shifted from the nature of capitalist society to the nature of action in general. The shift was mediated by the year he spent teaching at Amherst after his return from Heidelberg, where 'it gradually became clear to me that I wanted to go thoroughly into the relations between economic and sociological theory' (1970, 1977: 23). If at first Parsons eschewed a strictly economic account of the rise of capitalism for one that stressed institutional and cultural factors, he became increasingly preoccupied with alternatives to construing human action in purely economic terms, as oriented solely by instrumental rationality in pursuit of individual interest—a position he would come to gloss as 'utilitarian.'⁴

Parsons worked through these issues 'in the course of a series of critical studies in European sociological theory' (1935, 1991: 231), in which writings of Marshall and Pareto figured prominently. Both men became intellectual role models for him, economists who went on to focus on dimensions of action other than instrumental rationality: activities related to character in Marshall, nonlogical forms of action in Pareto. Weber remained essential in this phase of Parsons's work, especially the distinction between instrumentally-rational action and the types of action Weber called traditional, affective, and value-rational. From all three sources, Parsons gained support for his quest to supplement the view of action as a search for efficient means with a doctrine that represented a dimension of action guided by ideals and values.

On the question of action, Parsons again remained silent about Simmel. He never commented on any of the general formulations about action located in Simmel's

³ "[Sombarts] Gedankengänge knüpfen hier an die glänzenden Bilder in Simmels »Philosophie des Geldes« (letztes Kapitel) an" (Weber, 1905: 15, n.2; 1920: 34, n. 1).

⁴ In noting Parsons's usage of the term here, I do not subscribe to the way in which he represented the utilitarian tradition of British moral philosophy. For an important corrective, see Camic (1979).

master works of ethics and social theory, nor on presuppositions underlying the numerous substantive analyses of social phenomena wherein Simmel's sociological genius expressed itself.

The Fundaments of Analytical Sociology

For Parsons in the early 1930s, the question of how to conceptualize action was virtually identical with the question of how to establish secure and defensible boundaries between the disciplines of economics and sociology. Previous publications (Levine, 1980, 1985, 1993; Camic, 1990) have examined this matter at length. Those arguments may be summarized by saying that Parsons became committed to justifying sociology as a discipline independent of, yet parallel to, economics, and that the two dimensions of action just identified—the search for efficient means to ends, and the adherence to culturally-implanted values—seemed to him then to divide the subject matters of economics and sociology neatly.

Thus, it was *only on this issue of criteria for demarcating a science of sociology that Parsons took Simmel into account*. Even here, his reference to Simmel was limited. Although Parsons strove to promote what might be considered a neo-Kantian approach to demarcating disciplines—defining them with respect to analytical interests on the part of the knower—he ignored the philosophical justification for such an approach that Simmel provided in his epistemological writings (Levine, 1989). Parsons's route to such a position, which he came to designate as 'analytic realism,' followed the thought of economic theorists like Pareto, Frank Knight, and Lionel Robbins and of philosophers of science like Poincaré, L. J. Henderson and, especially, A. N. Whitehead. Whitehead's emphasis on the fallacy of misplaced concreteness gave Parsons an intellectual tool with which to hammer this point through (Wenzel, 1990). From both quarters Parsons gained support for his opposition to the view that any social science should aspire to an encyclopedic grasp of all human phenomena, a position he associated with the 'imperialisms' of Marshall and Durkheim, respectively. On this count Parsons disagreed with Weber, who viewed sociology either as a historical science, or as a synthetic science that subsumed the disciplines of economics and politics; Parsons glossed this as a 'narrow encyclopedic' view of the discipline ([1934] 1991: 167). By contrast, on this count Parsons applauded Simmel for

having eschewed a view of sociology as encyclopedic and for promoting it as a specialized analytic discipline. Only respecting the specific task assigned sociology—namely, to investigate the forms of social interaction—did Parsons part company with Simmel.

Unknown to Parsons, Max Weber himself, in an unpublished fragment of a critical essay, had also criticized the way Simmel proposed to delimit sociology as a discipline. Whereas Parsons applauded Simmel's approach to sociology for its specificity, but rejected the principle—namely, forms of interaction—by which Simmel proposed to circumscribe its domain, Weber rejected that same principle for being too broad and thus for failing to provide a suitable way to demarcate sociology from other domains (Weber, 1972). Instead, Weber wanted to make action, rather than forms of interaction, the subject of sociological investigation. On the question of how to demarcate sociology, then, Parsons appropriated from Weber the centrality of *action*, but differed from Weber by distinguishing sociology from economics according to the *dimension* of action—ideal or value-rational rather than instrumentally-rational—that sociology should be responsible for investigating.

Time and again, Parsons ran up against the incompatibility of the sort of sociological theory he was seeking to legitimate with the program for sociology promulgated by Simmel. For this reason, despite an initial attraction to Simmel, he finally needed to drop him from the grand convergence he was depicting. Psychologically, that amounted to a 'disavowal', such that an initially dispassionate assessment of Simmel seems to have become emotionally charged.⁵ Evidence for this interpretation comes from several sources, including the fact that when Parsons in later years was asked about his early unpublished chapter on Simmel, he claimed that it had been lost, yet it surfaced among his papers immediately after his death. What is more, his students at Harvard after the 1940s, as one of them recently observed to me, failed to read Simmel because Parsons had effectively 'inoculated us.' But the disavowal also took less subtle forms. It was manifest in a full-dress essay on the subject, 'Simmel and the Methodological Problems of Formal Sociology,' which has

⁵For an exploration of this response as a "disavowal," see Levine 1985. Another ground for Parsons's stance was his perception of Simmel as a dilettantish essayist,

recently come to light in the Harvard Archives.⁶ This paper makes it clear that Parsons's objection to Simmel is not that 'the "line" which Simmel's distinction between form and content draws through the facts' obscures or denies what Parsons has been calling the 'normative orientation' of action systems, as Alexander (1993) imaginatively argues, but rather that Simmel's approach 'results in pushing the whole problem of normative orientation over into the sphere of "content"; *it becomes a matter for the "social sciences" not for sociology*' (Parsons, n. d.: 21; emphasis mine). Because Parsons had come to believe that only by securing jurisdiction over the domain of normative orientations could sociology attain its academic *raison d'être*, that was a critical exclusion. What is more, he argued, since 'it is the active orientation to normative elements which plays the analytical role analogous to that of "energy in physical theory"' (21-2), only by including normative elements *within* the motivational domain could sociology hope to deal with process and change, and only then could it become an explanatory discipline and not a merely descriptive one (22). For such reasons Parsons asserted, at two points in this never-published paper, that '*it would be difficult to conceive a more pernicious doctrine than that of Simmel*'.⁷

The Simmelian Critique of Economistic Theories of Action

The issue over which Parsons based his most considered disavowal of Simmel—how to define sociology as a specialized abstract analytic discipline—proved to be the

not a systematic thinker—a judgment he maintained throughout his life. On this vexed issue, which has bedeviled so much of the Simmel reception, see Levine (1997).

⁶ For bringing this hitherto unknown draft to my attention, I am greatly indebted to Professor Kiyomitsu Yui of Kobe University. It had apparently been transferred to the Harvard Archives only in 1990 from a box of papers discovered in the basement of William James Hall.

⁷The emphasis is mine. This wording appears on page 27 and again on page 32 of the manuscript. I am not aware of any other time that Parsons used such language regarding any other author. For an analysis of Parsons's disposition as a methodological monist, see Camic (1997).

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that Parsons's unpublished paper on Simmel was accompanied by detailed comments from both Robert Merton and Edward Shils, neither of whom advised Parsons to tone down that judgment, even though both of them sought at other times to bring favorable attention to Simmel. From Shils's comments it is clear that his animus against von Wiese was sharper than against Simmel, whom he defended against some of Parsons's critical judgments; Shils also included the advice (which Parsons did not heed) that Simmel's analyses deserved a better designation than the derogatory term 'dilettantish'.

most ephemeral of his formulations. In the course of his career, Parsons changed the way he proposed to define the field a number of times. At this point, it scarcely matters how he argued that question, since there is no consensus and little interest within the field regarding the definition of sociology, and the salience of academic disciplinary boundaries has in any case weakened considerably (Levine, 1980: lxi ff.; 1995: ch. 14; 1996).

In stunning contrast, the question of the nature of human action has become more salient than ever. To some observers, Parsons's contribution to this problem is an achievement that may have come six decades too early (Gould, 1991). For the threat that Parsons confronted in the 1930s, and which most readers of *Structure* believed he had eliminated once and for all—the elevation of economistic abstractions to the status of an adequate theory of all human action—has emerged in the years since his death with a good deal of force. At this point, the arguments of *Structure* against economistic theories of action need a fresh hearing and all the collateral support that can be mobilized for them.⁸ And at this point it can be asserted confidently: a good deal of such support can be found in the work of Georg Simmel. Although some commentators have interpreted Simmel as a utilitarian theorist, on this question Alexander's intuitive gloss must be credited: despite imputing to Parsons that perception of Simmel, Alexander went on to surmise that Simmel may have participated as much as anyone in the convergence that Parsons professed to discover in the 1890–1920 generation of founding sociologists (Alexander, 1993: 111).

In both of the substantive areas that preoccupied the young Parsons, one can identify lines of convergence among Simmel, Weber, and Parsons—regarding the development and character of capitalist society and regarding the theorization of action. In Simmel's work, the former appears in the *Philosophie des Geldes*. Prefacing that work, Simmel announced his intention to supply a supplement to the materialistic construction of history, 'such that the explanatory value of the

⁸This includes going well beyond the line of attack Parsons pursued in *Structure*, which neglected a number of other arguments that can be mobilized against an economistic theory of action (in contrast with the use of economistic assumptions for heuristic purposes, in the mode of an abstract analytic perspective of the sort Parsons validated). For an audit of such other lines of criticism, see Joas (1996) and Levine (1998).

incorporation of economic life into the causes of intellectual culture is preserved, while these economic forms themselves are recognized as the result of more profound valuations and currents of psychological or even metaphysical pre-conditions' (Simmel, 1978: 56). Thus, in a chapter on exchange, Simmel comments on the predispositions needed for people to be willing to engage in trade, and on the institutional and cultural factors needed for markets to evolve. He speaks of the mechanisms that help overcome fickle subjectivities in economic exchange—those 'sacred forms, legal regulations, and protection by publicity and tradition that accompanied mercantile transactions in early cultures' (1978: 98).

Although Simmel went on to delineate the features and conflicts of the culture of modernity in a number of evocative texts, his treatment of capitalist society appears mainly as an adjunct to his analysis of money. By contrast, consideration of the components of human action runs throughout his oeuvre. In these brief remarks I hope to represent his numerous ideas on the matter in sufficient detail to make the case for a convergence more stunning than Parsons could have imagined.⁹

Action as shaped by norms

Although Simmel suggests that most relationships can be construed in terms of a cost-benefit exchange schema, that does not mean that the substance of those relationships is exhausted by such considerations. For Simmel as for Parsons, instrumental transactions are overlaid by considerations that stem from a pervasive human sense of moral obligation, *das Sollen*. Simmel's analyses of this dimension of action appear in four perspectives: philosophical, phenomenological, sociological, and psychological.

⁹To affirm a convergence in this area does not, of course, cover the numerous respects in which their thought can be compared. As I indicated long since, there are a number of points in which Parsons's position was arguably closer to Simmel than to Durkheim or Weber, including his conception of the autonomy of science, the status of scientific concepts, the relation of the social dimension to cultural and personality systems, and the distinctions that Parsons came to formulate as the pattern variables (Levine, 1980: xxxii-x;liv). I have also found it fruitful to combine ideas on rationality from Simmel, Weber, and Parsons into a more comprehensive synthesis, one which attains results that go beyond what was possible within the schemes of each (Levine, 1985: ch. 9). On the other hand, divergences of the sort Parsons responded to in his critique of Simmel remain significant and worthy of further exploration (Levine, 1991).

1. Philosophical.—Following Kant's radical distinction between the domain of nature and the domain of freedom, the major German social theorists drew a sharp line between the natural causes of human behavior and the grounding of value judgments (Levine, 1995: ch. 9). It was perhaps Parsons's intense engagement with Kant in a seminar with Karl Jaspers that laid the groundwork for his steadfast adherence to a dualistic construction of human action (Münch, 1981). Although Simmel was highly critical of Kant on a number of points, on this issue he also remained true to Kant throughout his life. Simmel's basic position, fully articulated both in the *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* and in the opening pages of *Philosophie des Geldes*, was that the domain of natural forces is crosscut by considerations of value and moral obligation; each of them defines a 'world.'

2. Phenomenological.—In the *Einleitung*, Simmel argued in depth that human experience is pervaded by a sense of moral obligation. The opening chapter of that little-read opus, '*Das Sollen*,' explains that our experience of anything can be clothed in a variety of emotional modalities, like willing, hoping, and attribution of Being to something. The sense of moral obligation figures as one of these modalities. No deed can escape the feeling of being subordinated to the judgment of an Ought. Oughtness cannot be grounded logically on anything: it is simply there, given as one of the pervasive emotional dispositions that became rooted in our nature in the course of human evolution.

3. Sociological.—In accounting for this sensibility to moral obligation, Simmel followed the footsteps of his teacher Moritz Lazarus, who countered Kant's assumption of an inherent human disposition toward the ethical with an account of its origins in the needs of societal organization (Köhnke, 1996). The ultimate source of our feelings of moral obligation, Simmel believes, lies in the archaic establishment of collective rules reproduced generation after generation. Humans were rule-following animals living in communities long before they evolved as separated individuals with personal consciences and individuated liabilities. The feeling of moral obligation thus represents an expression of fidelity to long-established social practices of whose origin people are no longer fully conscious (Simmel, [1892] 1989: 42–4).

d. Psychological.—The development of individuality is accompanied, not only by a transference of liability from the group to the individual, but also by an

internalization of group norms into the individual's conscience. What is useful to the species and the group is gradually bred into the individual, who comes to experience it as his own autonomous feeling—in addition to his own personal wishes, as it were, and often in contrast to them ([1908] 1971: 118). The mechanism of honor illustrates this. Honor represents a midpoint between law and individual conscience. At a certain stage of ethical development, the source of that moral motivation shifts from the social group to an impersonal, supraindividual power: from an objective ideality that has its locus in the free conscience of the actor (119).

Actions as only partly directed by cost-benefit calculations

Simmel analyzes the instrumentally-rational dimension of human action in two major contexts—in the analysis of economic exchange in *Philosophie des Geldes* and in his programmatic discussions of the contents of social interaction. Regarding the former, Simmel observes that humans decide which purpose to pursue in any given moment through an ongoing calculation of cost and benefits. This same type of calculation applies in the course of their transactions with others. 'Most relationships among people,' Simmel writes, 'can be construed as forms of exchange' (Simmel, 1978: 82; translation modified). This means that whatever A does to, with, or for B can be seen as involving a process whereby A weighs the gain anticipated from said transaction against the sacrifice that must be made to secure it. Widespread use of monetary currency increases the extent to which actors manifest this calculative disposition and lengthens the chains of their instrumental calculations. More generally, when Simmel advises sociologists to focus on the relational forms through which human organize their interactions, he suggests a utilitarian account of why they construct those forms—'on the basis of certain drives or for the sake of certain purposes'—in pursuit of erotic, defensive, financial, political, sociable, or cultural interests and the like (Simmel, [1908] 1971: 23).

It is not the case, however, that Simmel interprets all actions with reference to calculations of cost-efficient exchange. No sooner has he presented the formula just cited, construing most relationships as exchange, than he subjects it to a number of qualifications. For one thing, interaction is a much broader category, of which exchange relationships form a subset. And in actual exchanges, cost-benefit

calculations often play little or no role: “The idea that a balancing of sacrifice and gain precedes the exchange . . . is one of those rationalistic platitudes that are entirely unpsychological” (Simmel, 1978: 94).

In a number of originative forays, moreover, Simmel analyzes forms of action that are carried out for their own sake and without regard for their role as means to attain goals. These include interactional forms engaged in as play, which simply express surplus energies. They also include actions through which cultural forms are enjoyed for their own sake or in which humans act simply to actualize their distinctive selves (Levine, 1971, 1998).

The limitations of hedonistic assumptions

Although economic thought is not necessarily tied to a psychology of pleasure and pain, 19th-century economists, following in the wake of Bentham, largely presupposed a hedonistic psychology. This became prominent in the marginalist economics of Stanley Jevons and, closer to Simmel’s own ambience, the work of Carl Menger and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk. Simmel devotes a chapter of the *Einleitung* to weakening the claims of such a psychology. He begins by severing the connection between hedonistic motivation and the pursuit of self-interest, noting that one may act egoistically for an end other than pleasure, and one may take pleasure (or the avoidance of pain) as one’s end in a non-egoistic fashion, as when the Buddhist elevates escape from suffering into an ethical principle ([1892] 1989: 285).¹⁰

Simmel acknowledges that considerations of pleasure and pain often determine our will, but questions whether they are the only things that determine our will. Sometimes we seek pleasure only to revive our energy so that we may pursue other ends, as when we find pleasure in a meal taken to restore our readiness for some non-pleasurable pursuit. Of course, if it is true that those things that sustain us are pleasant, then it is possible that life is becoming more pleasant as it becomes better organized, and so if pleasure sustains us, it will be selected for in the course of evolution. In this sense, one might claim pleasure as our final end. However, several caveats undermine this evolutionary optimism. For one thing, if something is truly

necessary for life—such as childbirth—it will continue whether or not it is pleasant. What is more, the tendency of human culture over time has been to produce needs without limit, needs so extensive in scope that they cannot possibly be satisfied. Modern pessimism reflects the fact that our species has evolved needs at a pace that outstrips our ability to satisfy them, yielding a net hedonistic decline (289–90).

The credence given to ‘eudaimonism,’ Simmel suggests, reflects a confounding of psychic causes and consequences. A sense of pleasure accompanies the fulfillment of any act of will, just as suffering accompanies its disappointment. Eudaimonism thus mistakes what is a mere byproduct of action for the determining end of action. Simmel’s ultimate rejection of universal hedonism as a basis for theorizing about action is that it is vacuous: the pleasure principle does not illuminate anything when one can interpret all action by it.

The limitations of egoist psychologies

At the time that Simmel and Parsons were writing, many economists subscribed to hedonistic assumptions about motivation. Today, however, economism has divorced itself from psychological hedonism—divorced itself, in fact, from any substantive psychological theory—and simply views actors as equipped with preferences that include all possible objects of desire. Nevertheless, economic thinking continues to embrace the doctrine that all action is inherently egoistic in character.¹¹

Although Simmel acknowledges the everyday usefulness of distinguishing between egoism and altruism, in a series of pointed analyses in chapter 2 of the *Einleitung*, he debunks the notion that all action is oriented to serve one’s selfish interests. To the school of thought that reduces all action to egoism, Simmel rejoins that although a generalization of that sort may satisfy mind’s wish for unified explanations, it bypasses phenomena of a more subtle constitution—such as apparently

¹⁰The point has been reinforced by Albert Hirschman’s (1987) demonstration that early uses of the concept of interest referred to ‘interests of state’ that a prince ought to observe—interests that explicitly constrained the prince’s pleasure.

¹¹Economists such as Gary Becker claim to incorporate altruism in their explanatory system. However, on their interpretation, altruism—towards one’s children, for example—is simply part of the individual actor’s preference set. Acts of altruism are thus not instances of self-sacrifice, but part of a more comprehensive egoism.

egoistic acts within inherited social forms that leads to altruistic ends ([1892] 1989: 110–12). To those who regard selfish genes as an adaptive advantage in the course of human evolution, Simmel demonstrates that in the struggle for survival the individual's relationship to the group is so complex as to vitiate egoism as a dominant explanatory principle (116–20). More generally, Simmel goes on to argue, because every absolute ethical principle in actuality assumes the effectiveness of others that run counter to it, deeds that are ostensibly egoistic or altruistic in character necessarily entail ramifications that embody the other principle ([1893] 1991: 304–5).

Another problem with reducing all action to an egoistic motivation is that, absent a contrasting principle, the principle of 'egoism' loses all distinctive meaning. If we say that *all* action is egoistic, then we convey nothing, either descriptive or normative, when we apply the term to any particular action. To remedy the situation, we would inevitably find ourselves simply rearticulating the abandoned distinction at a higher level—distinguishing, for example, between narrow and 'enlightened' egoism ([1892] 1989: 130).

If one abandons a monistic egoism and employs the everyday distinction between egoism and altruism, one encounters difficulties in applying that dichotomy with precision. How can one impute one or the other motivation with any confidence, even regarding one's own conduct? Since we often deceive ourselves, introspection is no more reliable than third-person imputation in deciphering motives. For example, some people who regard being good as a weakness think themselves to be acting egoistically when unknowingly they are acting out of good-naturedness and altruism (94).

Even conceptually, the egoism-altruism dichotomy appears slippery. The same act can be egoistic in one perspective and altruistic in another. This reflects the elementary social fact that actors are embedded in social circles of varying sizes—family, company, association, class, nation. Because of this, 'interestedness on behalf of a certain social circle is altruistic with respect to this group, but for those situated outside the group, it amounts to egoism' (162). In addition, since all actions are embedded in social institutions, the seemingly egoistic pursuit of private profit entails consideration of others, for example, through observing property rights and rules of contract—as Durkheim and then Parsons would stress (94-6).

Perhaps most troublesome of all for contemporary economic theory is Simmel's emphasis on the multifariousness of personal motivations. Economic theory relies fundamentally on the assumption that each individual actor evinces a fixed preference schedule. However, Simmel argues repeatedly, each person's set of preferences are diverse and contradictory, and they are getting more so all the time. Even at the level of particular acts, 'every action incorporates a great number of extremely diverse elements' ([1893] 1991: 338). Fundamental psychological ambivalences derive from numerous contradictory impulses. What one might call fundamental sociological ambivalences (Merton, 1976) derive from the location of persons in sundry social circles that impose contradictory expectations and duties. The fact of multiple social embeddedness makes it logically impossible to accept the egoistic desires of any unit as givens. The main trajectory of social evolution has been to amplify the contradictory impulses produced by an increasing number of conflicting social expectations (Simmel, [1893] 1991: 378 ff.).

Simmel was absolutely clear about the point that altruism and morality cannot be equated. Normative obligations to oneself can be opposed to mobilization on behalf of group interests, just as readily as group obligations can contradict personal interests. In his culminating statement on moral obligation, '*Das individuelle Gesetz*,' Simmel emphasized the distinction between the grounding of moral commitment, which should reflect each person's distinctive authentic self, and the object of its attention, which could be a social group, a cultural form, or the individual's own personality—just as the *Einleitung*, had stressed that the form of moral obligation could encompass the most diverse contents. All together, then, Simmel's work provides a wealth of arguments for a critique of the economic interpretation of action, one of whose most common fallacies involves its unprincipled adoption of whatever point of view advances the interpretation of action as self-interested.

Concluding Comment

A good deal of Talcott Parsons's intellectual energy went into bringing together ideas and insights from disparate quarters. The momentous synthesis attempted in *The Structure of Social Action* was followed by many other efforts to bring together work from diverse domains: from economics and political science, from linguistics

and cybernetics, from psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology. Yet nothing quite compares to the scope of that foundational enterprise.

In an earlier critique of *Structure*, I pointed out that, contrary to what Parsons argued therein, the synthesis of instrumental and normative dimensions in a philosophy of action did not originate in the generation of Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber, but took shape more than a century before, in a series of philosophical developments that rebutted the Hobbesian reduction to atomic self-interest. Hume and Smith in Scotland, Montesquieu and Comte in France, Kant, Herder, and Hegel in Germany—all of them formulated conceptions of action of the sort that Parsons in *Structure* would designate as voluntaristic (Levine, 1980: xiii–xxvi). Even so, once the Hobbesian model had been revived and refined, first by Bentham, then by the marginalist revolution in economics, it was salutary and significant that men of the intellectual order of those whom Parsons selected so deftly should have arrived, in different ways, at systematic, empirically-backed theories that overcame naive economism. To that grand order of convergence at the level of general social theory—still plausible for Marshall, Pareto, and Weber, if not for Durkheim—one should add another area of convergence, which Parsons identified later on, between Freud and Durkheim, according to which the social generation and transmission of norms in Durkheim's sociology was paralleled in Freud's psychological theory by the internalization of norms through the agency of the superego.

At this point, Simmel can be shown to have anticipated both areas of convergence. Simmel's social theory offers nothing less than a combination of penetrating analyses of instrumental rationality conjoined with a multi-leveled account of the infusion of action by normative ideals, expressive dispositions, and contradictory strivings. What is more, anticipating what Parsons would later represent as a convergence between Freud and Durkheim, Simmel depicts the normative dimension of action as flowing both from society's need to instill norms and the individual's ontic-psychoic need to respect a sense of moral obligation. If Parsons was unable to appreciate that convergence in work that followed his exposure

to Weber and Simmel in Heidelberg, we who follow Parsons in struggling toward appropriate ways of conceptualizing human action can certainly do so now.¹²

¹²This is not to say that Parsons left us the most adequate point of departure for analyzing action. For critical commentary on that broader issue, see Camic (1989), Joas (1996), and Levine (1998).

REFERENCES

- Alexander, Jeffrey (1993) "'Formal Sociology' is not Multidimensional: Breaking the 'Code' in Parsons' Fragment on Simmel", *Teoria Sociologica* 1: 101-14.
- Camic, Charles (1979) 'The Utilitarians Revisited', *American Journal of Sociology*. 85: 516-50.
- _____ (1989) 'Structure after 50 Years: The Anatomy of a Charter', *American Journal of Sociology* 95: 38-107.
- _____ (1991) Introduction to *Talcott Parsons: The Early Essays*. Charles Camic (ed.), xxiii-liv. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____ (1997) 'The Monist Call to Sociological Theory: A Comment on the Early Parsons', paper presented at the 92nd Annual Meetings of American Sociological Association, Toronto.
- Christian, Petra (1978) *Einheit und Zwiespalt: Zum hegelianisierenden Denken in der Philosophie und Soziologie Georg Simmels*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
- Frischeisen-Köhler, Max (1920) 'Georg Simmel', *Kant-Studien* 24: 1-51.
- Gould, Mark (1991) 'The Structure of Social Action: At Least Sixty Years Ahead of its Time,' (pp. 85-107) in Roland Robertson & Bryan S. Turner (eds.) *Talcott Parsons: Theorist of Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Hirschman, Albert (1987) 'Interests', in *The New Paul Grave: The World of Economics..* John Eatwell et al (ed.), pp. 349-60. New York: MacMillan.
- Joas, Hans [1992] (1996) *The Creativity of Action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Köhnke, Klaus-Christian (1996) *Der junge Simmel in Theoriebeziehungen und soziale Bewegungen*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Levine, Donald N (1980) 'Introduction' to Levine 1957, *Simmel and Parsons: Two Approaches to the Study of Society*. New York: Arno Press.
- _____ (1985) *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays in Social and Cultural Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____ (1989) 'Simmel as a Resource for Sociological Metatheory', *Sociological Theory* 7: 161-74.
- _____ (1991) 'Simmel and Parsons Reconsidered', *American Journal of Sociology* 96: 1097-116.

- _____ (1993) 'Further Comments Regarding Parsons's Chapter on Simmel and Tönnies', *Teoria Sociologica* 2: 360-74.
- _____ (1995) *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____ (1996) 'Sociology and the Nation-State in an Era of Shifting Boundaries', *Sociological Inquiry* 66: 253-66.
- _____ (1997) 'Simmel Reappraised: Old Images, New Scholarship,' pp. 173-207 in Charles Camic (ed.) *Reclaiming The Sociological Classics..* London: Blackwell.
- _____ (1998) 'Putting Voluntarism Back into a Voluntaristic Theory of Action' paper presented at the XIV World Congress of Sociology, Montreal.
- Martel, Martin U (1977) 'Dialogues with Parsons (1973-74),' pp. 1-34 in G. C. Hallen *Essays on the Sociology of Parsons*, ed. G. C. Hallen. Meerut: Indian Journal of Social Research.
- Merton, Robert K (1976) *Sociological Ambivalence and Other Essays*. New York: Free Press.
- _____ (1997) Letter to Donald N. Levine, 16 June. Unpublished.
- Münch, Richard (1981) 'Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action I: The Structure of the Kantian Core', *American Journal of Sociology* 86: 709-39.
- Parsons, Talcott. [1970] (1977) 'On Building Social System Theory: a Personal History,' pp. 22-6 in *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*. New York: Free Press.
- _____ (1980) 'The Circumstances of my Encounter with Max Weber,' pp. 35-43 in *Sociological Traditions from Generation to Generation*. (Robert K. Merton and Matilda White Riley (eds) Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- _____ (1991) *The Early Essays* . Charles Camic (ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____ (1993) Letter to Jeffrey Alexander, 19 January 1979. *Teoria Sociologica* 1: 41-4.
- _____ N. d. 'Simmel and the Methodological Problems of Formal Sociology.' TMs (photocopy). Harvard University Archives. HUG (FP) 42.42.
- Simmel, Georg [1892] (1989) *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, vol. 1. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- _____ [1893] (1991) *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, vol. 2. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- _____ [1907] (1978) *The Philosophy of Money*, Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (trans). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- _____ [1908] (1971) *Soziologie. Selections in Georg Simmel :On Individuality and Social Forms*. Donald N. Levine (ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, Max (1905) 'Die protestantische Ethik und der "Geist" des Kapitalismus, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 20: 1-54.
- _____. [1908] (1972.) 'Georg Simmel as Sociologist,' with an introduction by Donald N. Levine. *Social Research* 39: 155-63.
- _____ (1920) *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
- Wenzel, Harald (1990) *Die Ordnung des Handelns: Talcott Parsons' Theories des Allgemeinen Handlungssystems*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

ABSTRACT

Although Parsons encountered the works of both Simmel and Weber during his stay at Heidelberg in the late 1920s, his appropriation of the two became increasingly asymmetrical, issuing in a lifelong devotion to Weber and a pronounced disavowal of Simmel around the time Parsons published *The Structure. of Social Action*. This reaction deprived Parsons of the substantial support he could have found in Simmel's work for his effort to counteract "utilitarian" theories of action. Simmel not only went beyond Parsons in revealing a number of perspectives that demonstrate the permeation of action by moral orientations, but he counteracted economistic thinking along a number of other dimensions. These include: 1) showing the limits of cost-benefit calculations in social exchange; 2) presenting strong theoretical arguments against the assumption of hedonism; 3) presenting strong theoretical arguments against the assumption of egoism.

Shortened abstract:

Talcott Parsons encountered the works of Simmel and Weber at Heidelberg in the 1920s. His appropriation of the two became asymmetrical, issuing in a lifelong devotion to Weber and a disavowal of Simmel by the time he published *The Structure. of Social Action*. This reaction deprived Parsons of Simmel's assistance in counteracting "utilitarian" theories of action. Simmel went beyond Parsons in revealing perspectives that demonstrate the permeation of action by moral orientations, and counteracted economistic thinking along a number of other dimensions. These include: 1) showing the limits of cost-benefit calculations in social exchange; 2) presenting strong arguments against the assumption of hedonism; 3) presenting strong arguments against the assumption of egoism.

Donald N. Levine is the Peter B. Ritzma Professor of Sociology and former dean of the College at The University of Chicago. For the past decade he has edited The Heritage of Sociology series for the University of Chicago Press and in 1996-7 served as chair of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association. His books include *Georg Simmel On Individuality and Social Forms* (1971), *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays in Social and Culture Theory* (1985) and *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995).