

SOCIAL THEORY TODAY

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Parsonian Theory Today: In Search of a New Synthesis¹

RICHARD MÜNCH

Introduction

At the present time the Parsonian theoretical tradition is undergoing a remarkable renewal. Although this tradition was pronounced dead by many sociologists during the seventies, the eighties have brought forth, to some astonishment, several new approaches which build on Parsonian theory to carry it onward to a new level. One should note, though, that this development has its origins in the seventies. This was a decade in which there was a curious parallel between the assumed decline of Parsonianism and the simultaneous increase in the number of contributions dealing with Talcott Parsons's work whose authors were primarily younger members of the academic world. The approaches developed during this period have made it evident that a new generation of sociologists are once again taking up the Parsonian theoretical tradition, but in a new way and with a critical and constructive attitude.

Thus it is not as surprising as it would at first sight appear that a breakthrough has occurred in the renewal of the Parsonian theoretical tradition during the eighties. The outstanding event sparking off this revitalization was the testimonial collection produced by Jan J. Loubser, Rainer C. Baum, Andrew Effrat and Victor M. Lidz in 1976, *Explorations in General Theory in Social Science*, which impressively documents the vitality welling up again in Parsonian theory (Loubser *et al.*, 1976)². From among

¹ I am grateful to Neil Johnson for translating this article from the German original.

² For important contributions pre-dating the testimonial collection, see Bershady: 1973; Black: 1961; Inkeles and Barber: 1973; Mitchell: 1967; Rocher: 1974; Schwanenberg: 1970; 1971; Turner: 1974; 1978; Turner and Beeghley: 1974. For important literature concurrent with the collection, and the rush of work which followed, see Adriaansens: 1980; Alexander: 1985; Almarcz: 1981; Bourricaud: 1976; Berger: 1977; Buxton: 1982; Genov: 1982; Loh: 1980; Menzies: 1977;

the very many treatises following on from that, which also provide a firm basis for the theory's renewal, the extensive work of Jeffrey C. Alexander is particularly prominent, especially his four volumes on *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* which appeared in 1982 and 1983.³ In Europe, too, new links have been forged with the work of Talcott Parsons. Niklas Luhmann, for example, has been extraordinarily successful in developing a new conception of systems theory (Luhmann: 1974; 1977; 1978; 1980; 1984). Jürgen Habermas, by reflecting critically upon Parsonian systems theory, has built a comprehensive paradigm for the analysis of modern society (Habermas: 1981a; 1981b). Wolfgang Schluchter has incorporated crucial elements of Parsons's work into his renewal of Weberian sociology (Schluchter: 1979; 1980). The author of this essay has endeavoured to give a fresh interpretation of Parsonian theory from a Kantian perspective and to formulate it anew (Münch: 1980; 1981a; 1981b; 1982b; 1982c; 1983a; 1983b; 1984; 1986; see also Alexauder: 1984).

What all these attempts have in common is that they refer to the current state of theoretical development in seeking a new synthesis, just as Parsons had intended in 1937 with his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1968), by both preserving and replacing positivism and idealism in a voluntaristic theory of action. At the current stage of development of the theory in general, this involves employing all the critiques of Parsons's approach and all the alternative theoretical approaches formulated since the late fifties in order to overcome the imbalances of Parsons's theory; at the same time, the content of his theory which is accepted as correct needs to be used as a frame of reference in determining the scope and limits of the new approaches. In this way Parsonian theory can enter into a fruitful, interpenetrative relationship with the competing theoretical approaches, enabling it to generate new theoretical formulations.

This present essay is designed to indicate, in programmatic fashion, the new way forward for the development of the Parsonian tradition shown by, on the one hand, the mutual penetration of the tracing of Parsonian theory back to its abstract foundations and, on the other, the application of competing theoretical approaches in formulating the theory on more specialized levels. I hark back to Parsons's own point of departure in *The Structure of Social Action* by terming this approach 'voluntaristic action theory'. The theoretical analysis of modern institutions will be taken as an example in clarifying this approach. The institutions referred to include the economy, the polity (with its own specific institutions of the constitution, the legal system, the executive, the bureaucracy and the political market), the modern societal community with civil rights as its basis, and the cultural institutions, such as those of science and the professions and those involved in the

Micbach: 1984; Proctor: 1980; Saurwein: 1984; Savage: 1981; Sciulli: 1984; Sciulli and Gerstein: 1985; Stichweh: 1980; Tiryakian: 1979-80; Turner and Beeghley: 1981.

³ See also Alexander: 1978; 1982-3.

formation of public consensus and in intellectual discourse. The question one faces in each case is what theoretical approach should be employed to investigate such institutions.

In subjecting modern institutions to theoretical analysis, we need at our disposal a comprehensive theory of action capable of incorporating within itself the two fundamental streams in Western thought, positivism and idealism. We may differentiate such a theory, as a voluntaristic theory of action, from positivistic or idealistic action theories. Positivism's and idealism's one-sided aspects need to be overcome on both metatheoretical and object-theoretical levels (Münch: 1982b; cf. Alexander: 1982; Micbach: 1984; Parsons: 1968, pp. 757-75; Parsons and Platt: 1973, pp. 7-102). On a metatheoretical level, I shall initially attempt to integrate idiographic, ideal-typical, nomological and constructivist methodological approaches. Each of these procedural forms can be conceived of in a positivistic or an idealistic variant. The next step is to forge a link between the positivistic methods of causal and teleonomic explanation and idealistic methods concerned with the normative and the life-world or with rational interpretation. The task on the object-theoretical level is to integrate utilitarianism and conflict theory – variants of positivism – with normative life-world sociology and the rationalistic theory of culture, as variants of idealism. Finally, integration must be achieved between the theories of social stability and those of social change, micro and macrosociology, individualism and collectivism, action theory and systems theory.

With the intention of developing a comprehensive paradigm able to integrate the different metatheoretical and object-theoretical procedural approaches, I begin by constructing an abstract action space within the confines of which all action takes place. The second step involves determining how to proceed metatheoretically according to the dimensions of the action space: that is, determining methods and explanations. In the third step an object-theoretical action frame of reference, a model of factors controlling action in distinguishable areas of the action space, is constructed. In the fourth step, the subsystems of action need to be determined by way of systems theory. The fifth step is intended to make explicit the various methodological applications of the object-theoretical frame of reference. Once the paradigm of a voluntaristic theory of action has been formally introduced the sixth step can be taken, in which the limits of particular metatheoretical and object-theoretical approaches and the ways in which they can be integrated are indicated.

I Basic Elements of the Theoretical Frame of Reference

All scientific study strives to recognize how the world is ordered. This is no less true of the scientific study of human action (Bershady: 1973; Kant: 1956; Münch: 1982b, pp. 17-58; 1982c, pp. 709-39; Parsons: 1954; Whitehead: 1956). This analytical problem of order in the world must be

strictly delimited in relation to the empirical problem of stability or change in concrete societies. Equally, the interest in gaining knowledge of the analytical order of the world (of action) has nothing at all to do with interest in the stability of concrete societies.⁴ The intermingling of these two levels where there should be a fundamental distinction – between analytical order and empirical stability – is a widespread phenomenon which leads to such erroneous dichotomizations as theory of change versus theory of stability, conflict theory versus the theory of order or integration, individualism versus collectivism and action theory versus systems theory.

Phenomena in reality, and hence also in action, can vary from total unpredictability (contingency) to total predictability (orderliness). We base predictions of events upon antecedents which we expect to have certain consequences. The number of antecedents involved can range from maximum complexity (a multiplicity with many interdependencies) to maximum simplicity (one single antecedent), and the consequences range from maximum contingency and minimum predictability (an infinite number of consequences) to minimum contingency or maximum predictability (only one possible consequence). On this basis we can construct a system of coordinates in which the vertical axis (ordinate) represents the complexity of antecedents and the horizontal axis (abscissa) represents the contingency of consequences. At the four extremes of this system of coordinates are the points determining the four fields in which events are ordered (Münch: 1982b, pp. 98-109, 224-6, 242-52):

- 1 maximum complexity of antecedents and maximum contingency of consequences;
- 2 maximum complexity of antecedents and minimum contingency of consequences;
- 3 minimum complexity of antecedents and maximum contingency of consequences;
- 4 minimum complexity of antecedents and minimum contingency of consequences.

If we wish to apply this system of coordinates to human action, we must begin with the first definitional characteristic distinguishing human action from mere reaction to causal impulses or instinctive response to stimuli, i.e. with meaningfulness. On the level of meaningfulness human action is guided by symbols whose meaning is interpreted by actors. In this case, then, relations between antecedents and consequences are those between symbols and the actions which can be subsumed under them. We can also take the various interpretations which symbols allow as belonging to the category of actions. Here, too, a system of coordinates can be constructed in order to define the action space. The ordinate now represents symbolic complexity

⁴ This is shown by Alexander: 1982, pp. 90-4.

and the abscissa the contingency of action. The action space is delineated by four extreme points defining their respective fields of action:

- 1 maximum symbolic complexity and maximum contingency of action;
- 2 maximum symbolic complexity and minimum contingency of action;
- 3 minimum symbolic complexity and maximum contingency of action;
- 4 minimum symbolic complexity and minimum contingency of action.

II Methods and Explanations

With this system of coordinates it is possible, in corresponding fashion and taking the metatheoretical level first, to explicate four discrete methods and four discrete explanations although, of course, it is possible for less extreme combinations to exist between them.

The following four methodological procedures should be distinguished (see figure 1).

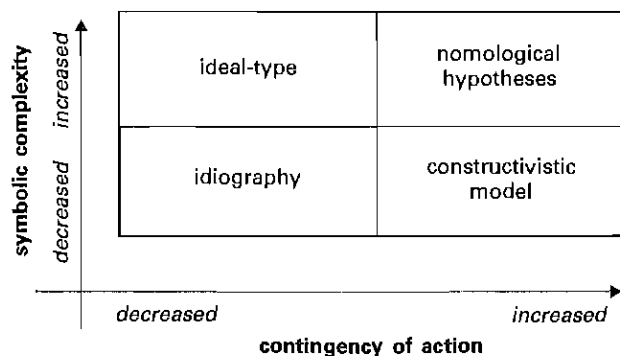


Figure 1 Methodological procedures.

- 1 The nomological method attempts to formulate scientific laws independently of symbolic complexity and the contingency of action. It investigates laws in action contexts which, as such, are totally open.
- 2 The ideal-typical method proceeds selectively. With regard to the complexity of symbols guiding action in different directions, it picks out one quite specific, selective interpretation of the symbols which exercise relatively unambiguous control over action.
- 3 Constructivist-model construction reduces the complexity of the symbolic world to a simplified set of abstract symbols which guide action in general, but on a concrete level imply that action is highly contingent and has a minimum of predictability.

- 4 The idiographic method describes action in closed societal contexts in which both symbolic complexity and the contingency of action are reduced by a self-evident but particularized life-world.

As regards explanations, the following four types can be distinguished (see figure 2).

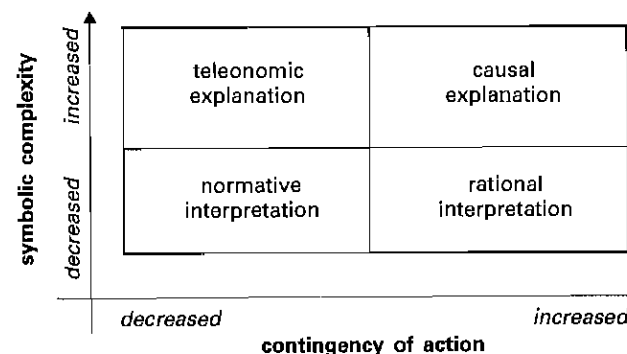


Figure 2 Explanations.

- 1 Causal explanation applies latent causal laws, independently of the complexity of the symbolic world and the contingency of action, to the explanation of action.
- 2 Teleonomic explanation attempts, regardless of the symbolic world's complexity, to explain a latent directedness, and hence restricted contingency, in action.
- 3 Rational interpretation sees action as being deduced according to simple, general principles from a set of premisses and initial conditions for those premisses. The general principles (low symbolic complexity) admit of a multiplicity of actions (high contingency of action) which will depend upon concrete circumstances.
- 4 Normative interpretation reads action in terms of an established normative symbolic pattern. Knowledge of a particularized life-world (low symbolic complexity) allows action to be unequivocally predicted (low contingency of action).

III Basic Assumptions of Action Theory

On an object-theoretical level we can formulate a frame of reference out of the factors guiding action in the four discrete action fields (Münch: 1982b, pp. 234-52; Parsons: 1968, pp. 43-86) (see figure 3).

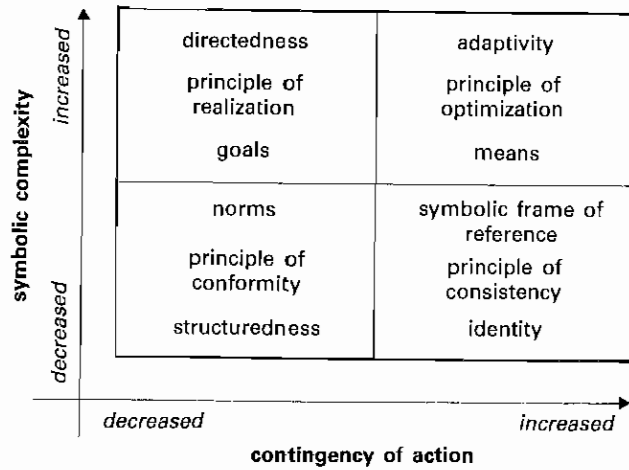


Figure 3 The action frame of reference.

1 Means enhance the variability and adaptivity of action and allow maximum symbolic complexity to be combined with maximum contingency of action. This is the zone where action has adaptivity and is governed by the principle of the optimization of goals.

2 Goals lend directedness to action, thus reducing the contingency of action in spite of the symbolic alternatives which could be conceived of. This is the zone where action has directedness, and occurs in accordance with the principle of realization and the maximization of goals.

3 Symbolic frames of reference give action its identity. The symbolic world is simplified by abstraction, but the contingency of the action which can be subsumed under it remains high. This is the zone where action has identity, and it occurs in accordance with the principle of consistency within a frame of reference.

4 Norms are responsible for action conforming to regular patterns. In this instance the symbolic world is normatively simplified and, at the same time, action which conforms to the prevailing norms is unequivocally determined. This is the zone where action has structuredness and obeys the principle of conformity to norms.

IV Basic Assumptions of Systems Theory

Action theory can be extended in systems-theoretical terms if we subdivide to find subsystems and their respective environments which correspond to

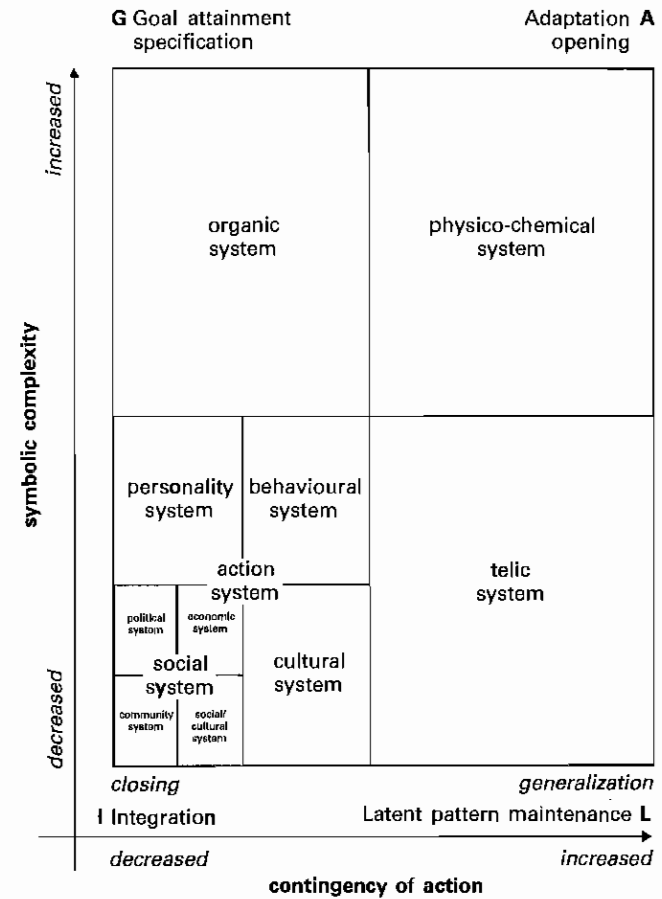


Figure 4 The human condition.

the fields of action in the action space. The subsystems are characterized by particular functions and their associated structures and processes, and also by generalized media which control these processes. Depending on the level involved, and working from the highest downwards, the generalized media are oriented to, respectively, categories of orientation and the standards of evaluation applied to them, meaning patterns and standards of value, or value principles and standards of coordination (Münch; 1982b, pp. 123-67).

The most abstract stage in the analysis comprises the anthropological level of the human condition. The following subsystems can be distinguished on this level (Parsons: 1978) (see figure 4).

1 The physico-chemical system is made up of physical and chemical processes controlled by the medium of empirical ordering. It fulfils the function of adaptation and opening by combining maximum complexity and maximum contingency (**A**). The category of orientation is causality, and the associated standard of evaluation is the adequacy of causal explanations.

2 The organic system is founded upon organic processes controlled by the medium of health. It fulfils the function of goal attainment and specification by combining maximum complexity and minimum contingency (**G**). The category of orientation is teleonomy, and the standard of evaluation is diagnosis.

3 The telic system comprises the transcendental conditions of meaningful human existence controlled by the medium of transcendental ordering. It fulfils the function of latent pattern maintenance and generalization by combining minimum complexity and maximum contingency (**L**). The category of orientation is transcendental, and the standard of evaluation is transcendental discourse.

4 The action system is based upon action, controlled by meaning. It fulfils the function of integration and closing by combining minimum complexity and minimum contingency (**I**). The category of orientation is generativity, and the standard of evaluation is interpretation (*Verstehen*).

The second systems level is the general system of action, and this too can be divided up internally according to the four fields of action (Loubser *et al.*: 1976, vol. 1; Parsons: 1951; 1959; 1964; Parsons and Bates: 1956; Parsons and Platt: 1973, pp. 7-102; Parsons and Shils: 1951).

1 The behavioural system is composed of stimulus-response linkages and cognitive schemata controlled by the medium of intelligence. It fulfils the function of adaptation together with the opening up of the scope for action by combining maximum symbolic complexity and maximum contingency of action (**A**). The meaning pattern to which intelligence relates comprises grounds for cognitive validity and significance, and the standard of value is cognitive rationality.

2 The personality system encompasses personal dispositions controlled by personal performance capacity. It fulfils the function of goal attainment and specification of the scope for action by combining maximum symbolic complexity with minimum contingency of action (**G**). The meaning pattern is the internalization of relevant meaning by the personality, and the standard of value is the means-end rationality of action.

3 The cultural system is built upon symbols controlled by definitions of the situation. It fulfils the function of latent pattern maintenance and generalization of the scope for action by combining minimum symbolic complexity and maximum contingency of action (**L**). The meaning pattern is shaped by the human condition's constitutive grounds of meaning,

and the standard of value is the meaningfulness of action in a cultural frame of reference.

4 The social system is defined by social action, controlled by affective attachment. It fulfils the function of integration and the closing of the scope for action by combining minimum symbolic complexity with minimum contingency of action (**I**). The relevant meaning pattern is the institutionalization of meaning in social systems, and the standard of value is the unity in meaning of the social actors' identities.

The inner structure of the social system can in turn be differentiated into four subsystems in line with the fields into which the action space is divided. They are distinguishable according to the structure of social interaction and to the corresponding generalized media which control social action. In an ideal case, the use of the generalized media is regulated by a special normative order. The social subsystems and the corresponding generalized media are associated with distinguishable general value principles and with standards of coordination used to assess the realization of those principles (Loubser *et al.*: 1976, vol. 2; Parsons: 1961, 1967, 1977; Parsons and Smelser: 1956).⁵

1 The economic system is determined by acts of competition and exchange in a market; economic action is controlled by money as regulated by an order of property. It fulfils the function of allocating resources and preferences and as such is a concretization of the function of adaptation and the opening up of the scope for action by combining maximum symbolic complexity and maximum contingency of action. The value principle applying to money is utility, and the standard of coordination is the solvency of economic enterprises.

2 The political system is founded upon authority. Political action is controlled by power as regulated in an order of authority. It fulfils the function of collective decision-making and is a concretization of the function of goal attainment and a specification of the scope for action by combining maximum symbolic complexity with minimum contingency of action (**G**). The value principle for political power is political effectiveness as expressed in decision-making ability, and the standard of coordination is the acceptance and observance of decisions.

3 The social-cultural system derives from discourse, conducted with arguments (value commitments) as regulated by an order of discourse. It fulfils the function of constructing symbols in a socially binding manner and is a concretization of the function of latent pattern maintenance and a generalization of the scope for action by combining minimum symbolic complexity and maximum contingency of action (**L**). The value principle relating to arguments (value commitments) is the integrity of patterns of

⁵ See also Parsons's essays, 'On the Concept of Political Power', 'On the Concept of Influence' and 'On the Concept of Value Commitments' (1969, pp. 352-404, 405-48, 439-72).

symbols, and the standard of coordination is the consistency of symbol systems.

4 The community system is built upon the foundation of mutual attachment, controlled by influence, and based on the commitment to a community and its norms as regulated by a communal order. It fulfils the function of the maintenance of solidarity and is a concretization of the function of integration and the closing of the scope for action by combining minimum symbolic complexity and minimum contingency of action (I). The value principle for influence based on commitment is the solidarity of community members, and the standard of coordination is social consensus.

All subsystems are functionally specialized systems requiring structures adequate to the fulfilment of their functions; in addition, they are not self-sufficient but depend upon the performance of complementary functions by the other subsystems. A necessary requirement for this is that the performance of functions should be interchanged with the aid of generalized media and that mediating subsystems should develop in the zones of interpenetration between the systems. A society represents a concrete and relatively self-sufficient social system. If it is to maintain its unity, there must be internal interpenetration between its subsystems, and it must 'adapt' to its environment, that is there must be external interpenetration too. The society's environment can be subdivided according to the dimensions of the action space as follows: **A**, articulation of interests, learning, physico-chemical processes; **G**, goals set by individuals and groups, individuals' personal dispositions, organic structures; **L**, social-cultural discourse, cultural symbols, transcendental conditions; **I**, particularized communities.

The relations between the action subsystems, and between the society and its environment, vary depending upon how coherent the systems are and upon the type of order inherent in them, as well as upon the mediating systems' level of development and their type of order.

- (a) If adaptive subsystems are relatively strongly developed this has a dynamizing effect on the other subsystems and causes them to accommodate the adaptive subsystems, i.e. norms, values and goals are accommodated to interests and/or means.
- (b) If goal-directed subsystems are relatively strongly developed this has a selective effect on the other subsystems and causes them to be dominated through compulsion, i.e. values, norms and interests/means are forcibly dominated by goals and the power standing behind them.
- (c) If integrative subsystems are relatively strongly developed this has a limiting effect on the other systems and leads to them being enchained, i.e. values, goals and interests/means are enchained by norms.
- (d) If structure-maintaining subsystems are relatively strongly developed this has a generalizing effect on the other subsystems so that all of

them are defined but without concrete control, i.e. norms, goals and interests/means are subsumed under generally applicable values.

How much certain subsystems might dominate, with the effects upon other subsystems described above, depends upon the relative development of the subsystems themselves and of the mediating systems. The following constellations are conceivable.

- (a) All subsystems and mediating systems are poorly developed: the result is an underdeveloped and malintegrated action system.
- (b) All subsystems are poorly developed, but the mediating systems are more strongly developed: the result is an underdeveloped but integrated action system.
- (c) The subsystems are strongly developed, but the mediating systems are poorly developed: the result is conflict.
- (d) One subsystem is strongly developed, but the others and the mediating systems poorly developed: the result is the dominance of that one subsystem over the others.
- (e) One subsystem is strongly developed, the others more poorly developed, but the mediating systems are well advanced: the result is that the strong subsystem overrides the others.
- (f) All subsystems and mediating systems are strongly developed: the result is a highly developed, differentiated and integrated system of action.

How the action system is integrated is in turn a product of the structure of the mediating systems.

- (a) Exchange produces open and unstable integration.
- (b) Authority causes integration which is compulsively enforced through domination.
- (c) Communal association leads to a conformist and immobile integration.
- (d) Discourse implies integration through reconciliation.
- (e) The combination of exchange, authority, communal association and discourse according to their analytical order as mediating systems is the main precondition for the interpenetration of strongly-developed subsystems. These latter are themselves a necessary condition for interpenetration as realized by the mediating systems.

V Forms of Application of the Theoretical Frame of Reference

With the aid of this comprehensive paradigm we are able to proceed constructivistically, ideal-typically, nomologically or idiographically.

1 A constructivist model is available to us in the shape of the entire frame of reference. In terms of action theory, it represents a closed model of interdependent factors which, in any given situation, guide action in particular fields of the action space. In terms of systems theory, the frame of reference is a closed model of interdependent subsystems in an environment defined according to the dimensions of the action space. In this instance the emphasis is upon abstraction (**L**).

2 Ideal-types can be constructed by selecting particular fields and factors of action or particular subsystems and functions. It is important that the selective nature of this procedure is immediately apparent from the frame of reference's point of view and that the interdependence of the ideal-typical structures and processes with the other factors of action and subsystems can be demonstrated. Max Weber's types of action serve as an example: they selectively define quite specific factors controlling action, yet without being arranged in a model which might throw light on their special characteristics and their mutual relations. Weber distinguishes between instrumentally (means-end) rational, value-rational, affectual and traditional action. Their unique characteristics and interdependence emerge more clearly than they did in Weber's own work if we interpret them as representing different fields of action in the action space. Instrumentally-rational action leads into the field of adaptivity, value-rational action into the field of identity, affectual action into the field of directedness and traditional action into the field of structuredness. Ideal-types are specifications of the general frame of reference (**G**).

3 Nomological hypotheses give expression to structural relations. Without our frame of reference the following four basic hypotheses can be formulated.

- (i) The more action is controlled by exchange, utility orientation, money, learning, intelligence and physico-chemical processes, then in turn the more frequently and rapidly an institutional order will change but the less an order will be enforced, will retain any continuity or will conform to regular patterns.
- (ii) The more action is controlled by authority, by orientation to goals and by power, personal dispositions, performance capacity and organic processes, then in turn the more one institutional order is enforced against other alternatives but the less it will change situationally, retain any continuity or conform to regular patterns.
- (iii) The more action is controlled by discourse, orientation to universal principles, arguments, symbols, definitions of the situation and transcendental conditions, then in turn the more an institutional order will retain continuity but the less it will change situationally, be concretized and enforced or conform to regular patterns.
- (iv) The more action is controlled by communal association, orientation to norms, influence based on commitments, obligation through solidarity, and affective attachment, then in turn the more an institutional order will conform to regular patterns but the less it will

change situationally, be concretely enforced against its alternatives or maintain its continuity.

Nomological hypotheses relate to the field of opening in the action space (**A**).

4 In idiographic accounts we use the language of the paradigm. More specifically, we can indicate with the aid of the frame of reference which factors in action, subsystems, structures and functions in individual societies carry special weight and dominate in relation to others, what frictions exist between subsystems and what gaps there are in the institutional order. Idiographic descriptions are attuned to the field where the scope for action is closed (**I**).

VI The Scope and Limits of Specific Approaches in Metatheory and Object Theory

Having thus far given a formal presentation of the paradigm for a voluntaristic theory of action, this perspective will now be adopted in a detailed examination of the scope and limits of specific metatheoretical and object-theoretical approaches and of their integration into the voluntaristic paradigm. The following metatheoretical approaches and explanations on the metatheoretical level will be discussed: (**a**) idiographic, ideal-typical, nomological and constructivist methods; (**b**) causal, teleonomic, normatively interpretative and rationally interpretative explanation. On the object-theoretical level, our concern is with the scope, limits and integration of the following approaches: (**c**) utilitarianism and conflict theory as variants of positivism, and normativism and cultural rationalism as variants of idealism; (**d**) the explanation of stability and change in institutions; (**e**) micro and macrosociology; (**f**) individualism and collectivism; (**g**) action theory and systems theory. Finally, (**h**) the emergence of modern law will be discussed as an example of systems analysis founded in action theory.

(a) Idiographic, ideal-typical, nomological and constructivist methods

If we examine modern institutions using the frame of reference of voluntaristic action theory, we go beyond a merely *idiographic* description and explanation of the institutions. The latter method would have to make an interpretative explanation of an institution's uniqueness within a concrete society at a particular point in time, looking outwards from the context of the life-world in that particular society (Collingwood: 1946; Dilthey: 1970; Husserl: 1928; Schütz: 1962; Schütz and Luckmann: 1979). Historical casuistry predominates, with no opportunity to trace hypothesized functional relations back to universally verifiable knowledge or to point out deficiencies, alternative procedures and further developments associated with a model ranging beyond the individual case under study. Positivist empiricism differs

from this idealistic variant of empiricism in that it offers a historical explanation by collecting quantifiable historical data (Best and Mann: 1977; Clubb and Schuch: 1980; Flora: 1974; Imhof: 1980). However, when such collections of historical data serve as the sole methodological basis the problem is the same, namely, that nothing can be said about functional relations, deficiencies, alternative procedures or further developments.

Nor should our examination be based solely on the deliberately selective construction of positivistic or idealistic *ideal-types* in the manner of Max Weber.⁶ In this case too, functional relations, deficiencies, alternative procedures and further developments cannot be generally established. An ideal-type, ultimately, is an arbitrary selection of a phenomenon's characteristics from among the manifold qualities present in reality, without any attempt to place it in any superordinate relationship. This can easily lead to distortions and hasty conclusions which cannot be corrected in the absence of more universal knowledge, even though the distortions occur during a 'conscious' process. There is no superordinate analytical order.

Another method which is inadequate if applied in isolation is historical explanation by way of *nomological* hypotheses, whether in its positivistic variant centred around natural laws or in its idealistic one with a normative emphasis (Dray: 1957; Goldstein: 1972; Hempel: 1965a; 1966; Nagel: 1960; Schmid: 1979). The former lacks both access to action's meaningful aspects and any superordinate analytical order, and the latter lacks universal order. As a rule, positivistic explanations are sought in utilitarian and conflict-theoretical approaches. This means that the relation to the normative and the life-world and the cultural interrelations in which institutional orders are involved are either completely eliminated or are reduced to constellations of interests or power. The substantive quality of institutions then goes by the board. In the absence of any superordinate analytical order it is impossible to place the special ways in which factors work, and the reciprocal relations between different nomological hypotheses, in any further structured framework. The question of which hypotheses should be applied to which problem is wide open: there is a veritable jumble of competing hypotheses.

Finally, positivistic or idealistic *constructivism* is a method which, for all its special relevance here, still ought not to become an object in itself (Kambartel: 1976; Lorenzen: 1974). It is restricted to constructing abstract models which are then tested under the sole criterion of their internal consistency. Under such circumstances it is of course easy for historical concretization to be missing, along with any application to reality. If pursued as an end in itself, constructivism leads ultimately to 'neo Platonism' (Albert: 1965). Examples can be found in constructions of developmental logic in its idealistic, materialistic and indeed dialectic variants. The theory of rationalization

⁶ Here, see Burger: 1976; Henrich: 1952; Parsons: 1968, pp. 579-639; Prewo: 1979; Schelting: 1984, pp. 325-43, 354-61; Tenbruck: 1959; Watkins: 1952; Weber: 1973; Weiss: 1975.

as used in explaining the formation of modern institutions undoubtedly displays this kind of developmental logic.

If we wish to avoid the distortions arising from these different methods, we need to choose a procedure which integrates them all within a more comprehensive frame of reference. We need to work constructivistically, ideal-typically, nomologically and idiographically at one and the same time. This does not necessarily rule out the possibility of giving priority to one method in particular (depending on the type of knowledge one is seeking to enlarge) and then supplementing it by making at least some use of the others. When making a historical investigation of an individual case, for example, one tends to utilize the idiographic method. Even here, though, if the research is not guided by a constructive frame of reference, ideal-types and nomological hypotheses, it will amount to no more than blind empirical work with no order to it. Sociological investigation differs from historical scrutiny in that it strives to achieve a greater order in knowledge at the expense of the variety of individual cases. It is for this reason that a constructive frame of reference is especially important, though it must be expanded by ideal-types, nomological hypotheses and idiographic-empirical accounts.

In the investigation of modern institutions we need to adopt a sociological approach, and therefore our first requirement is for a comprehensive frame of reference. The constructivist method, construing general patterns inherent in modern institutions, is pre-eminent here. We use this method with the conviction that sociological knowledge without the achievement of such ordering will inevitably remain blind. Just as intuition and empirical observation are blind without concepts and a theoretical frame of reference, so too the concepts and theoretical frame of reference are empty without intuition and empirical observation (Kant: 1956, pp. 294-349). If we wish to be faithful to this maxim of Kant, a constructivistic method is as indispensable in investigating modern institutions as it is elsewhere, but, again, this must not become mere constructivism for its own sake. It must be compelled to work side by side with idiographic/empirical considerations to provide for empirical testing, with ideal-typical considerations to allow specification toward particular sections of reality and with nomological ones to explain phenomena observed.

(b) *Causal, teleonomic, normatively interpretative and rationally interpretative explanation*

Another question arising on the metatheoretical level is the controversy between the idealistic method of interpretation (*Verstehen*) and the positivistic one of explanation (Parsons: 1968, pp. 579-639; Weber: 1973). Here, too, we should not have to choose between the one method and the other, but should find a way of proceeding which integrates the two. Institutions consist of a pattern of norms. In analysing their relations of meaning -

whether internally, or externally in relation to other institutions, culture in general and the life-world of communities – we have need of interpretation through *Verstehen*. Likewise, the placing of these institutions in a more universal pattern is attributable to this form of interpretation. Yet interpretation is also the force in explaining the actions of individual and collective actors in a situation. Any such actor's intentional action should be interpreted as being derived from a choice made according to a certain principle under given initial conditions consisting of means, conditions (situation), ends, norms and a frame of reference. The underlying principles the actor can follow are the optimization of goals, the maximization and attainment of one goal, conformity to norms or consistency within a frame of reference, or, again, an ordered pattern incorporating all of these. The link between the initial conditions and the intention implicit in the action is a relation of meaning which can be appreciated through interpretation, and not a causal relation; the only aspect which is causal or quasi-causal in nature is the direct effect conditions have upon the action carried out.

The more the object of investigation is determined by levels of action which are far removed from symbolic structures (culture and the life-world) and constitute conditions which the actor cannot change by argument, the more his action is causally or quasi-causally determined and should be explained accordingly. This also applies to the relation between relatively rigid and established structures of interaction or institutional structures, on the one hand, and particular frequencies of given types of action on the other. The links between features of the social structure and rates of suicide investigated by Émile Durkheim (1973) are classic examples of quasi-causal relationships. They are also exemplified in Max Weber's demonstration of the relation between the spread of ascetic Protestantism and the existence of *rational* capitalism as a form of capitalism subject to normative order (Weber: 1973). However, it is not causal laws running their predictable course without any human reflection which are under discussion, but natural laws which are only quasi-causal in character. Apart from establishing statistically significant correlations and allowing for determining factors by comparison, in order to test for causal adequacy Weber and Durkheim alike expended considerable effort to discover the relation of meaning between the symbolic features of the social structure concerned and the intentions of the actors. Max Weber emphasized the meaning connection between the Protestant ethic and capitalist norms in order to ascertain the adequacy of the hypothesized relation on the level of meaning. Émile Durkheim analysed suicide as a meaningfully understandable action under conditions of, respectively, a lack of order in the personality system (anomic suicide), social isolation and the individual search for meaning (egoistic suicide), and communal responsibility (altruistic suicide).

The fact that meaning structures accessible to human reflection underlie what at first sight appear to be inexorable laws means that they can also be undermined and changed by human beings. This is why such relations are described as *quasi-causal*. For example, the meaning connection between

the Protestant ethic and capitalism can be portrayed as a problem in discourse, with the result that changes occur in the justifiability of economic structures. In close proximity to quasi-causal relations, as far as their effect on the frequency of actions and the characteristics of social orders are concerned, are interest constellations and power structures. Here, actors are strategic in what they do, and if they act communicatively at all then it is only on a superordinate level, meaning that their action is largely determined by external conditions. The frequency with which actors generate negative external effects for each other when they act self-interestedly or make use of power in large, interdependent circles of interaction is a necessary consequence which the actors can only overcome if they transfer from strategic to communicative action.

The investigation of modern institutions is not to remain restricted to the level of meaning structures, nor to the level of interest and power structures or to that of individual action, and if institutions are to be seen as meaning structures which interrelate not only with other meaning structures but also with interest and power structures, then a comprehensive approach demands the formulation of quasi-nomological hypotheses which can be measured against the criterion of the causal adequacy of statements on relations and applied through quasi-causal explanation. Yet the investigation also demands interpretations (through *Verstehen*) of meaning relations and ways of acting oriented to the criterion of the adequacy of assertions concerning relations on the level of meaning.

Another method of explanation may be used, particularly where we are investigating concretely-delineated systems of action to which we can attribute an unequivocal underlying purpose, as in the case of organizations. Here we require a comprehensive model of the functions which such systems need to fulfil if they are effectively to attain their goals in the environment. It is then possible to give a *functional* explanation for the relation between goal attainment and the fulfilment of required functions within a system. If the system manages to maintain goal attainment constantly we are able to deduce *functionalistically* the existence of the structures required for the purpose. If it has the means to control inputs from the environment with regard to the extent to which they allow goal attainment to be held over time then, whenever disruptions due to the environment occur, particular processes can be explained *teleonomically* as being responsible for restoring the position of goal attainment (Hempel: 1965b; Münch: 1976, pp. 111–59; Nagel: 1956). Of the three explanatory variants, the one most likely to play a part in the analysis of institutions is functional explanation. This involves viewing an institution as the normative pattern of a concrete system of interactions related to one particular goal (function), and indicating which structures, i.e. patterns of interaction, need to be developed in order to achieve the goal (fulfil the function) in question; the extent of a system's goal attainment (function fulfilment) can be ascertained by a measure of how marked the required patterns of interaction are.

(c) *Utilitarianism, conflict theory, normativism and cultural rationalism*

I turn now to object theory. Here we need to overcome the limitations of the two variants of positivism, utilitarianism and conflict theory, and of the two of idealism, normative life-world sociology and the rationalistic theory of culture.

A *utilitarian* viewpoint would have to make the formation of modern institutions attributable to the utility calculations of the actors involved.⁷ This, without doubt, is a difficult undertaking. Any attempts so far made in this direction have invariably confined themselves to the simple question of whether the very existence of social order or laws of property is beneficial when set against the possibility of their non-existence. However, in larger circles of interaction even this question cannot be answered on the basis of individual utility considerations, as the actors in this situation succumb to a prisoner's dilemma. This approach provides no opportunity for establishing anything substantial about modern institutions or about the significance for their stability and development of cultural traditions and discursive argument. According to this approach, institutions are situated in a cultural and communal vacuum.

Similar problems apply to explanations of modern institutions through *conflict theory* (Bendix: 1964; 1978; Collins: 1968; 1975; Coser: 1956; 1967; Dahrendorf: 1959; 1961). The question of how they originated is reduced, in this theory's authoritarian variant, to one of the size and strength of the battalions which could be mobilized on their behalf or, in its liberal variant, to the existence of a precarious and transient equilibrium of power between societal groups. This raises the question of how, in this perspective, one is supposed to regard the continuity of such political institutions as those of Britain and the United States, which were supported neither by a power structure which remained stable throughout nor by any continuous power equilibrium. Conflict theoreticians frequently tend to ignore those foundations of controlled conflict which do not in themselves contain any elements of conflict, namely the cultural and communal foundations, in just the same way that the utilitarians fail to notice the non-contractual, i.e. cultural and communal, foundations underlying the closing of contracts in one's own interest. Conflict theory precludes statements about the substantive characteristics of institutions, unless we are prepared to look into the cultural traditions of those who support them. However, this in itself is to overstep the limits of conflict theory in the direction of a sociology of culture and the life-world.

From the perspective of *normativistic* life-world sociology, modern institutions appear to be an expression of the particularized life-world of specific societies, and as such to be normatively closed (Berger and Luckmann:

⁷ See, among others, Becker: 1976; Buchanan: 1975; North and Thomas: 1973; for a criticism of these see Münch: 1983b, pp. 45-76.

1966; Collingwood: 1946; Schütz and Luckmann: 1979).⁸ Each institution has to be understood and interpreted from its own particular position in the interrelations of life. Its formation and structure, in terms of meaning, have to be cemented into the structure of the life-world of a concrete society. The objection to this approach from a rationalistic perspective is that it provides no hint of an explanation for the development of universal institutional patterns. Institutions remain particularized life-interrelations confined to themselves. It is equally impossible to provide a critique of institutions from the perspective of more generally valid normative patterns. Other factors which cannot be grasped within the normativistic framework are those inducing change in institutions, such as learning processes and market behaviour. The same is true of factors allowing concrete institutional norms to be enforced even though they are not an integral part of any existing tradition, or of factors which might actually allow tradition to be broken, such as the mobilization of power, and charisma.

The *rationalistic* theory of culture regards modern institutions as the product of a cultural process of rationalization which is in turn converted into the societal rationalization of institutions (Habermas: 1981a; Tenbruck: 1975; Schluchter: 1979). Rationalizations in the spheres of the economy, polity and communal relations are interpreted as specifications of a general cultural pattern of rationality. Rationalization refers here to the tendency of culture to become intellectualized, the economy and business life to become economically rationalized, politics to become bureaucratized and politicized and community relations to become formalized and objectified. It frequently remains unclear as to whether institutions are penetrated and shaped by cultural rationalization or whether cultural impulses spur on the rationalization of institutional spheres according to their own laws. What cannot be grasped in this approach's frame of reference are the institutional particularisms resulting from any given society's life-world tradition; nor, equally, can it explain the situational, open and undirected changes to which institutions are subjected by the articulation of interests, by learning processes and by exchange relations, nor can it explain instances of the enforcement of institutional norms without general, cultural legitimation and before rational justifications have been established.

Instead of the restricted viewpoints of the sociological approaches outlined above, we need a comprehensive paradigm with a frame of reference in which appropriate assumptions from all those approaches are preserved while, at the same time, their limitations are recognized. An integrated paradigm is required to encompass the various institutional fields where the individual approaches do provide adequate explanations. The following fields can be distinguished (see figure 5).

⁸ For a conjunction of the normative/life-world and the conflict-theoretical approaches, cf. Haferkamp: 1980; 1981.

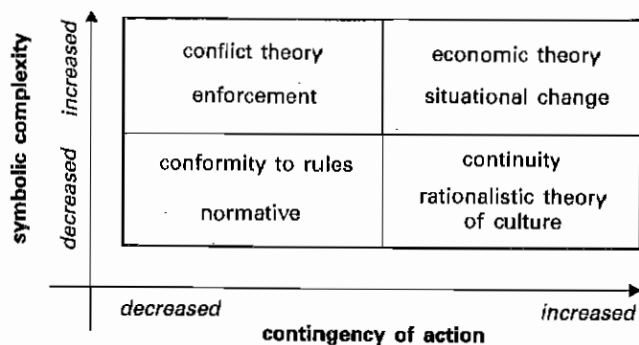


Figure 5 Theoretical paradigms and aspects of institutional orders.

- 1 *Situational change* in specific institutional norms occurs as a result of learning processes, the interchange of interests, and utility orientations. This is the domain of utilitarian positivism.
- 2 The *enforcement* of specific institutional norms in the face of opposition depends upon the mobilization of power and upon authority and charisma. This is where the power and conflict theory's variant of positivism is appropriate.
- 3 The observance of *regular patterns* in institutional action and the *social binding power* of institutional norms are bound up with the roots they have in a community's life-world tradition. This is the field of normativistic idealism.
- 4 The *continuity* of institutions is a consequence of the generalization of their norms in discursive procedures of argument. This is the sphere where explanatory power rests with rationalistic idealism.

(d) *Explanation of stability and change in institutions*

With a suitable paradigm which integrates specific approaches into a generally valid frame of reference, it ought to be possible to explain not only change in institutions, but also their stability or consolidation (Alexander: 1981; Eisenstadt: 1973; Parsons: 1961, pp. 70-9; Smelser: 1963). Change does not signify mere chaos, but the transformation of an institutional pattern from one point in time, t_1 , to another, t_2 . This transformation has effects in all the fields of action which have been discussed. At t_1 an institutional pattern initially has its foundations in consolidation upon communal tradition. This pattern is subjected to undirected pressure for change by learning processes, the articulation of interests, and utility orientations, while directed pressure for change comes from discursive argument questioning the validity of institutional patterns. Both of these processes have the effect of undermining the tradition concerned. If orderly procedures are available the institutional pattern can be adjusted step by step, by

opening and discursive generalization. In the absence of such procedures, a break with tradition is necessary which must rely on the mobilization of power and on charisma (Eisenstadt: 1968; Shils: 1975, pp. 127-34, 256-75; Weber: 1976, pp. 140-8, 654-87). However, if this is to lead to a new institutional pattern, processes of traditionalization and communal consolidation need to establish the necessary social binding power as the step-by-step adjustments take place. In the case of a break in tradition, a new traditionalizing process is again necessary to secure social binding power; furthermore, discursive justifications are needed to guarantee the continuity of the new pattern. In this sense any change in an institution t_1 and t_2 that is not mere chaos invariably relies on processes whereby institutions are eased open, generalized, enforced and newly consolidated. In consequence, a theory is needed which can grasp these different processes and the nature of their effects on action within one integrated paradigm.

One particular form of change is the evolution of sociocultural patterns (Giesen: 1980; Parsons: 1966; 1971a; Giesen: 1982; Schmid: 1982).⁹ For this purpose we can take cultural patterns to be a genetic code which during the process of sociocultural evolution obeys, *internally*, a logic of rational argument and, as determined by this logic alone, approaches a cultural pattern with increasing universal validity. *Externally*, this cultural pattern has to be converted into particular institutional patterns by interpretative procedures. In this respect, the institutional patterns represent genotypes of the cultural pattern shaped by genetic construction. The handing down of tradition and socialization ensures the institutional pattern's reproduction, whereas innovations provide for variations and hence facilitate change. The institutional patterns gained by interpretation are then further specified to become institutional norms. These are the concretely existing institutions which can be described as phenotypes, and as such they are exposed to an *external* selection process by their environment.

We can understand an institution to be a specified normative pattern whose 'successful survival' is influenced by how it is rooted in a community's life-world tradition, by enforcement through the mobilization of power and through charisma, and by adaptation to situationally changing learning experiences, interests and utility calculations. The institutions which have thus been socioculturally stabilized then again determine the make-up of the cultural pattern, meaning that the evolution of this pattern not only proceeds according to an internal logic of cultural rationalization, but is also subjected to external selective processes. Which factors are foremost as the evolution unfolds depends on how strongly they are shaped by appropriate structures and on the reciprocal relations between them, which can range from dominance and accommodation through mutual isolation and reconciliation to interpenetration.

⁹ See also Parsons's essays 'Evolutionary Universals in Society' (1967, pp. 490-520) and 'Comparative Studies and Evolutionary Change' (1977, pp. 279-320).

The evolutionary perspective has a part to play in the consideration of modern institutions to the extent that those institutions possess a specific cultural pattern representing an interpretation of the general Western pattern of culture (rationality, activism, freedom, equality). This institutional pattern is specified in institutional norms which are subjected to the process of selection by anchoring in tradition, by the mobilization of power and charisma and by learning processes and utility calculations.

(e) *Micro and macrosociology*

In addition to the integrating effects we have already asked of it, a comprehensive paradigm must also allow micro and macro-levels to be considered on an integrated basis.¹⁰ This distinction can only be a relative one made according to the size of unit being investigated. On the level of social action we can regard situative interaction between two actors as a micro-phenomenon. For example, the interaction occurring in a concrete situation between a buyer and a seller of a certain commodity is a microphenomenon provided all we are looking at is the commodity itself and the mutual orientations of the exchanging parties. However, as soon as we also take account of the effects this may have for third parties, how they react and how the exchanging parties orient themselves to this, we have already begun to investigate a larger social unit which then, in *relative* terms, appears to be a macrophenomenon. Similarly the fact that, when they effect their transaction, the two parties follow a normative pattern which they share in common with a larger market community, or that they observe rules enforced by a superordinate body as binding on all acts of exchange, is a macrophenomenon reaching beyond the immediate interactive dyad. The same is ultimately also true of the language in which they communicate, unless it is a private language between the two parties rather than one spoken by a larger community.

From the foregoing we see that, as a rule, any concrete action involves a complex interweaving of micro-interaction and macro-relations, so that both perspectives need to be brought into the analysis. To the extent that institutions are patterns of interactions valid for a larger circle of people, they should be treated as macrophenomena. On the other hand, they are microphenomena as specifications of a broader cultural pattern. In turn, the action of two interacting parties oriented toward institutions includes purely situational elements within it which, when set against the macro-level of the institutions, define the micro-level of institutionally-oriented action. One particular institution, such as a modern democracy, is a micro-phenomenon in relation to the social system of society in its entirety. Thus whether a micro- or macro-analysis should be carried out depends on the

¹⁰ See here Blau: 1975; Brodbeck: 1958; Collins: 1981; Homans: 1961; Lindenberg: 1977; O'Neill: 1973; Parsons: 1971b; Sztompka: 1979, pp. 83-128, 287-323; Turk and Simpson: 1971; Wippler: 1978.

perspective applied. In any event, the concrete investigation of an institution must range from micro-interaction right through to the nature of the interweaving on overall societal and overall cultural levels. The same applies to our example of the analysis of modern institutions. What is needed here is a model in which larger units are systematically constructed from combinations of smaller ones.

(f) *Individualism and collectivism*

The theoretical dichotomy between individualism and collectivism is also inappropriate here (Alexander: 1982, pp. 90-112; Parsons: 1968, pp. 43-125). Institutions should be interpreted as patterns for collective orders, that is, as seen from the aspect of consolidated conformity to rules, they consist of norms which are commonly shared in a collectivity (a community) and are maintained by mutual attachment in solidarity. Both those who violate norms and those injured as a result can assume that the community members will maintain solidarity in ensuring that the norms' binding power remains intact. The violator must expect to be subjected to sanctions, whereas the injured party can expect help through solidarity. The prime basis for the binding power of norms is not the sanctions invoked when they are broken, but the mutual attachment in solidarity inherent in the common sharing of the norms, which is a prerequisite for the equitable sanctioning invoked by norm violations. Otherwise, any sanctioning which takes place can be countered by opposing sanctions. In this sense institutions have a *collective* basis for their conformity to regular patterns.

In contrast to communal association in solidarity, other factors do not have the same singular effect of consolidating norms. Discursive argument tends to bring about the universalization and hence alteration of particularized life-world norms. The spontaneous articulation of interests and individual actors' utility orientations can create coincidental orders but these are situational and short-lived; in the long run, these are factors which have the effect of dissolving order. The use of power only facilitates the enforcement of rules if there is a clear power gradient, but even then it is invariably pushed aside either because the holder of power has no need of rules for himself/herself or because the power gradient is transformed. The power equilibrium involved is an extremely precarious state of affairs and as such is virtually as unstable as the coincidental complementarity of interests. Even though institutions, as far as their consolidated regular patterns are concerned, cannot rely on factors such as these, that is nevertheless not to say that they are dispensable, for institutions are not covered by consolidated regular patterns alone. In as far as they undergo any process of universalization they are reliant upon discursive procedures; their ability to change depends on the opening effect of interest and utility orientations and, to assert themselves, they need the use of power, and charisma.

It is indeed the case that the aspect of consolidated regular patterns in institutions is based upon collective attachment in sharing and maintaining

norms. Yet this does not mean that the individual actor has no place in the paradigm underlying our analysis. All we mean is that individual utility orientation among a large number of actors is incapable of producing any order in social action other than a coincidental and unstable one. At the same time, however, the concept of the individual actor is extended. Strictly individualistic approaches without exception locate the roots of the individual's motivation to follow collective rules in the individual rather than in any communal involvement and attachment or in any socialization. The radical variant of utilitarianism thus reduces the possibility of collective order to coincidental complementarity of interests (Buchanan: 1975; Locke: 1963, esp. Book 2, paras 95–122; Smith: 1937). The non-radical variant generally postulates a *naturally* given sense of social sympathy in each individual (Hume: 1966; Smith: 1966). The individualistic variants of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism also assume, at least in evolutionary terms, that there is a given solidarity in individuals which precedes communal attachment and socialization (Joas: 1980; Lewis and Smith: 1980; Mead: 1972; Peirec: 1958; 1960). The collectivist solution to the problem of order sees the emergence of a collective moral order only as the result of the individual's communal attachment and socialization within the community. As part of the same process, however, it is only then that an individual personality develops which reaches beyond the structure of organic drives, and that cultural identity and autonomy develop which stretch beyond the confines of particularized groups (Münch: 1981a, pp. 311–54; 1982b, pp. 364–426).

The *concrete* individual embraces all of these aspects: structure of needs, personality, membership of the collectivity and cultural identity. A collective order in this case is naturally based on the unification of the individuals involved who, in their communal association, put a normatively-consolidated imprint, which all of them carry, on their own need structures, free personal development and cultural identity, whereas need structures and personalities are not shared and their cultural identity reaches out beyond the limits set by communal norms and can thus subject those norms to critical reflection. The collective order relies upon individuals' abilities to step beyond the confines of their organic needs and personal dispositions to adopt the wider standpoint of collective solidarity.

A comprehensive paradigm can be neither purely individualistic nor purely collectivistic; instead, it must take up within itself the tension between these two components. This tension finds expression primarily in the concept of voluntaristic order. This is an order which is conditional upon the interpenetration of the organic structure of needs, personal dispositions, collective attachment and cultural identity. In all of these four aspects, we can speak of the individual's orientations to action. In this extended sense, I proceed in individualistic terms. However, orderedness in action cannot be reduced to the coincidental complementarity of needs and dispositions, but derives from communal association. In this sense, I adopt a collectivistic procedure. It is useful at this point to draw a distinction between the

individual as a concrete actor who acts intentionally, combining all orientations to action in a specific way in any particular situation, and the individual personality, individual organism and individual behavioural system which are merely analytical aspects of the individual. Equally, an intentionally acting collective actor such as a group, a commercial undertaking, a club or association and, indeed, a society, must be set apart from collective communal association which is an analytically definable aspect of social systems (Parsons: 1968, p. 337).

(g) *Action theory and systems theory*

The final dichotomy which needs to be avoided is that between action theory and systems theory.¹¹ The two need to be incorporated as differing perspectives into the one frame of reference. In the perspective of action theory, the object of investigation is an individual or collective actor whose action takes place in a situation that comprises given conditions and available means, is directed towards ends and is oriented to norms and a general frame of reference. The actor derives an intended action, following a certain principle of action or a combination of such principles ordered in a certain way, from perceptions of the situation, the frame of reference, ends and norms. We may explain how this derivation is made by way of interpretation (*Verstehen*).

It is also possible, from an action-theoretical perspective, to solve the problem of order in action. One must ask what influence the basic elements of action (ends, situation, norms, frame of reference) exert upon the orderedness of action. Ends give action directedness, but one which is dependent upon the power at the actor's disposal. Means and conditions give it situational variability, but not any constant, stable order. General frames of reference merely cause action to have an abstract identity, with high variability on more superficial levels. Norms alone produce consolidated regular patterns in action. This is equally true for both action in general and social action in particular. Norms cannot be established by individuals alone, as this would make them synonymous with ends and dependent on individual power for their effectiveness. It is only in the form of commonly-shared rules upheld by attachment in solidarity that norms can convey a constant, stable orderedness to action in general and to social action in particular.

A first step toward the extension of action theory by systems theory is taken when subsystems of action are distinguished according to an appropriate systematic framework encompassing dimensions and aspects of action and the analytical order associated with that framework. In this case the

¹¹ See here Adriaansens: 1980; Bershady: 1973; Dubin: 1967; Gerstein: 1975; Habermas: 1981a, vol. 2, pp. 297–443; Menzies: 1977; Münch: 1982b, pp. 193–214; Parsons, 'Pattern Variables Revisited: A Response to Robert Dubin' (1967, pp. 192–219); Savage: 1981.

basic elements of action are attributed to particular structures and processes which can be delineated as subsystems of action and which have reciprocal interchange relations of special significance for the order underlying action. Three levels can be distinguished here: the human condition, the general level of action and social action. On the anthropological level of the human condition, the human organism determines the goals, physico-chemical processes allow for situational adaptation, the meaningful definition of action brings order, and transcendental conditions for meaningful human existence represent a general frame of reference. On the general action level, goals are set through the formation and development of personal dispositions and performance capacity, situational adaptation is a product of adaptive learning processes and intelligence, attachment to norms is a product of social bonding and affective attachment, and the orientation to a general frame of reference is the product of cultural symbolization and definitions of the situation. On the level of social action, goals are set by authority as a decision-making procedure and by political power, situational adaptation follows from the economic allocation of resources and preferences and from money, attachment to norms is based on communal association and commitments to norms, and the orientation to a general frame of reference is brought by communication in argumentative discourse.

The greater the extent to which the subsystems of action are not only analytically separable but also concretely differentiated from each other, the more in turn the order underlying action is a product not only of the subsystems' different contributions but also of the interrelations among them. None of these subsystems is self-sufficient; all of them rely on the provision of 'factors' and 'products' from the other subsystems in order to be able to fulfil these functions.

Let us take the social subsystem of collective goal-setting and decision-making as an example. The subsystem encompasses decision-making procedures and the processes resulting from them, as well as the enforcement of decisions by means of political power. The selection and enforcement of decisions is something which does flow from the above structures and processes; what does not, however, is their social binding power, legitimacy and realizability. For decisions to have social binding power demands that commitments from the societal community be mobilized, for them to attain legitimacy requires discursive societal-cultural justification, and for them to be realizable, resources must be mobilized from the economic system. The political subsystem's relation to the other social subsystems is not in this respect understood in terms of one concrete system having to adapt naturalistically to a complex environment. Rather, the reciprocal interchange of factors and products is postulated as essential if subsystems are to fulfil their special functions, and is interpreted as a form of interpenetration.

The political system does not function in a naturalistic sense but as interdependent and meaningful social actions oriented to collective decision-making. The more these actions have a density of interdependence among themselves which is relatively greater than the density of their interpen-

dence with actions which are oriented differently, the more they can be delimited from other actions as a concrete system. As we know, if the system's delineation is to be lasting, there must be a normative order for a political institution. We may speak of the system fulfilling its function if collective decisions in accordance with articulated needs are reached within these interdependent and normatively-governed political interactions. Although it is not a self-sufficient social subsystem but one specialized to suit a certain function, the political system is nevertheless dependent for the fulfilment of its function on the economic mobilization of resources and on social-cultural legitimation and communal attachment, which are in turn themselves dependent on the effects of political decision-making (Münch: 1982a).

The only area where the interchange portrayed here may have quasi-naturalistic aspects is in the political system's relation to economic resource mobilization, at least to the extent that collective decision-making must accommodate itself to the realities of available material resources, which it does in an instrumental and technical way. However, in so far as the interchange is also conducted between role-carriers from the political and economic sectors then here too elements of meaningful communication are involved. The latter apply exclusively in the case of the cultural legitimation of political decision-making procedures and the decisions resulting from them. The essential requirement for such a process is that the procedures and resulting decisions are rationally grounded by discursive argument, which is what holds together social-cultural discourse and political decisions. In concrete terms this means that politicians cannot simply rest their decision-making procedures and resulting decisions on factually existing power but have to justify them with regard to generally valid values and norms. Conversely, the procedures and resulting decisions are invariably subject to social-cultural criticism by intellectuals. Thus the political system's relation with its social-cultural 'environment' is not a quasi-naturalistic but a discursive one. Nor is its relation with the environment of communities quasi-naturalistic in character. In this case the central issue is the social binding force of decision-making procedures and the resulting decisions. To ensure that this applies, the relevant social communities must be drawn into the decision-making process and become a common carrier of the procedural rules at least. This provides for communal association and for communication within a life-world.

In the form of systems-theoretical consideration discussed above, there is no trace of any naturalization or technologization of communication. Moreover, the interchange relations between the social subsystems should not be understood as economic exchange relations. Intellectuals do not barter cultural legitimation of decision-making procedures and of actual decisions in return for the collective decisions themselves. To interpret interchange relations in such a way would be absurd. What is meant here is that politicians, for example, only obtain the legitimation they need for decision-making procedures and the resulting decisions if they ensure that they are

rationally grounded, which means they cannot avoid taking account of social-cultural discussions. Put more vividly, they have to step outside the purely political context to subject themselves to the rules of social-cultural discourse if they are to achieve legitimation and justification for their decision-making procedures and ultimate decisions. Conversely, intellectuals need to make an effort to mobilize power in decision-making processes if they wish to see their abstract ideals converted into concrete decisions. To do this they have to step outside the sphere of mere discussion and enter the political arena.

This form of interchange between the political and social-cultural systems is facilitated by the formation of mediating systems in the systems' zones of interpenetration. Political constitutions, for example, can be understood as social-cultural subsystems of political systems in which political decisions are subordinate to social-cultural discursive procedures. Likewise the professional complex can be understood as a subsystem of the social-cultural system in which interpretations of meaning, norms, expressions and knowledge are transferred to collective decisions on the basis of professional authority. The corresponding subsystems in the other zones of interpenetration mediate in a similar way in the interchange of factors and products between the social-cultural, communal, political and economic-action systems.

It would be a further step in the direction of system-environment analysis if the 'survival' of a system's normative structure – the norms of political decision-making procedures, for example – were to be interpreted as signifying that the system had adapted to its environment (cf. Buckley: 1967; Luhmanu: 1970; Sztompka: 1974). Yet even this kind of perspective cannot be interpreted naturalistically on the level of meaningful action. Neither the system's structure – meaningful interactions – nor its environment are built solely upon non-meaningful phenomena. Let us again consider the political system as an example. Its immediate environment consists of utility-oriented articulations of interest, social-cultural discussions, and communities. As applied to these dimensions, environmental 'adaptation' signifies the development of subsystems which open up the decision-making procedures to utility-oriented articulations of interests (the political market), subsume them under generally valid values and norms (the constitution) and bind them to the life-world of communities (legal system), and which can also execute decisions even if there is a wide variety of preferences (the administration). At least as far as culture and communities are concerned, 'adaptation' in this situation is only possible by way of discourse and communication.

The same can be said of the 'adaptation' of society, which we can understand as a concrete social system not specialized to suit any particular social function and in this sense relatively self-sufficient in *social* terms.¹² A

¹² See here Parsons's essay, 'Social Systems' (1977, pp. 177–203), esp. pp. 182–3.

society's environment is only partly made up of material resources and demands; this dimension, on the other hand, is the only one where that society's adaptation to the environment has a naturalistic character through the development of technology and economic resource and preference allocation. For society is also situated in an environment of social communities which it needs to tie into itself through *societal* communal association. Only communication among the groups involved and between representatives of the societal decision-making centre and these groups can make adaptation possible. Another environment to be taken into account is the cultural area to which the society belongs. In this case the discursive foundation of the societal culture in relation to the wider culture is imperative. Finally, the goals set by societal and extra-societal groups also represent an environment in relation to which society needs to prove its ability to develop and assert collective goals. This means that political decision-making procedures are an essential requirement.

If the demands made by these very different environments increase, the society's 'adaptation' to them calls for the formation of appropriate subsystems 'functionally' specialized toward dealing with specific environmental demands. They then make up zones of interpenetration between society and the environment. Being functionally specialized, however, the subsystems have to rely on the interchange of factors and products not only to fulfil their own functions but also to be able to maintain the society's existence as a concrete unit. This interchange of factors and products again has to be mediated by further subsystems in the internal, societal zones of interpenetration. These continue to proliferate the more the functionally specialized subsystems for their part 'adapt' to their internal societal environment. In all these cases, the relation between system and environment only has a naturalistic character when it comes to the system's adaptation to material and organic conditions. Even the relations to articulations of interests and to established goals are quasi-naturalistic at the most, and permeated by processes of communication. The relations in the cultural and communal dimensions are inconceivable without communication. This is how we should regard the interchange relations between the social subsystems which are the components of a paradigm of interchange (Baum: 1976a; 1976b; Gould: 1976; Johnson: 1973; Münch: 1982c, esp. pp. 796–806).¹³

(h) *An example of systems analysis founded in action theory: the emergence of modern law*

The wish to explain the development of modern law solely as a result of the necessities of maintaining systems as their environment becomes

¹³ See also Parsons's essays, 'On the Concept of Political Power', 'On the Concept of Influence', 'On the Concept of Value Commitments' and 'Social Structure and the Symbolic Media of Interchange' (1977, pp. 204–28).

increasingly complex is one which falls well short of its target.¹⁴ The problem begins with the usual explanation for increased environmental complexity, namely systems differentiation. Can the development of modern law really be understood as a process of differentiation providing the basis for the law itself to achieve an unprecedented degree of autonomy, proceeding solely according to its own inner laws? The formula trips off sociologists' tongues so glibly that they have completely ceased to reflect on what it actually means. One should be clear about the background of such a development, namely the predominance of common law, giving expression to principles a community accepts without question. Common law obeys the logic of communal association and is thus bound to commitment to the community and to the limits of that same community. It is relatively rigid, and limited in the extent to which it can undergo change, can be specified to fit particular purposes or can be generalized beyond the boundaries of the community.

The increased complexity of the environment is far too general an event to be able to explain precisely the process of the differentiation of the law from communal action. Though the 'complexity' of society certainly did increase as cities and trade blossomed anew in the Middle Ages, such surges in complexity repeatedly occurred in the wake of more widespread commercial activity in India and China, yet without resulting in any comparable rationalization of the law. Max Weber stressed this clearly enough. Weber tells us, however, that there were three primary factors contributing to the development of modern rational law: an independent profession of lawyers and jurists oriented solely to its own system of logic, capitalist interested parties wishing to assess their opportunities for gain, and monarchs and princes striving for a unified control of their domains in opposition to existing disparate estates (Weber: 1972, pp. 437-8; 1976: pp. 398-9, 401, 416-22, 487-8, 490-1, 502, 506). That is, the law was subjected by the jurists to a process of rationalization (abstraction, analytical sharpness of concepts, freedom from contradiction, formalism). If we assume that the law's function is to regulate social interaction by way of norms, these regulations are generalized to such an extent by rationalization that they are applicable to considerably broader interaction contexts than communal action alone. This is the explanation for the universal applicability of modern law.

However, the law has also come under the influence of utilitarian interests wishing to rationalize business relations in order to enhance their profit opportunities. The law is thus subjected to a constant process of change as new situations and interests press for new regulations. This serves to explain why rapidity of change is a characteristic of modern law. Finally, institutions vested with political authority (monarchs, princes, governments, parliaments, bureaucracies) are intent on subjugating their respective

¹⁴ See Teubner and Willke: 1984, esp. pp. 9-13, 15-16, 19-24; see also Luhmann: 1972; 1984.

domains to uniform control and on breaking down particularized claims to authority or sources of resistance, and thus represent a force acting towards the systematic unification of the law and towards its enforcement in a uniform way, even in the face of resistance (Münch: 1984, pp. 380-446).

Generalization, dependence on interests, and uniform systematization and enforcement, all reaching beyond the context of purely communal action, are three hallmarks of modern law which distinguish it from common law and in this sense include a process of differentiation from the original particularized, rigid common law which was limited in its effectiveness. However, it is a process which runs in three totally different directions, none of which in any way lead to a unidimensional inner logic of legal development. Moreover, even though the common law tradition loses some significance it does not become altogether insignificant, and does not do so at all in the Anglo-Saxon legal sphere. The legal tradition, as the characteristic of common law, remains the source of the law's self-evident obligatory power. If it is not anchored in this way to the collective legal convictions of a legal community - one which can vary in the pluralism of its structure - politically-established law, too, will be devoid of any binding power which is *felt to be obligatory*. The law's differentiation as it emerges from pure common law renders its development accessible to the logic of rules of thought, to the pluralism of economic interests and to the goal-setting and unification associated with a central, political legislative process. It is drawn away from communal action and into the spheres of cultural and scientific thought, of economic interchange and of the exertion of political power; as such it occupies a new position as a zone of interpenetration between these extreme fields of action.

When compared to common law, modern law is determined by a greater variety of different factors and represents the space where they collide and engage in a continued struggle for supremacy. For fundamental differences in the actual course taken by the differentiation process, one need look no further than the development of European law as against that of Anglo-Saxon law.

In Europe, formulation of the law has always been in the hands of university-trained legal theorists. It has been subjected to especially thorough rationalization which has led to a radical breach in the particularism associated with common law. In the main, the university-trained jurists were employed as civil servants, meaning that the state was able to enforce its concern to achieve a purposeful, uniform control over its sphere of authority. The great moves to codify the law issued from this union of state and bureaucracy, giving shape to generalization and to purposeful, uniform enforcement as a hallmark of modern law. In comparison, economic interests played a secondary role, though they cannot be entirely ignored. As codified law developed it always did so against a background of complaints that it was out of touch with reality. Juristic rationalism and political legislators together steadily supplanted the tradition of common law.

The Anglo-Saxon legal sphere is a different matter. There, common law

remains an essential part of the legal system to this day. Anglo-Saxon law is rooted in the collective legal convictions of the legal community, yet its primordial self-evidence is always lost if new societal groups come forward with interests and convictions which have not yet filtered into the communal legal consensus. Common sense in such situations is merely a dominating consensus, but an endangered one.

Anglo-Saxon law has been subjected to comparatively little rationalization by jurists. It has been shaped by legal *practitioners* interacting directly with their economically-motivated clients. Accordingly, the law has been quicker to adapt to changing constellations of economic interests and represents a conjunction of the binding power of common law and situational adaptation to new interests. Unification to suit the purposes of political bodies, however, is far less marked than it is in Europe. In the absence of any comparable alliance between legal theoreticians and the political legislature, the law lacks an equivalent degree of codification to form a uniform system, even though it is certainly possible to identify a – somewhat weaker – trend in this direction.

Modern law, then, has undergone a development which, though it certainly differentiates it from common law, has not by any means made it into a unidimensional system proceeding according to its own logic. Rather, it represents a zone of interpenetration between rational thought, the political formulation of statutes, the economic articulation of interests and the collective convictions of the legal community, with whatever degree of pluralism. Thus, though their individual weightings vary, modern law combines characteristics as different from each other as rationality, collective binding authority, uniform enforcement, and change according to interest constellations. One cannot grasp the nature and extent of its development by regarding such characteristics as subject solely to a quasi-naturalistic and completely unspecified process whereby modern law's own complexity is raised in response to increased complexity of the environment.

In such an approach, any action-theoretical basis, and hence any access to the cultural differences in the development of the law, are altogether lacking. To adopt an action-theoretical orientation, one would have to understand the development of certain characteristics of the law (rationality, binding authority, uniform enforcement, and change dependent on interests) as the results of how certain actors carry out their actions according to certain principles, thus influencing how the law is shaped (see figure 6). Legal theoreticians orient their actions towards rational laws of thought (the principle of consistency), political bodies orient theirs towards instrumental control over their domain (the principle of realization), economic interests act according to the maximization of profit (principle of optimization), and to the extent that we feel ourselves to be members of a legal community we follow the norms which have always applied to social intercourse (principle of conformity). In the perspective adopted by systems theory, all these specifications of the concrete development of the law are suppressed to the point of being unrecognizable by the logic of systems development.

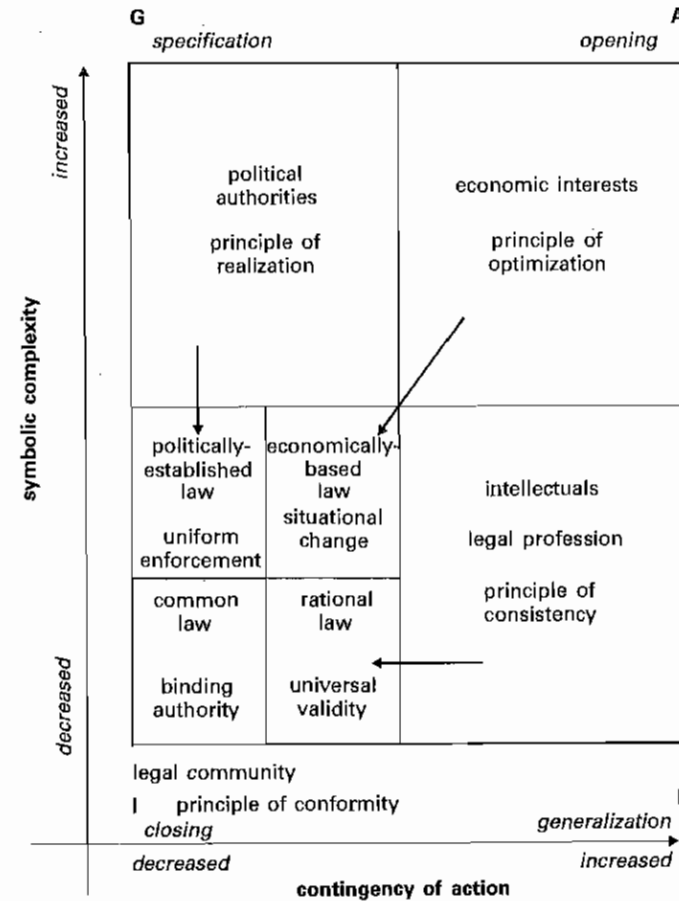


Figure 6 The development of modern law in its social environment.

Conclusion

I have endeavoured to show programmatically how cross-fertilization between Parsonian theory and competing theoretical approaches can allow us to make progress along the road toward a new synthesis. What is important now is the willingness to continue along this path by way of mutual criticism that is prepared to appreciate the alternative points of view, and then to apply this in concrete practical research. The aim is not simply to incorporate competing theoretical approaches within the paradigm of Parsonian theory as it already exists, but to achieve a *new* synthesis

reaching beyond the present position of either Parsonianism or its competitors.

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