2

Grand Theory

LET US BEGIN with a sample of grand theory, taken from Talcott Parsons' *The Social System*—widely regarded as a most important book by a most eminent representative of the style.

An element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion or standard for selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in a situation may be called a value. . . But from this motivational orientation aspect of the totality of action it is, in view of the role of symbolic systems, necessary to distinguish a 'value-orientation' aspect. This aspect concerns, not the meaning of the expected state of affairs to the actor in terms of his gratification-deprivation balance but the content of the selective standards themselves. The concept of value-orientations in this sense is thus the logical device for formulating one central aspect of the articulation of cultural traditions into the action system.

It follows from the derivation of normative orientation and the role of values in action as stated above, that all values involve what may be called a social reference. . . It is inherent in an action system that action is, to use one phrase, 'normatively oriented.' This follows, as was shown, from the concept of expectations and its place in action theory, especially in the 'active' phase in which the actor pursues goals. Expectations then, in combination with the 'double contingency' of the process of interaction as it has been called, create a crucially imperative problem of order. Two aspects of this problem of order may in turn be distinguished, order in the symbolic systems which make communication possible, and order in the mutuality of motivational orientation to the normative aspect of expectations, the 'Hobbesian' problem of order.

The problem of order, and thus of the nature of the integration of stable systems of social interaction, that is, of social structure, thus

focuses on the integration of the motivation of actors with the normative cultural standards which integrate the action system, in our context interpersonally. These standards are, in the terms used in the preceding chapter, patterns of value-orientation, and as such are a particularly crucial part of the cultural tradition of the social system.[1]

Perhaps some readers will now feel a desire to turn to the next chapter; I hope they will not indulge the impulse. Grand Theory —the associating and dissociating of concepts—is well worth considering. True, it has not had so important an effect as the methodological inhibition that is to be examined in the next chapter, for as a style of work its spread has been limited. The fact is that it is not readily understandable; the suspicion is that it may not be altogether intelligible. This is, to be sure, a protective advantage, but it is a disadvantage in so far as its *pronunciamentos* are intended to influence the working habits of social scientists. Not to make fun but to report factually, we have to admit that its productions have been received by social scientists in one or more of the following ways:

To at least some of those who claim to understand it, and who like it, it is one of the greatest advances in the entire history of social science.

To many of those who claim to understand it, but who do not like it, it is a clumsy piece of irrelevant ponderosity. (These are rare, if only because dislike and impatience prevent many from trying to puzzle it out.)

To those who do not claim to understand it, but who like it very much—and there are many of these—it is a wondrous maze, fascinating precisely because of its often splendid lack of intelligibility.

Those who do not claim to understand it and who do not like it—if they retain the courage of their convictions—will feel that indeed the emperor has no clothes.

Of course there are also many who qualify their views, and many more who remain patiently neutral, waiting to see the professional outcome, if any. And although it is, perhaps, a dreadful

[1] Talcott Parsons, *The Social System,* Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1951, pp. 12, 36-7.

thought, many social scientists do not even know about it, except as notorious hearsay.

Now all this raises a sore point—intelligibility. That point, of course, goes beyond grand theory,[2] but grand theorists are so deeply involved in it that I fear we really must ask: Is grand theory merely a confused verbiage or is there, after all, also something there? The answer, I think, is: Something is there, buried deep to be sure, but still something is being said. So the question becomes: After all the impediments to meaning are removed from grand theory and what is intelligible becomes available, what, then, is being said?

1

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

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

Parsons has written:

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

[2] See Appendix, section 5.

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

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

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

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

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

An *institution* will be said to be a complex of institutionalized role integrates which is of strategic structural significance in the social system in question. The institution should be considered to be a higher order unit of social structure than the role, and indeed it is made up of a plurality of interdependent role-patterns or components of them.[3]

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

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

[3] Parsons, op. cit. pp. 38-9.

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

Parsons writes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[4] Ibid. pp. 41-2.

biography and history, and the connections of the two in a variety of social structures.'

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

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

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

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

One point does puzzle me a little: given this social equilibrium, and all the socialization and control that man it, how is it possible that anyone should ever get out of line? This I cannot explain very well, that is, in the terms of my Systematic and General Theory of the social system. And there is another point that is not as clear as I should like it to be: how should I account for so-

cial change—that is, for history? About these two problems, I recommend that whenever you come upon them, you undertake empirical investigations. (end of translation)

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

2

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

The basic cause of grand theory is the initial choice of a level of thinking so general that its practitioners cannot logically get down to observation. They never, as grand theorists, get down from the higher generalities to problems in their historical and structural contexts. This absence of a firm sense of genuine problems, in turn, makes for the unreality so noticeable in their pages. One resulting characteristic is a seemingly arbitrary and certainly endless elaboration of distinctions, which neither enlarge our understanding nor make our experience more sensible. This in turn is revealed as a partially organized abdication of the effort to describe and explain human conduct and society plainly.

When we consider what a word stands for, we are dealing with its *semantic* aspects; when we consider it in relation to other words, we are dealing with its *syntactic* features.[5] I introduce

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

these shorthand terms because they provide an economical and precise way to make this point: Grand theory is drunk on syntax, blind to semantics. Its practitioners do not truly understand that when we define a word we are merely inviting others to use it as we would like it to be used; that the purpose of definition is to focus argument upon fact, and that the proper result of good definition is to transform argument over terms into disagreements about fact, and thus open arguments to further inquiry.

The grand theorists are so preoccupied by syntactic meanings and so unimaginative about semantic references, they are so rigidly confined to such high levels of abstraction that the 'typologies' they make up—and the work they do to make them up—seem more often an arid game of Concepts than an effort to define systematically—which is to say, in a clear and orderly way—the problems at hand, and to guide our efforts to solve them.

One great lesson that we can learn from its systematic absence in the work of the grand theorists is that every self-conscious thinker must at all times be aware of—and hence be able to control—the levels of abstraction on which he is working. The capacity to shuttle between levels of abstraction, with ease and with clarity, is a signal mark of the imaginative and systematic thinker.

Around such terms as 'capitalism' or 'middle class' or 'bureaucracy' or 'power elite' or 'totalitarian democracy,' there are often somewhat tangled and obscured connotations, and in using these terms, such connotations must be carefully watched and controlled. Around such terms, there are often 'compounded' sets of facts and relations as well as merely guessed-at factors and observations. These too must be carefully sorted out and made clear in our definition and in our use.

To clarify the syntactic and the semantic dimensions of such conceptions, we must be aware of the hierarchy of specificity under each of them, and we must be able to consider all levels of this hierarchy. We must ask: Do we mean by 'capitalism,' as we are going to use it, merely the fact that all means of production are privately owned? Or do we also want to include under the term the further idea of a free market as the determin-

ing mechanism of price, wages, profit? And to what extent are we entitled to assume that, by definition, the term implies assertions about the political order as well as economic institutions?

Such habits of mind I suppose to be the keys to systematic thinking and their absence the keys to the fetishism of the Concept. Perhaps one result of such an absence will become clearer as we consider, more specifically now, a major confusion of Parsons' book.

3

Claiming to set forth 'a general sociological theory,' the grand theorist in fact sets forth a realm of concepts from which are excluded many structural features of human society, features long and accurately recognized as fundamental to its understanding. Seemingly, this is deliberate in the interest of making the concern of sociologists a specialized endeavor distinct from that of economists and political scientists. Sociology, according to Parsons, has to do with 'that aspect of the theory of social systems which is concerned with the phenomena of the institutionalization of patterns of value-orientation in the social system, with the conditions of that institutionalization; and of changes in the patterns, with conditions of conformity with and deviance from a set of such patterns, and with motivational processes in so far as they are involved in all of these.' [6] Translated and unloaded of assumption, as any definition should be, this reads: Sociologists of my sort would like to study what people want and cherish. We would also like to find out why there is a variety of such values and why they change. When we do find a more or less unitary set of values, we would like to find out why some people do and others do not conform to them. (end of translation)

As David Lockwood has noted,[7] such a statement delivers the sociologist from any concern with 'power,' with economic and political institutions. I would go further than that. This statement, and, in fact, the whole of Parsons' book, deals much more

[6] Parsons, op. cit. p. 552.

[7] Cf. his excellent 'Some Remarks on "The Social System,"' *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. VII, 2 June 1956.

with what have been traditionally called 'legitimations' than with institutions of any sort. The result, I think, is to transform, by definition, all institutional structures into a sort of moral sphere—or more accurately, into what has been called 'the symbol sphere.' [8] In order to make the point clear, I should like first to explain something about this sphere; second to discuss its alleged autonomy; and third, to indicate how Parsons' conceptions make it quite difficult even to raise several of the most important problems of any analysis of social structure.

Those in authority attempt to justify their rule over institutions by linking it, as if it were a necessary consequence, with widely believed-in moral symbols, sacred emblems, legal formulae. These central conceptions may refer to a god or gods, the 'vote of the majority,' 'the will of the people,' 'the aristocracy of talent or wealth,' to the 'divine right of kings,' or to the allegedly extraordinary endowment of the ruler himself. Social scientists, following Weber, call such conceptions 'legitimations,' or sometimes 'symbols of justification.'

Various thinkers have used different terms to refer to them: Mosca's 'political formula' or 'great superstitions,' Locke's 'principle of sovereignty,' Sorel's 'ruling myth,' Thurman Arnold's 'folklore,' Weber's 'legitimations,' Durkheim's 'collective representations,' Marx's 'dominant ideas,' Rousseau's 'general will,' Lasswell's 'symbols of authority,' Mannheim's 'ideology,' Herbert Spencer's 'public sentiments'—all these and others like them testify to the central place of master symbols in social analysis.

Similarly in psychological analysis, such master symbols, relevant when they are taken over privately, become the reasons and often the motives that lead persons into roles and sanction their enactment of them. If, for example, economic institutions are publicly justified in terms of them, then references to self-interest may be acceptable justification for individual conduct. But, if it is felt publicly necessary to justify such institutions in terms of 'public service and trust,' the old self-interest motives and reasons may

[8] H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *Character and Social Structure,* New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1953, pp. 274-7, upon which I am drawing freely in this section and in section 5, below.

lead to guilt or at least to uneasiness among capitalists. Legitimations that are publicly effective often become, in due course, effective as personal motives.

Now, what Parsons and other grand theorists call 'value-orientations' and 'normative structure' has mainly to do with master symbols of legitimation. This is, indeed, a useful and important subject. The relations of such symbols to the structure of institutions are among the most important problems of social science. Such symbols, however, do not form some autonomous realm within a society; their social relevance lies in their use to justify or to oppose the arrangement of power and the positions within this arrangement of the powerful. Their psychological relevance lies in the fact that they become the basis for adherence to the structure of power or for opposing it.

We may not merely assume that some such set of values, or legitimations, *must* prevail lest a social structure come apart, nor may we assume that a social structure must be made coherent or unified by any such 'normative structure.' Certainly we may not merely assume that any such 'normative structure' as may prevail is, in any meaning of the word, autonomous. In fact, for modern Western societies—and in particular the United States—there is much evidence that the opposite of each of these assumptions is the more accurate. Often—although not in the United States since World War II—there are quite well organized symbols of opposition which are used to justify insurgent movements and to debunk ruling authorities. The continuity of the American political system is quite unique, having been threatened by internal violence only once in its history; this fact may be among those that have misled Parsons in his image of The Normative Structure of Value-Orientation.

'Governments' do not necessarily, as Emerson would have it, 'have their origin in the moral identity of men.' To believe that government does is to confuse its legitimations with its causes. Just as often, or even more often, such moral identities as men of some society may have rest on the fact that institutional rulers successfully monopolize, and even impose, their master symbols.

Some hundred years ago, this matter was fruitfully discussed

in terms of the assumptions of those who believe that symbol spheres are self-determining, and that such 'values' may indeed dominate history: The symbols that justify some authority are separated from the actual persons or strata that exercise the authority. The 'ideas,' not the strata or the persons using the ideas, are then thought to rule. In order to lend continuity to the sequence of these symbols, they are presented as in some way connected with one another. The symbols are thus seen as 'self-determining.' To make more plausible this curious notion, the symbols are often 'personalized' or given 'self-consciousness.' They may then be conceived of as The Concepts of History or as a sequence of 'philosophers' whose thinking determines institutional dynamics. Or, we may add, the Concept of 'normative order' may be fetishized. I have, of course, just paraphrased Marx and Engels speaking of Hegel.[9]

Unless they justify institutions and motivate persons to enact institutional roles, 'the values' of a society, however important in various private milieux, are historically and sociologically irrelevant. There is of course an interplay between justifying symbols, institutional authorities, and obedient persons. At times we should not hesitate to assign causal weight to master symbols—but we may not misuse the idea as *the* theory of social order or of the unity of society. There are better ways to construct a 'unity,' as we shall presently see, ways that are more useful in the formulation of significant problems of social structure and closer to observable materials.

So far as 'common values' interest us, it is best to build up our conception of them by examining the legitimations of each institutional order in any given social structure, rather than to *begin* by attempting first to grasp them, and in their light 'explain' the society's composition and unity.[10] We may, I suppose, speak of 'common values' when a great proportion of the members of an

[9] Cf. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology,* New York, International Publishers, 1939, pp. 42 ff.

[10] For a detailed and empirical account of the 'values' which American businessmen, for example, seek to promulgate, see Sutton, Harris, Kaysen and Tobin, *The American Business Creed,* Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1956.

institutional order have taken over that order's legitimations, when such legitimations are the terms in which obedience is successfully claimed, or at least complacency secured. Such symbols are then used to 'define the situations' encountered in various roles and as yardsticks for the evaluations of leaders and followers. Social structures that display such universal and central symbols are naturally extreme and 'pure' types.

At the other end of the scale, there are societies in which a dominant set of institutions controls the total society and superimposes its values by violence and the threat of violence. This need not involve any breakdown of the social structure, for men may be effectively conditioned by formal discipline; and at times, unless they accept institutional demands for discipline, they may have no chance to earn a living.

> A skilled compositor employed by a reactionary newspaper, for example, may for the sake of making a living and holding his job conform to the demands of employer discipline. In his heart, and outside the shop, he may be a radical agitator. Many German socialists allowed themselves to become perfectly disciplined soldiers under the Kaiser's flag—despite the fact that their subjective values were those of revolutionary Marxism. It is a long way from symbols to conduct and back again, and not all integration is based on symbols.[11]

To emphasize such conflict of value is not to deny 'the force of rational consistencies.' The discrepancy between word and deed is often characteristic, but so is the striving for consistency. Which is predominant in any given society cannot be decided *a priori* on the basis of 'human nature' or on the 'principles of sociology' or by the fiat of grand theory. We might well imagine a 'pure type' of society, a perfectly disciplined social structure, in which the dominated men, for a variety of reasons, cannot quit their prescribed roles, but nevertheless share none of the dominator's values, and thus in no way believe in the legitimacy of the order. It would be like a ship manned by galley slaves, in which the disciplined movement of the oars reduces the rowers to cogs in a machine, and the violence of the whipmaster is only rarely needed. The galley slaves need not even be aware of the ship's

[11] Gerth and Mills, op. cit. p. 300.

direction, although any turn of the bow evokes the wrath of the master, the only man aboard who is able to see ahead. But perhaps I begin to describe rather than to imagine.

Between these two types—a 'common value system' and a superimposed discipline—there are numerous forms of 'social integration.' Most occidental societies have incorporated many divergent 'value-orientations'; their unities involve various mixtures of legitimation and coercion. And that, of course, may be true of any institutional order, not only of the political and economic. A father may impose demands upon his family by threatening to withhold inheritance, or by the use of such violence as the political order may allow him. Even in such sacred little groups as families, the unity of 'common values' is by no means necessary: distrust and hatred may be the very stuff needed to hold a loving family together. A society as well may of course flourish quite adequately without such a 'normative structure' as grand theorists believe to be universal.

I do not here wish to expound any solution to the problem of order, but merely to raise questions. For if we cannot do that, we must, as demanded by the fiat of quite arbitary definition, *assume* the 'normative structure' which Parsons imagines to be the heart of 'the social system.'

4

'Power,' as the term is now generally used in social science, has to do with whatever decisions men make about the arrangements under which they live, and about the events which make up the history of their period. Events that are beyond human decision do happen; social arrangements do change without benefit of explicit decision. But in so far as such decisions are made (and in so far as they could be but are not) the problem of who is involved in making them (or not making them) is the basic problem of power.

We cannot assume today that men must in the last resort be governed by their own consent. Among the means of power that now prevail is the power to manage and to manipulate the consent of men. That we do not know the limits of such power—and that we hope it does have limits—does not remove the fact

that much power today is successfully employed without the sanction of the reason or the conscience of the obedient.

Surely in our time we need not argue that, in the last resort, coercion is the 'final' form of power. But then we are by no means constantly at the last resort. Authority (power justified by the beliefs of the voluntarily obedient) and manipulation (power wielded unbeknown to the powerless) must also be considered, along with coercion. In fact, the three types must constantly be sorted out when we think about the nature of power.

In the modern world, I think we must bear in mind, power is often not so authoritative as it appeared to be in the medieval period; justifications of rulers no longer seem so necessary to their exercise of power. At least for many of the great decisions of our time—especially those of an international sort—mass 'persuasion' has not been 'necessary'; the fact is simply accomplished. Furthermore, such ideologies as are available to the powerful are often neither taken up nor used by them. Ideologies usually arise as a response to an effective debunking of power; in the United States such opposition has not been recently effective enough to create a felt need for new ideologies of rule.

Today, of course, many people who are disengaged from prevailing allegiances have not acquired new ones, and so are inattentive to political concerns of any kind. They are neither radical nor reactionary. They are inactionary. If we accept the Greek's definition of the idiot as an altogether private man, then we must conclude that many citizens of many societies are indeed idiots. This—and I use the word with care—this spiritual condition seems to me the key to much modern malaise among political intellectuals, as well as the key to much political bewilderment in modern society. Intellectual 'conviction' and moral 'belief' are not necessary, in either the rulers or the ruled, for a structure of power to persist and even to flourish. So far as the role of ideologies is concerned, the frequent absence of engaging legitimation and the prevalence of mass apathy are surely two of the central political facts about the Western societies today.

In the course of any substantive research, many problems do confront those who hold the view of power that I have been sug-

gesting. But we are not at all helped by the deviant assumptions of Parsons, who merely assumes that there is, presumably in every society, such a 'value hierarchy' as he imagines. Moreover, its implications systematically impede the clear formulation of significant problems:

To accept his scheme we are required to read out of the picture the facts of power and indeed of all institutional structures, in particular the economic, the political, the military. In this curious 'general theory,' such structures of domination have no place.

In the terms provided, we cannot properly pose the empirical question of the extent to which, and in what manner, institutions are, in any given case, legitimated. The idea of the normative order that is set forth, and the way it is handled by grand theorists, leads us to assume that virtually all power is legitimated. In fact: that in the social system, 'the maintenance of the complementarity of role-expectations, once established, is not problematical.... No special mechanisms are required for the explanation of the maintenance of complementary interaction-orientation.' [12]

In these terms, the idea of conflict cannot effectively be formulated. Structural antagonisms, large-scale revolts, revolutions—they cannot be imagined. In fact, it is assumed that 'the system,' once established, is not only stable but intrinsically harmonious; disturbances must, in his language, be 'introduced into the system.' [13] The idea of the normative order set forth leads us to assume a sort of harmony of interests as the natural feature of any society; as it appears here, this idea is as much a metaphysical anchor point as was the quite similar idea among the eighteenth-century philosophers of natural order.[14]

The magical elimination of conflict, and the wondrous achievement of harmony, remove from this 'systematic' and 'general' theory the possibilities of dealing with social change, with history. Not only does the 'collective behavior' of terrorized masses and excited mobs, crowds and movements—with which our era is so filled—find no place in the normatively created social structures

[12] Parsons, op. cit. p. 205.
[13] Ibid. p. 262.
[14] Cf. Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City;* and Lewis A. Coser, *Conflict,* Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1956.

of grand theorists. But any systematic ideas of how history itself occurs, of its mechanics and processes, are unavailable to grand theory, and accordingly, Parsons believes, unavailable to social science: 'When such a theory is available the millennium for social science will have arrived. This will not come in our time and most probably never.'[15] Surely this is an extraordinarily vague assertion.

Virtually any problem of substance that is taken up in the terms of grand theory is incapable of being clearly stated. Worse: its statement is often loaded with evaluations as well as obscured by sponge-words. It is, for example, difficult to imagine a more futile endeavor than analyzing American society in terms of 'the value pattern' of 'universalistic-achievement' with no mention of the changing nature, meaning and forms of success characteristic of modern capitalism, or of the changing structure of capitalism itself; or, analyzing United States stratification in terms of 'the dominant value system' without taking into account the known statistics of life-chances based on levels of property and income.[16]

I do not think it too much to say that in so far as problems are dealt with realistically by grand theorists, they are dealt with in terms that find no place in grand theory, and are often contradictory to it. 'Indeed,' Alvin Gouldner has remarked, 'the extent to which Parsons' efforts at theoretical and empirical analysis of change suddenly lead him to enlist a body of Marxist concepts and assumptions is nothing less than bewildering.... It almost seems as if two sets of books were being kept, one for the analysis of equilibrium and another for the investigation of change.'[17] Gouldner goes on to remark how in the case of defeated Germany, Parsons recommends attacking the Junkers at their base, as 'a case of exclusive class privilege' and analyzes the civil service in terms of 'the class basis of recruitment.' In short, the whole economic and occupational structure—conceived in quite Marxian

[15] Parsons, taken from Alvin W. Gouldner, 'Some observations on Systematic Theory, 1945-55,' *Sociology in the United States of America*, Paris, UNESCO, 1956, p. 40.
[16] Cf. Lockwood, op. cit. p. 138.
[17] Gouldner, op. cit. p. 41.

terms, not in terms of the normative structure projected by grand theory—suddenly rises into view. It makes one entertain the hope that grand theorists have not lost all touch with historical reality.

5

I now return to the problem of order, which in a rather Hobbesian version, seems to be the major problem in Parsons' book. It is possible to be brief about it because in the development of social science it has been re-defined, and in its most useful statement might now be called the problem of social integration; it does of course require a working conception of social structure and of historical change. Unlike grand theorists, most social scientists, I think, would give answers running something like this:

First of all, there is no *one* answer to the question, What holds a social structure together? There is no one answer because social structures differ profoundly in their degrees and kinds of unity. In fact, types of social structure are usefully conceived in terms of different modes of integration. When we descend from the level of grand theory to historical realities, we immediately realize the irrelevance of its monolithic Concepts. With these we cannot think about the human variety, about Nazi Germany in 1936, Sparta in seventh century B.C., the United States in 1836, Japan in 1866, Great Britain in 1950, Rome at the time of Diocletian. Merely to name this variety is surely to suggest that whatever these societies may have in common must be discovered by empirical examination. To predicate anything beyond the most empty formalities about the historical range of social structure is to mistake one's own capacity to talk for all that is meant by the work of social investigation.

One may usefully conceive types of social structure in terms of such institutional orders as the political and kinship, the military and economic, and the religious. Having defined each of these in such a way as to be able to discern their outlines in a given historical society, one asks how each is related to the others, how, in short, they are composed into a social structure. The answers are conveniently put as a set of 'working models' which are used to make us more aware, as we examine specific soci-

eties at specific times, of the links by which they are 'tied together.'

One such 'model' may be imagined in terms of the working out in each institutional order of a similar structural principle; think for example of Tocqueville's America. In that classical liberal society each order of institutions is conceived as autonomous, and its freedom demanded from any co-ordination by other orders. In the economy, there is *laissez faire;* in the religious sphere, a variety of sects and churches openly compete on the market for salvation; kinship institutions are set up on a marriage market in which individuals choose one another. Not a family-made man, but a self-made man, comes to ascendancy in the sphere of status. In the political order, there is party competition for the votes of the individual; even in the military zone there is much freedom in the recruitment of state militia, and in a wide sense—a very important sense—one man means one rifle. The principle of integration—which is also the basic legitimation of this society—is the ascendancy within each order of institutions of the free initiative of independent men in competition with one another. It is in this fact of correspondence that we may understand the way in which a classic liberal society is unified.

But such 'correspondence' is only one type, only one answer to the 'problem of order.' There are other types of unity. Nazi Germany, for example, was integrated by 'co-ordination.' The general model can be stated as follows: Within the economic order, institutions are highly centralized; a few big units more or less control all operations. Within the political order there is more fragmentation: Many parties compete to influence the state, but no one of them is powerful enough to control the results of economic concentration, one of these results—along with other factors —being the slump. The Nazi movement successfully exploits the mass despair, especially that of its lower middle classes, in the economic slump and brings into close correspondence the political, military, and economic orders. One party monopolizes and remakes the political order, abolishing or amalgamating all other parties that might compete for power. To do this requires that the Nazi party find points of coinciding interest with monopolies

in the economic order and also with certain elites of the military order. In these main orders there is, first, a corresponding concentration of power; then each of them coincides and co-operates in the taking of power. President Hindenburg's army is not interested in defending the Weimar Republic, or in crushing the marching columns of a popular war party. Big business circles are willing to help finance the Nazi party, which, among other things, promises to smash the labor movement. And the three types of elite join in an often uneasy coalition to maintain power in their respective orders and to co-ordinate the rest of society. Rival political parties are either suppressed and outlawed, or they disband voluntarily. Kinship and religious institutions, as well as all organizations within and between all orders, are infiltrated and co-ordinated, or at least neutralized.

The totalitarian party-state is the means by which high agents of each of the three dominant orders co-ordinate their own and other institutional orders. It becomes the over-all 'frame organization' which imposes goals upon all institutional orders instead of merely guaranteeing 'government by law.' The party extends itself, prowling everywhere in 'auxiliaries' and 'affiliations.' It either breaks up or it infiltrates, and in either case it comes to control all types of organizations, including the family.

The symbol spheres of all institutions are controlled by the party. With the partial exception of the religious order, no rival claims to legitimate autonomy are permitted. There is a party monopoly of formal communications, including educational institutions. All symbols are recast to form the basic legitimation of the co-ordinated society. The principle of absolute and magical leadership (charismatic rule) in a strict hierarchy is widely promulgated, in a social structure that is to a considerable extent held together by a network of rackets.[18]

But surely that is enough to make evident what I should think an obvious point: that there is no 'grand theory,' no one universal scheme in terms of which we can understand the unity of social

[18] Franz Neumann, *Behemoth*, New York, Oxford, 1942, which is a truly splendid model of what a structural analysis of an historical society ought to be. For the above account, see Gerth and Mills, op. cit. pp. 363 ff.

structure, no one answer to the tired old problem of social order, taken *überhaupt*. Useful work on such problems will proceed in terms of a variety of such working models as I have outlined here, and these models will be used in close and empirical connection with a range of historical as well as contemporary social structures.

It is important to understand that such 'modes of integration' may also be conceived as working models of historical change. If, for example, we observe American society at the time of Tocqueville and again in the middle of the twentieth century, we see at once that the way the nineteenth century structure 'hangs together' is quite different from its current modes of integration. We ask: How have each of its instutional orders changed? How have its relations with each of the others changed? What have been the tempos, the varying rates at which these structural changes have occurred? And, in each case, what have been the necessary and sufficient causes of these changes? Usually, of course, the search for adequate cause requires at least some work in a comparative as well as an historical manner. In an over-all way, we can summarize such an analysis of social change, and thus formulate more economically a range of larger problems, by indicating that the changes have resulted in a shift from one 'mode of integration' to another. For example, the last century of American history shows a transition from a social structure largely integrated by correspondence to one much more subject to coordination.

The general problem of a theory of history can not be separated from the general problem of a theory of social structure. I think it is obvious that in their actual studies, working social scientists do not experience any great theoretical difficulties in understanding the two in a unified way. Perhaps that is why one *Behemoth* is worth, to social science, twenty *Social Systems*.

I do not, of course, present these points in any effort to make a definitive statement of the problems of order and change—that is, of social structure and history. I do so merely to suggest the outlines of such problems and to indicate something of the kind of

work that has been done on them. Perhaps these remarks are also useful to make more specific one aspect of the promise of social science. And, of course, I have set them forth here in order to indicate how inadequately grand theorists have handled one major problem of social science. In *The Social System* Parsons has not been able to get down to the work of social science because he is possessed by the idea that the one model of social order he has constructed is some kind of universal model; because, in fact, he has fetishized his Concepts. What is 'systematic' about this particular grand theory is the way it outruns any specific and empirical problem. It is not used to state more precisely or more adequately any new problem of recognizable significance. It has not been developed out of any need to fly high for a little while in order to see something in the social world more clearly, to solve some problem that can be stated in terms of the historical reality in which men and institutions have their concrete being. Its problem, its course, and its solutions are grandly theoretical.

The withdrawal into systematic work on conceptions should be only a formal moment within the work of social science. It is useful to recall that in Germany the yield of such formal work was soon turned to encyclopedic and historical use. That use, presided over by the ethos of Max Weber, was the climax of the classic German tradition. In considerable part, it was made possible by a body of sociological work in which general conceptions about society were closely joined with historical exposition. Classical Marxism has been central to the development of modern sociology; Max Weber, like so many other sociologists, developed much of his work in a dialogue with Karl Marx. But the amnesia of the American scholar has always to be recognized. In grand theory we now confront another formalist withdrawal, and again, what is properly only a pause seems to have become permanent. As they say in Spain, 'many can shuffle cards who can't play.' [19]

[19] It must be evident that the particular view of society which it is possible to dig out of Parsons' texts is of rather direct ideological use; traditionally, such views have of course been associated with conservative styles of thinking. Grand theorists have not often descended into the political arena; cer-

[19] *footnote continued*

tainly they have not often taken their problems to lie within the political contexts of modern society. But that of course does not exempt their work from ideological meaning. I shall not analyze Parsons in this connection, for the political meaning of *The Social System* lies so close to its surface, when it is adequately translated, that I feel no need to make it any plainer. Grand theory does not now play any direct bureaucratic role, and as I have noted, its lack of intelligibility limits any public favor it might come to have. This might of course become an asset: its obscurity does give it a great ideological potential.

The ideological meaning of grand theory tends strongly to legitimate stable forms of domination. Yet only if there should arise a much greater need for elaborate legitimations among conservative groups would grand theory have a chance to become politically relevant. I began this chapter with a question: Is grand theory, as represented in *The Social System*, merely verbiage or is it also profound? My answer to this question is: It is only about 50 per cent verbiage; 40 per cent is well-known textbook sociology. The other 10 per cent, as Parsons might say, I am willing to leave open for your own empirical investigations. My own investigations suggest that the remaining 10 per cent is of possible—although rather vague—ideological use.