



Exzerpt: T. Parsons: Values and Social Systems

Parsons defines action and the basic elements of action: action is behaviour which is oriented to goal achievement which is normatively regulated. Actors are acting in situations consisting of object, where objects can be other actors, physical or cultural objects. So the actor is embedded in a system of relations-to-objects, called by Parsons a 'system of orientations'. These objects can be goals, resources, means, conditions, obstacles or symbols and they can be cathected and they have different significances attached to them. The objects become organized into the actors system of orientations by these cathectes and significances.

As actions occur in constellations, which are called 'systems', these systems differ in their modes of organization: the social systems and personalities are modes of organizations of motivated action, whether as relations of actors to each other or, in personalities, about living organisms. These systems can be conceived as actors whose action is oriented to goals and gratifications of need-dispositions, as occurring in situations, using energy and as being normatively regulated.

The third system, the 'cultural system', is a system of symbolic patterns. It is created or manifested by individuals and can be transmitted among social systems by diffusion or among personalities by learning. It can be understood as standards of criteria of selection which are institutionalized in social systems and internalized in personality systems. It guides actors in his orientations to ends with normative regulations of means.

As the cultural system is central to Parsons analysis, he describes four characteristics: 1) it is constituted by an organization of values, norms and symbols, they guide choices and limit interaction, 2) it is not an empirical system, it represents abstractions of elements from social systems and personalities 3) it has to be consistent 4) it's parts are interrelated and forms value and belief systems and systems of expressive symbols

Values are the crucial part in this chapter as they stabilize the contingency of interactions. The orientation of actors to each other is reciprocal, they both need a measure for the others expectations in terms of realistic possibilities and meaning of their interaction (see Luhmann: 'doppelte Kontingenz'). Based on the stabilizing effects of values, there is »a tendency towards consistent appropriateness of reaction is also a tendency toward confirmity«, which seems an important point for his analysis of the Pre-Nazi Germany.

Culture is not only a set of symbols but a set of norms for actions where the actor's motivations become integrated with normative patterns through interaction. These 'normative ideas' or 'regulatory symbols' are symbol systems with a primacy on evaluative functions and are the standards of the value-orientation. As an actor has a commitment to these symbols in terms of balance of consequences and implications, these symbols must be conform with the imperatives of the larger system of normative orientations.

As over-all consistency is an ideal type, there can be integrational problems which need to be adjusted to. This can be achieved 1) in forcing the structure of the system of social objects into conformity with the value system or 2) in tolerating and in varying degrees institutionalize the inconsistencies into the social system or internalize them into the personality system. As Parsons says: »(...) incostistencies of value patterns are intraindividually adjusted through the mechanisms of defense, and interindividually adjusted through (...) isolation and segregation« (p. 44)

Societies have to cope with a fundamental dilemma: they can only live by a system of internalized values and simultaneously they have to be able to accept compromises and accommodations. Here lies a the major source of strain and instability - and the seed of social change.

References

Parsons, T. and E. Shils (1990). Values and social systems. In J. C. Alexander and S. Seidman (Eds.), *Culture and Society. Contemporary Debates*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge Univ. Press.