Garfinkel
and
Ethnomethodology

JOHN HERITAGE

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POLITY PRESS

Contents

Preface

Notwithstanding his world renown, Harold Garfinkel is a
sociologist whose work is more known about than known. My
own contact with his writings began when, quite by chance, I
exercised my newly acquired rights as a graduate student to
request the loan of a doctoral dissertation from the Widener
Library at Harvard. The dissertation was entitled 'The
Perception of the Other: A Study of Social Order' and had
been written by Garfinkel some sixteen years previously. It
contained a profound and arresting analysis of social action
which quite transcended anything I had previously read in the
field. Eager to locate more of Garfinkel's work, I quickly
discovered that he had recently published a collection of
papers entitled *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. My subsequent
encounter with this volume was one of considerable shock.
There seemed to be scarcely any connection between the
Garfinkel of the dissertation and the new and puzzling
sequence of studies. I had little idea of what to make of them
and it was only after a considerable period that an under-
standing of the newer work could be co-ordinated with my
knowledge of its background.

   That initial puzzlement and the difficulties of understanding
Garfinkel's work, which are still widely experienced today,
have informed the writing of this book. In it, I have attempted
to set Garfinkel's major theoretical contributions in the
context of the traditional preoccupations of social theory and,
through these continuities, to make the character of his
thinking available to a wider audience. I am only too
conscious of the pitfalls and difficulties inherent in this
enterprise of making 'good sociological sense' of Garfinkel.
The strains towards oversimplification and even downright
revisionism which inhabit any expository work press all the
more insistently on those who would expound truly innovative

perspectives. The danger of traducing newly minted insights by rendering them in a more traditional conceptual coinage is an ever-present one. Nonetheless, the risks will have been worth running and this book will have served its purpose if it enables others to have more direct and productive contacts with the originals it represents.

In writing this book I have been more than fortunate in the encouragement and criticism which I have received from friends and colleagues who have read it in whole or in part. Margaret Archer, Max Atkinson, Robert Dingwall, Paul Drew, Anthony Giddens, David Greatbatch, Christian Heath, Martin Hollis, Mike Mulkay, William Outhwaite, Ian Procter and Rod Watson have generously helped in the task of eliminating weaknesses of substance and presentation and I am indebted to all of them. Two outstanding Warwick undergraduates, Peter Burnham and John Mattausch, did their best to reassure me that the text was reasonably accessible to student readers and I am grateful to them for their advice. My greatest debt is to my wife, who has been a constant source of encouragement and has survived the writing of this book with cheerfulness and patience.

<div align="right">Stratford upon Avon, June, 1984</div>

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In studying a man's empirical work the questions asked will not merely be, what opinions did he hold about certain concrete phenomena, nor even, what has he in general contributed to our 'knowledge' of these phenomena? The primary questions will, rather, be, what theoretical reasons did he have for being interested in these particular problems rather than others, and what did the results of his investigation contribute to the solution of his theoretical problems?

Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*

Any attempt to give an account of Garfinkel's work and the subsequent development of the ethnomethodological movement which he founded is immediately confronted with two formidable obstacles. There is, firstly, the character of the work itself. Garfinkel's entire published output has appeared in essay form and on a diversity of substantive topics. An essay on rationality rubs shoulders with an analysis of studies of intake decisions at a psychiatric clinic. Accounts of jury deliberations, the behaviour of a person seeking a sex-change operation, interpersonal conduct in a range of extraordinary, yet quasi-natural, experiments all jostle for attention, each in its own terms, seeming to lack any connecting theme. These studies are discussed in a difficult prose style in which dense thickets of words seem to resist the reader's best endeavours, only to yield, at the last, forceful and unexpected insights which somehow remain obstinately open-ended and difficult to place.

Then again there is the curious 'off-stage' role of theory. Although the writings convey an immediate sense of theoretical power, the theory itself is nowhere systematically stated, let alone used to integrate the various studies. Programmatic statements crop up, but they are formidably abstract and remain largely detached from traditional sociological reference

points. The reader is thus confronted by a series of essays which, in their singularity and lack of compromise with conventional sociological sensibilities, both invite an engagement of an absolute kind whilst simultaneously resisting the assimilation of their perspectives and subject matter to any extant sociological framework. In both style and content the work is self-consciously revolutionary, demanding the abandonment of a range of widely held sociological assumptions before its message can be perceived fully.

The second obstacle lies in the reception accorded to Garfinkel's work during the past decade. The publication of *Studies in Ethnomethodology* in 1967 coincided with a period of widespread dissatisfaction with the prevailing orthodoxies of sociological theory and methodology. Parsonian systems theory, with its analytic subordination of the actor to an environment of functional requirements, had lost its appeal in a decade of libertarian social movements and political protest. These latter found theoretical expression within sociology in an upsurge of interest in frameworks which stressed the analytic primacy of the actor's point of view and the social construction of reality. A related critique, which spread into social psychology, stressed the weaknesses of social science methodologies which were based on a view of social actors as simply the passive bearers of sociological and psychological attributes. Common to both critiques was a renewed stress on the role of human agency in social life, a novel emphasis on the cognitive bases of action and a focus on the situation of action as a means of resolving previously intractable research dilemmas.

In this context a number of ethnomethodological tenets, pillaged from their carefully constructed frameworks, seemed to speak directly to the mood of the moment. The enduring ethnomethodological emphasis on the local, moment-by-moment determination of meaning in social contexts appeared, in itself, an important prophylactic against the mystifying consequences of 'grand theorizing' and 'abstracted empiricism', while the collateral focus on the contingency of meaning resonated happily with the humanistic overtones of theories which stressed the interpreted and constructed nature of social reality. By the same token, the ethnomethodological

vocabulary of 'accounts' and 'accountability' seemed to many to give straightforward access to that most elusive phenomenon, the actor's definition of the situation. The dramatic oversimplifications embodied in these borrowings were facilitated during this period by the apparent alignment of several of the more significant empirical studies — such as Cicourel's and Kitsuse's *The Educational Decision Makers* (1963) and Cicourel's *The Social Organization of Juvenile Justice* (1968) — with the more readily understandable sociological approaches prominent at the time. The net result was an assimilation of a range of perspectives — symbolic interaction, labelling theory, the phenomenological analyses of Berger and Luckmann, and ethnomethodology — into a single category: the 'sociology of everyday life'. In this process, Garfinkel's fundamental and enduring analytical achievements were lost from sight at the very moment at which 'ethnomethodology' became a household word in sociology.

Unlike such famous contemporaries as Foucault or Habermas, Garfinkel's significance as a sociologist does not arise from the encyclopaedic range of his investigations nor from any attempt at large-scale theoretical synthesis. Rather it derives from his sustained attack on a narrow range of problems which have preoccupied him throughout an intellectual career spanning nearly forty years. These problems — the theory of action, the nature of intersubjectivity and the social constitution of knowledge — have been central areas of investigation throughout the history of the discipline and, in their various aspects, have persistently concerned its most distinguished practitioners. The positions adopted on these topics have been among the most distinctive hallmarks of the major schools of sociological theory. They are universally acknowledged as fundamental to the discipline.

Garfinkel's contribution has been a strikingly original re-analysis of these problems and a highly integrated treatment of their various implications for the conceptualization and analysis of fundamental aspects of social organization. This analysis, which has been widely influential across a range of social science disciplines, has emerged in a succession of papers in which Garfinkel has repeatedly returned to, and reworked, the foundational issues which have concerned him.

Like Husserl, Garfinkel has consistently sought to be a 'true beginner' and he has never attempted to follow Weber or Parsons in building outwards from his analysis of social action towards a large-scale systematic theory of social structure. Instead, he has persistently worked to secure and deepen the analyses of foundational social processes which he began as a doctoral student at Harvard in 1946.

By the mid-1950s, Garfinkel had coined the term which would subsequently make him famous. 'Ethnomethodology' was originally designed simply as a label to capture a range of phenomena associated with the use of mundane knowledge and reasoning procedures by ordinary members of society. The term, Garfinkel relates (Garfinkel 1974: 16), occurred to him as he was writing up a study of jury deliberations. The jurors, he found, were preoccupied with a variety of 'methodological' matters such as the distinction between 'fact' and 'opinion', between 'what we're entitled to say', 'what the evidence shows' and 'what can be demonstrated' (ibid.). The jurors worked with these kinds of distinctions seriously and methodically as part of a deliberative process which all of them knew to be highly consequential and through which they determined the reasonableness of particular evidences, demonstrations, conclusions and, ultimately, verdicts. These distinctions were handled in coherently organized and 'agree-able' ways and the jurors assumed and counted upon one another's abilities to use them, draw appropriate inferences from them and see the sense of them. Although the systematic use of the distinctions was an essential part of the jurors' tasks, Garfinkel found that the distinctions themselves were not made or employed by using a special 'juror's logic'. Quite the contrary, they were overwhelmingly made by reference to common-sense considerations that 'anyone could see'. As Garfinkel put it, 'a person is 95 per cent juror before he comes near the court' (Garfinkel 1967d: 110). The term 'ethnomethodology' thus refers to the study of a particular subject matter: the body of common-sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves. The term was designed to be cognate with a

number of related anthropological terms, such as ethnobotany and ethnomedicine, but its scope is not restricted to any particular domain of knowledge. In its open-ended reference to any kind of sense-making procedure, the term represents a signpost to a domain of uncharted dimensions rather than a staking out of a clearly delineated territory.

As the preceding discussion suggests, by the mid-1950s Garfinkel was already working in a terrain which was largely alien to the majority of sociologists. During this period every form of sociology simply took for granted and left out of consideration the key questions of the construction and recognition of social activities by the actors themselves. In this context, it fell to Garfinkel to point out that these questions are analytically primary to any theory of social action and ultimately to any form of sociological investigation. His achievement has been to show that a consideration of these issues can be made an integral part of the theory of action and that they can be addressed as productive research questions in concrete empirical investigations with significant analytic results.

Although these achievements can be simply stated, they are in fact the products of a complex reconceptualization of both the theory of action and the sociology of knowledge aimed at wresting each from its preoccupation with the phenomenon of error. In the theory of action this is manifested in the long-standing distinction between rational and (normatively determined) non-rational action as a fundamental theoretical axis. Garfinkel has consistently opposed the use of this distinction in the analysis of action, arguing that it is an irrelevant and misleading distraction from the most central features of the organization of social activity — its inherent intelligibility and accountability. An emphasis on these latter characteristics, however, places a new weight on the kinds of knowledge that the actor might be viewed as possessing or drawing upon in devising or recognizing conduct. Here the older neo-Kantian sociology of knowledge, with its parallel focus on the distinction between rationally founded knowledge on the one hand and error and ideology on the other, was simply insufficient to carry the burden. Hence Garfinkel drew extensively on Schutz's writings to develop a sociology of

mundane knowledge-in-action and, in accomplishing this, then found it possible to proceed to an adequately grounded analysis of institutionalized conduct.

Finally, in both its positive recommendations for the study of common-sense knowledge and its rejection of analytical frameworks premised on the assumed, in-principle superiority of social science knowledge over its lay equivalents, Garfinkel's work also issues in a programme of study which focuses on the social constitution of knowledge. Here we encounter the obverse of Garfinkel's insistence that the analysis of action must take account of the actor's use of common-sense knowledge, namely, that the social constitution of knowledge cannot be analysed independently of the contexts of institutional activity in which it is generated and maintained. This position is most obviously asserted in Garfinkel's ' "Good" organizational reasons for "bad" clinic records' (Garfinkel, 1967f) and it has recently found exemplification in a range of detailed studies of organizational knowledge as it is produced and reproduced in the mundane work of scientists and professionals of various kinds (Garfinkel, forthcoming).

The full depth of the theoretical innovations through which Garfinkel has come to stress the profoundly reflexive relations between knowledge and action has tended to remain dimly perceived or badly misconstrued in the reception of his work. The unhappy result of this has been a widespread failure to appreciate the major advances in the analysis of knowledge and action which he has accomplished and which remain, partially submerged, in the particulars of his various studies. Accordingly, I have thought it right to begin this book with a fairly extensive account of the theory of action which Garfinkel encountered as a graduate student in the late 1940s and to discuss at some length his transformation of the main features of this theory. Subsequently, I have used this discussion of action as a basis from which to consider Garfinkel's analysis of institutionalized conduct and his treatment of the social organization of knowledge. Finally, it has proved valuable, if only as a background, in situating both the development of conversation analysis and of the more recent studies of organizational work which, in their different ways, have been strongly influenced by his teachings.

A Parsonian Backdrop

*In most available theories of social action and social structure rational
actions are assigned residual status.*
                              Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*

Garfinkel's career as a theorist effectively began when, in
1946, he enrolled as a doctoral student at Harvard University
in the newly formed Department of Social Relations. The
department was the recent product of an amalgamation of
several social science disciplines (incorporating sociology,
social anthropology, and social and clinical psychology) and
had been expressly created in order to promote the develop-
ment of integrated interdisciplinary research. A primary focus
was to be social theory and, within five years, a group of faculty
members was to produce a first interdisciplinary synthesis,
Towards a General Theory of Action, which represented 'a kind of
intellectual stocktaking of what underlay the social relations
experiment' (Parsons 1970: 843).
    This novel, even revolutionary, emphasis within the
Harvard department on theory and, in particular, the theory
of action was due largely to the influence of its first chairman,
Talcott Parsons. During the previous decade Parsons had
consistently advocated the significance of systematic theory
construction in the social sciences in a largely empiricist
intellectual climate which stressed the importance of piece-
meal empirical research over against the claims of theoretical
work. In *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) Parsons had
insisted against this prevailing orthodoxy that *theoretical*
development is the hallmark of science. No discipline, he
argued, is simply created as an assemblage of 'raw facts'. On
the contrary, empirical findings and the disciplines which are
based on them are always and inevitably the products of

theoretical interpretations of available evidence. In this context, the theorist has a vital and essential role to play. It is one of explicitly formulating, clarifying and developing the conceptual frameworks in terms of which evidence is evaluated, interpreted and integrated within a discipline's corpus of scientific fact.

Parsons coupled these claims with an extensive discussion which introduced American sociologists to a range of European theorists whose work was not widely appreciated at the time. Moreover he presented a powerful case for the latent convergence of the major theorists (Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber) on a single basic theoretical framework — the 'voluntaristic theory of action' — which made the actors' treatment of their circumstances in terms of subjectively held norms and values central to the analysis of social institutions. The effect of these claims was two-fold. They created a case for the significance of theory which was to become increasingly influential during the post-war period while, additionally, proposing a major site for theoretical development based on the voluntaristic theory itself.

It was these proposals which became central to the early development of the 'social relations experiment' at Harvard. The voluntaristic theory provided a coherent and viable focus for the department's initial endeavours, not least because the theory's emphasis on the normative aspects of conduct permitted a satisfactory intellectual division of labour among the constituent social science disciplines. Thus, in both its constitution and its objectives, the Department of Social Relations represented a radical departure from prevailing patterns of research in American sociology. Its novel and distinctive institutionalization of theoretical work as a legitimate form of sociological research in its own right proved a powerful attraction for a new post-war generation of graduate students and it was to this department, during its most richly innovative period, that Garfinkel came to participate in what Parsons later recalled (Parsons, 1970: 843) as a 'golden age' of graduate studies at Harvard.

Yet, although written under the supervision of Parsons and extensively occupied with his thought, the theoretical viewpoint of Garfinkel's dissertation was not derived from the

'structural functionalist' conceptual system then emerging through a stream of publications from the department. Instead, Garfinkel sought to dig still deeper into basic problems in the theory of action which had been raised, but incompletely dealt with, in *The Structure of Social Action*. In particular, he was dissatisfied with — and sought to remedy — the sketchy treatment of the actor's knowledge and understanding within the voluntaristic theory. Garfinkel summarized the differences between Parsons' achievements and his own interests in the opening paragraph of his dissertation:

> At least two important theoretical developments stem from the researches of Max Weber. One development, already well worked, seeks to arrive at a generalized social system by uniting a theory that treats the structuring of experience with another theory designed to answer the question, 'What is man?' Speaking loosely, a synthesis is attempted between the facts of social structure and the facts of personality. The other development, not yet adequately exploited, seeks a generalized social system built solely from the analysis of experience structures. (Garfinkel, 1952: 1)

The objective of the dissertation was 'to go as far as possible in exploring a theoretical vocabulary to transform [the second development] into a working scheme for the experimental investigation of the sociological phenomenon of social order' (ibid.). From the outset therefore, Garfinkel was in search of a theoretical framework which would directly catch at the procedures by which actors analyse their circumstances and devise and carry out courses of action. Such a framework would, in turn, result in an account of social activity which was more directly based on an analysis of the organization of experience itself. While the theoretical vocabulary to be used in this task was to be drawn from the phenomenological writings of Schutz and Gurwitsch, it would be used to analyse classical problems in the theory of action and to propose entirely novel avenues towards their solution. The differences between Parsons and his student would ultimately crystallize around the question of whether the actor's point of view, and its role in the organization of action, should be analysed and treated by means which were intrinsic to, or external to, the

structure of the actor's experience. Although the distinction might seem to be a slender one, it entailed a transformation in the analysis of action no less complete in its consequences than the previous shift — from the utilitarian to the voluntaristic framework — canvassed by Parsons himself.

THE ACTION FRAME OF REFERENCE

One of the central claims of *The Structure of Social Action* is that all of the various social sciences essentially deal with systems of social action. The basic units of such systems, Parsons argued, are 'unit acts' which, in turn, are composed of the following irreducible elements:

(1)   An *actor*, the agent of the act.
(2)   An *'end'*, a future state of affairs which the actor seeks to bring about by the act.
(3)   A current situation within which the actor acts and which he or she seeks to transform by his or her action. The situation is analysable into two kinds of elements: the *conditions* of action over which the actor has no control and the means of action over which he or she does have control.
(4)   A *mode of orientation*, comprising at least one selective standard, in terms of which the actor relates the end to the current situation.

These elements which, together, comprise the action frame of reference are, according to Parsons, 'the indispensable logical framework in which we describe and think about the phenomena of action' (Parsons, 1937: 733). Here Parsons made a specific analogy between the action frame of reference in the social sciences and the space-time framework formulated by Kant as the a priori basis of Newtonian mechanics. As he put it, without the irreducible framework of the action frame of reference, 'talk about action fails to make sense' (ibid. 732).

Two important consequences flow directly from this conceptualization of action. First, Parsons argued, action must necessarily be viewed as involving the use of effort over time. For an end is, by definition, a future state of affairs —

something which has yet to come about and which must be brought about by the overcoming of obstacles. In the course of overcoming the obstacles to an end (the conditional elements of situations), energy will be expended and time will elapse. In stressing this aspect of action, Parsons particularly sought to counteract the tendency which he identified in the German idealistic tradition to view action as simply an automatic 'emanation' of cultural ideals.

The second major consequence of this conception of action is that it necessarily involves a thoroughgoing analysis of the subjective point of view of the actor. It is, of course, axiomatic that an 'end', as a future state of affairs, can only presently exist 'in the mind' of the actor. Additionally however, the 'selective standards' by reference to which the actor relates aspects of the present situation to the end cannot be conceived as anything but subjective in character. Finally, since what will appear as the 'means' and the 'conditions' in the situation will depend both on the goal which the actor has in mind and the 'selective standards' which he or she brings to bear, the actor's conceptualization of the situation of action in terms of 'means' and 'conditions' will also be subjectively determined. In sum, the specification of each of the elements of the action frame of reference will inevitably involve some recourse to the subjective point of view of the actor. This stress on the subjective direction of human effort to overcome real world obstacles — Parsons' 'voluntaristic metaphysic' (Scott, 1963; Procter, 1978) — lies at the very heart of the Parsonian conception of action and gives rise to his most fundamental preoccupation: how to conceptualize and account for the fact that, rather than passively adapting to their external circum- stances as they are originally encountered, human beings act positively (and sometimes at great cost) to transform recalci- trant environments in accordance with the dictates of sub- jectively held normative ideals.

Examined from the perspective of this conception of action, it is possible to review the various preceding accounts of action as involving different emphases or 'loadings' on the various terms of the action frame of reference. Thus within the utilitarianism of Hobbes and his intellectual successors (Parson, 1937: 89 *et seq.*) the ends of action were treated as

random and no attempt was made to give an account of either
their origins or interrelationships. The actor was treated as
having a veridical grasp of the objective features of the
situation which included the objectively given conditions of
action, the range of available means for the achievement of
ends and the full range of consequences of their use. Finally,
the utilitarian theorist characteristically assumed that the sole
selective standard governing the actor's choice of means to an
end would be that of 'intrinsic rationality' in which ends are
pursued 'by the means which, among those available to the
actor, are intrinsically best adapted to the end for reasons
understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science
(ibid. 58). As Parsons viewed it, the utilitarian theory of
action was acutely indeterminate on two counts. Firstly, it
lacked any account of the ends of action and thus could shed
no light either on how the individual could establish priorities
among ends or, even more seriously, why the conflictual
pursuit of ends should not result in a Hobbesian state of war.
Secondly, in its reliance on a single selective standard of
'intrinsic rationality', the theory could only account for the
actor's divergence from a rational choice of means by treating
such divergences as the product of the actor's ignorance or
error. These latter, like the ends of action, were treated as
random in occurence (ibid. 65–6).

Subsequent positivistic variations on the utilitarian frame-
work designed to remedy these defects, Parsons argued,
simply resulted in the destruction of the action frame of
reference altogether. The positivistic theory of action explained
the formation of ends as a product of hereditary factors or
environmental conditioning. Similarly, the actor's ignorance
or error in departing from 'intrinsically rational' choices of
means to ends were accounted for as products of the same
factors. Thus, in each of the problematic areas, the actor's
action was viewed as the conditioned product of biological
make-up or environmental circumstances. The result was a
violation of the fundamentals of the action frame of reference
and, in particular, of the analytical independence of the 'ends'
from the 'conditions' of action. The positivistic theory results
in a view of action as a process of adaptation to the
environment — a far cry from action as Parsons conceived it.

As he put it, 'there can in the last analysis be no such thing as a radically positivistic theory of action' (ibid. 762). To the extent that a theory of action is 'positivistic' in Parsons's terms, it is not a theory of 'action' at all.

At the opposite pole from the utilitarian and positivistic streams of social theory stood the German idealistic tradition. This viewpoint had, since Hegel, been preoccupied with the uniqueness, reflexivity and moral qualities of the human subject. Expressed in German historiography in particular, these preoccupations emerged in an emphasis on the uniqueness of historical events and cultural complexes, their resistance to positivistic methodological techniques and, above all, in the view that the social order pre-eminently expresses the moral commitment of its members to a set of cultural values. It is, of course, this value dimension of the social order which is ignored in positivistic accounts of social action and which has, at best, a residual status in utilitarian economic thought. However, the idealistic tradition, with its focus on the unique cultural complexes underlying particular societies, tended to develop a view of action which emphasized the significance of values to the exclusion of the real recalcitrant conditions which actions are designed to overcome. As a result, both individual actions and social structures appeared in these writings as simple 'expressions' of cultural values. The truth of the matter, as Parsons saw it, is that

> action must always be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional. As a process, action is, in fact, the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms. Elimination of the normative aspect altogether eliminates the concept of action itself and leads to the radical positivistic position. Elimination of conditions, of the tension from that side, equally eliminates action and results in idealistic emanationism. Thus conditions may be conceived at one pole, ends and normative rules at the other, means and effort as the connecting links between them. (ibid. 732)

The task which emerges then is that of creating a body of social theory and empirical analysis which does not jettison

one or another of the elements of the action frame of reference and which thus remains an analysis of 'social action'.

As Parsons had conceptualized it during the thirties, the key to this task could be developed from the convergent works of the European social theorists. The emerging voluntaristic theory of action, he argued, sharply reduces both the extent to which actions are to be explained as the products of means— ends efficient choices and the degree to which the actor's subjective point of view is to be likened to that of a scientific observer.

> The basic tenet of the voluntaristic theory is that neither positively nor negatively does the methodological schema of scientifically valid knowledge exhaust the significant subjective elements of action. Insofar as subjective elements fail to fit as elements of valid knowledge, the matter is not exhausted by the categories of ignorance or error, nor by the functional dependence of these elements on those capable of formulation in non-subjective terms, nor by elements random relative to these. Positively, a voluntaristic system involves elements of a normative character. (ibid. 81)

Effectively, the voluntaristic theory intervenes at each of the crucial problem areas encountered by utilitarian thought. Firstly, at the level of the choice of means, the voluntaristic theory embodies the proposal that normative standards other than those expressed in the rational application of scientifically valid knowledge may constitute the basis on which a course of action is chosen. Secondly, at the level of ends, the voluntaristic theory provides that the ends of action, far from being random, are the products of systems of ultimate values. Further, such systems of values, if held in common among the members of society, will constitute a factor contributing to the explanation of social organization and social integration.

In thus breaking out of the narrow restrictions of utilitarian thought, the voluntaristic theory seemed able to handle a much wider range of social actions than its predecessor. In particular, religious and other forms of 'value-rational' conduct – the classical territory of the *Geisteswissenschaften* – were opened up for scrutiny on a similar footing with the more instrumentally rational forms of conduct. Nor was this the

only advance enabled by the voluntaristic theory. In particular, Parsons took from Durkheim not only the idea that social integration is the product of collective subscription to commonly held norms and values, but also the conception that such values could be 'internalized' and thus not merely limit egoistic tendencies but become constitutive in the formation of the objects of desire. Finally, the voluntaristic theory provided a conceptual scaffolding which, in giving due weight to the full range of subjective considerations in the organization of action, seemed capable of development into a thoroughgoing analysis of social action in the Weberian tradition.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that Parsons asserts that Weber's concept of action is 'closely similar' and 'substantially the same concept dealt with all through this study' (ibid. 640–2), the analysis of action which emerged from *The Structure of Social Action* and subsequent publications had little in common with Weber's emphasis on the meaningful character of action and the necessity of its analysis from the actor's point of view. This departure from the Weberian tradition resulted from two convergent trends in Parsons's thought: his substantive preoccupation with 'the problem of order' and his distinctive conception of social science.

THE SUBJECTIVE ELEMENTS AND THE PROBLEM OF ORDER

The most significant theoretical advance represented by the voluntaristic theory of action lay, for Parsons, in its contribution to resolving the Hobbesian 'problem of order'. Hobbes's proposal that the 'unloosed passions' would naturally result in endemic social conflict had remained unanswered in subsequent utilitarian writings. Locke's bland assumption of the natural identity of interests had merely evaded the problem and, in Parsons's judgement, any solution to the problem based solely upon the co-ordination of individual interests was insufficient. Even if one assumes an ideal initial situation in which interests interlock harmoniously, he asserted, social order will remain inherently problematic because the interlocking of interests

is a brittle thing which comparatively slight alterations of conditions can shatter at vital points. A social order resting on interlocking of interests alone, and thus ultimately on sanctions, is hence hardly empirically possible . . . For, on the one hand the greater the need for sanctions, the weaker the ultimate force behind them; on the other, the conditions of human social life being what they are, alterations of sufficient magnitude to shatter such a brittle and unstable order can scarcely be avoided for very long. (ibid. 404–5)

According to Parsons the key to the Hobbesian problem lay in the analysis, convergently developed by Durkheim and Freud, of the internalization of norms. By this process, social actors would come to adopt value standards which would limit the range of ends they could aspire to and the means they could employ to achieve them. Given this outline solution, the task as Parsons saw it was to develop and systematize the theorem in application to institutional actions. The fulfilment of this task was Parsons's core contribution to the manifesto of the 'social relations experiment' at Harvard — *Towards a General Theory of Action*.

In this volume and its companion, *The Social System*, social actors were viewed as orienting to the environment along three dimensions in which they (1) discriminate the objects of the situation, (2) invest these objects with (positive or negative) cathectic significance and (3) evaluate possible courses of action in relation to them. All three of these dimensions of actor orientation are, in turn, influenced by culturally transmitted value orientations ('organized sets of rules or standards'|(Parsons et al, 1951: 60)) which are used to determine (1) the validity of cognitive judgements, (2) the appropriacy of cathectic attachments and (3) the choices of courses of conduct.

In order to depict how the internalized value standards integrate institutional activity, Parsons begins with an idealized situation in which:

(1)   The actors share complementary role expectations.
(2)   These expectations are themselves integrated with a more general value system which is also shared.

    (3) Both the specific role expectations and the wider
          values are internalized by the actors.

In such a situation — an idealized microcosm of any routine
social circumstance from the exchange of a greeting in a
corridor, or a mother's relationship with a child, to partici-
pation in a large-scale organization — the actors will co-
operate with one another in a co-ordinated pattern of activity
for three basic reasons. First, they will have become committed
to the prescribed or expected course of action because each
has internalized it as the appropriate or proper one; second,
they have internalized other related values which may be
threatened or strained by their failure to 'live up to' the
demands of the present situation, causing painful internal
conflicts or loss of self-esteem; and, third, they fear that others
will punish them for not acting appropriately by frustrating
their expectations and/or withdrawing love, approval or
esteem from them. The 'double contingency' involved in this
theorem of institutionalized action is such that any pattern of
activity will tend to 'crystallize' and become self-stabilizing
and self-equilibrating over time because any tendency (from
any actor) to deviate from the standardized expectations will
encounter sharply disadvantageous consequences.
    The central theoretical significance of this account of
institutionalized action is to limit substantially the importance
of purely instrumental interests as motivating forces in
conduct. Instead, the workings of the theorem of institutional-
ized action effectively provide that the actor will become
positively motivated to co-operate with others and, in turn,
the theorem underwrites the likelihood that actors will
actually come to want to act in accordance with institutional
necessities. As Parsons and Shils put it:

> institutionalization itself must be regarded as the fundamental
> integrative mechanism of social systems. It is through internal-
> ization of common patterns of value-orientation that a system
> of social interaction can be stabilized. Put in personality terms
> this means that there is an element of super-ego organization
> correlative with every role-orientation pattern of the individual
> in question. In every case, the internalization of a super-ego

element means motivation to accept the priority of collective
over personal interests, within the appropriate limits and on
the appropriate occasions. (Parson et al, 1951: 150)

This analysis was a *tour de force*. Suitably elaborated with an
account, derived from Freud, of the psychological mechanisms
of adjustment and defence (Parsons, 1951: 201–26) so as to
admit more friction and slippage into the system, it enabled
the explanatory role of the internalization of norms to be
drawn deeply into the analysis of institutional processes. It
greatly increased the extent to which institutions could be
viewed as non-coercively maintained. Furthermore it suggested
an inherent social psychological process through which a
'skin' of legitimacy would inevitably coalesce around, and
sustain, stable interaction patterns even where the latter were
initially established on a coercive basis. Finally, if the theory
appeared at times to eliminate the possibility of conflict in
social relations altogether (Wrong, 1961), the sceptic could
always be reminded that the analysis was an ideal typical one
and that, to the extent that the condition of full institutional-
ization was not met at the empirical level, the system would
either be maintained through the operation of non-normative
factors (e.g. coercion) or would simply undergo change.

   Parsons's use of the internalization formula to meet the
motivational problems raised by the question of egoistic self-
interest is well known and has been widely discussed. Yet in
the welter of commentary, his emphasis on the *motivational* role
of norms and values has scarcely been remarked upon. This
emphasis was, of course, a natural one. Hobbes, after all, has
generally been interpreted as posing his fateful problem as one
concerning the motivational wellsprings of action and the
internalization formula straightforwardly answered him in
kind. Yet to address Hobbes in this way is plainly to treat
norms and values, once internalized, as *causes* of action. And
this treatment inexorably draws attention away from the
'logic' of action, that is, the interpretative bases on which
actions are constructed and understood in terms which are
meaningful to the actors involved. Starting from a framework
which began with the subjective point of view of the actor,
Parsons had arrived at an entirely *external* analysis of the

norms and values which he treated as constraining and determining conduct. This development was fully consistent with his view of social science, to which we now briefly turn.

PARSONS'S SCIENCE OF SUBJECTIVITY

Although, in *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons was concerned to reject positivistic analyses of social action in favour of the voluntaristic perspective, he did not extend this rejection of positivism to the methods or objectives of positive science. On the contrary, he committed himself at an early date to the view that 'there is a methodological core common to all empirical science, no matter what its concrete subject matter' (Parsons, 1936: 679). In Parsons's analysis, all sciences worthy of the name develop when discrete empirical observations are knitted together by abstract theoretical concepts and expressed as generalized analytical laws. Such laws do not, of course, spring fully armed from empirical observation. Rather they arise through an intervening process in which observations are increasingly formulated in abstract theoretical terms (which Parsons terms 'analytical elements') which then become the basis for analytical laws. For example, classical mechanics initially developed from piecemeal observations of falling bodies, balls rolling down inclined planes, the motion of pendulums and so on. These observations could not be integrated, let alone furnish the basis for the laws of gravitation, until they were expressed in terms of abstract concepts ('analytical elements') such as mass, acceleration, etc. In Parsons's discussion, conceptual abstraction from the concrete is thus an essential precondition for theoretical advance towards the generalized laws characteristic of natural science. Parsons is adamant that, although the social sciences deal with 'subjective' phenomena, they are not on this account to be excluded from the general pattern of scientific development. If it is to develop as a science capable of expressing results as generalized laws, sociology must first pass through this crucial phase of conceptual development in which 'analytical elements' — the sociological equivalents of concepts like mass and acceleration — are formulated and used as

a means of expressing the results of sociological observation.

In developing the implications of this view for the construction of a sociological science, Parsons began by making a key distinction between what he termed 'unit' and 'element' analyses. Unit concepts, he stated (Parsons, 1937: 31–3), make reference to entities such as the actor's orientation which are concrete or, as in the case of ideal types, 'hypothetically concrete'. Sociological analysis with the use of unit concepts will give the investigator treatments of social activity in terms of the meanings with which the actors invest it. However such treatments, Parsons insists, will remain collections of discrete observations approximately equivalent to the results of isolated experiments jotted into the physicist's notebook. If they are to be knitted together with other, similarly discrete, observations so as to yield general laws, these particular concrete observations must be broken down into their underlying components — the 'analytical elements'. If this is accomplished, each 'unit' observation will be found to comprise 'a specific combination of the values of one or more analytical elements' (ibid. 748). As for the 'analytical elements' themselves, Parsons identified these as the basic co-ordinates of the value orientations which lay at the heart of the voluntaristic theory of action. He specified them in terms of the 'pattern variables' — a logically exhaustive system of orientational possibilities collectively constituting a closed metric whose combinations and permutations would prove capable of expressing every humanly meaningful value stance, whether individual, institutional or societal. Integrated with his analysis of the functional imperatives for the survival of social systems, the pattern variables would subsequently be employed in Parsons's comparative work on social systems and his analysis of social change.

Thus Parsons's project for a sociological science was one which, although formally rooted in the 'action frame of reference', effectively focused attention away from the analysis of social action *per se*. Observation of the latter — the province of 'unit' analysis — would certainly be a vital source of raw data, but a sociological science could only emerge when 'unit' observations were decomposed into their component ('vector') value elements and accounted for in terms of universal