

Theory of the Social, Theory as the Social:

On the Self-Application of Sociological Theory

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[Abstract]

The purpose of this article is to show that scientific theory is a social system consisting of communication. Applying this to sociological theory, we realize that it is not just a theory of the social, but it is itself the social. Talcott Parsons, referring to Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, regarded scientific theory as a transcendent Idea in his *The Structure of Social Action*. However, as Niklas Luhmann's theory of self-referential social systems points out, science is a real communication system that exists in the actual world through mediums such as publications. In fact, Parsons himself had acknowledged that his abovementioned work was an *empirical* monograph based on the published works of the great forerunners.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to show that scientific theory is a social system consisting of communication and to demand that sociology consider sociological theory not only as a theory of the social, but also reflectively, as the social. Thus, one must examine the possibility of self-applying sociological theory. To this end, we contrast the theory of self-referential social systems by Niklas Luhmann with Talcott Parsons' view of scientific theory in his *The Structure of Social Action*. We focus on the problem of the ontological status of the observer, which Parsons calls a theoretical system. Parsons himself devoted a section of *The Structure of Social Action* to this issue, but he thought that its discussion was, in strictness, outside the scope of the work

(Parsons, [1937] 1968: 753 fn. 1). This article attempts to clarify the particular philosophical implications of Parson's approach and, drawing on the theory of self-referential social systems, to refute Parsons' notion. It denies any transcendental status to scientific theory, something that Parsons, referring to Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations (Logische Untersuchungen)* (Husserl, [1900] 1913; Husserl, [1901] 1913), upholds. Further, the article views scientific theories as members of the class of real communication systems that exist in the actual world through mediums such as publications. Consequently, it views theoretical study as an empirical study that refers to empirical objects.

2. Parsons' Analytical Realism

As is well known, Parsons adopted the theoretical standpoint called "analytical realism" in his first book, *The Structure of Social Action*. This has received a lot of criticism, but it is doubtful whether such criticism has shed light on the content of analytical realism.¹ The reason for this seems to be that the criticism of Parsons is based more on ideological grounds than on scientific ones. However, this is not of concern to us here. Rather, we are concerned with a fatally blind spot in Parsons' original argument: although he advocated "realism," Parsons had never conceived the system of scientific theory as an empirically real system in the actual world. He defined the term "system" as follows:

As far as it concerns the facts of the situation of action the term "system" has been employed throughout in two different senses which should be made clear. On the other hand, it refers to a body of *logically* interrelated propositions, a "theoretical system"; on the other, to a body of *empirically* interrelated phenomena, an empirical system. The first kind of system is not only not a "real" system at all, it does not state any facts in the ordinary sense. It merely defines general properties of empirical phenomena and states

general relations between their values (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 71 fn. 1).

For Parsons, scientific theory is a complex of elements, that is, of propositions, *logically* (not *empirically*) related to each other. Therefore, he regarded it as an ideal system where the relations between the elements are not causal but meaningful ones (*Sinnzusammenhang*)—an “ideal reality” (see Parsons, [1937] 1968: 482). According to him, those meaningful relations differ from causal ones in not being in a temporal process. It is true that scientific actions are temporal, based on the causal relation between means and ends. However, a scientific theory as a system of meanings is *atemporal*. Therefore, while causal relations are relevant to rational action in the role of conditions and means, meaningful relations condition action in the role of *norms*.

In elaborating a theory for instance, there is nothing in the conditions of his [scientific action] situation to prevent the theorist from making a logical error — what prevents him is, rather, his effort to conform his action to the norm of logical correctness (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 483).

A scientific theory is an atemporal Idea, consisting of logical relations among propositions, and it normatively guides scientific actions that are empirical realities in a temporal process.

Indeed, Parsons had understood “realism” to mean that there is an external world of so-called empirical reality which is not reducible to terms of an ideal order in the philosophical sense (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 753). This world of empirical reality is not the creation of human minds. However, he also thought that the systems of scientific theory could not be such a direct representation of the external world as empiricism (especially the positivistic variety) assumes.² According to him, while empirical reality to which scientific theory can be applied is a factual order, scientific theory itself is not an empirical entity but an ideal representation of empirical phenomena or aspects of them (Parsons,

[1937] 1968: 753-754). Thus, contrary to the naïve assumption of empiricism, scientific theory has inherent limitations.

It is not a justified assumption that reality is exhausted by its congruence with the kind of ideal systems accessible to the human mind in its scientific phase, such as what we call logic. The same kind of argument may be applied to limitations inherent in the humanly available mechanisms of observation. If the term be interpreted broadly enough it is correct to say that factual elements can find a place in science only when there is a humanly possible operation by which they can be determined (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 754).³

On the other hand, the important thing for Parsons was that the propositions of human science are not wholly subjective, because “[t]here is and *must be* as a limiting concept a totality of humanly possible scientific knowledge which is not that of ‘external reality itself’ but adequate to a *significant* part of it. In so far as science progresses actual knowledge approaches this limit asymptotically” (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 754 emphasis added). Hence, in Parsons’ view, the fact of “verification” that scientific theory works is proof that the propositions of human science are adequately relevant to “significant” aspects of reality (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 754). The Ideal existence of objectively complete reality, or correspondingly, the attainment of the totality of humanly possible knowledge, is the normative element that scientists should respect. This normative element guides the voluntary efforts of scientists to control their scientific actions of verification, and it helps ensure that scientific propositions relate to facts.

Of course, Parsons thought that such a norm, the so-called complete realism, is in its absolute sense an unrealizable Idea. In terms of the cognitive limitations of the human mind, the actual knowledge about facts at any given time in any given field is always less than the totality of humanly possible

knowledge. Therefore, a system of generalized theory must be interpreted as an abstraction from the totality of possible knowledge, and it is capable of explaining only part of the facts important within the given frame of reference. The others, the values of constants, can be explained only in terms of other analytical systems. However, those facts that are important in terms of a given frame of reference are by no means all that can be known about the concrete phenomenon (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 755). The concrete phenomenon can be said to have been as fully explained as is possible in the state of scientific knowledge of the time only when it has been adequately described in terms of all known frames of reference, all the data have been subsumed under analytical concepts of some system, and all these different ways of analyzing it systematically related to one another (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 755). Thus, according to Parsons, we must abandon the naïve realism of empiricism. Nevertheless, for him, the abstraction from the totality of humanly possible knowledge did not imply such unreality in the fictional sense as Max Weber's ideal type, because "[t]his is proved by the fact that the results of analysis on the different levels, in terms of the various frames of reference, etc., are capable of being integrated into a coherent body of knowledge which, as a whole, has the realistic implications.... In so far as this happens the various parts of this body of knowledge serve to reinforce each other and to strengthen the evidence in favor of any one proposition in it" (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 755).

The important thing here is that the norm, even if it conditions and directs the scientist's action, does not always work restrictively. Parsons thought that, among variables that determine the human limitation on the knowability of reality, "[t]hose connected with the direction and limitations of scientific interest in relation to value systems are, perhaps, the most significant" (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 756). This would be because the Idea as norm, while limiting the number of possible points of view that lead to the skeptical consequences of relativism, encourages progress beyond the current levels of human cognition. The humanly possible approaches to empirical phenomena have not yet been

exhausted. As more varied human values are accommodated, the scientific range also broadens. With the accumulation of value experience, the totality of knowledge gradually approaches the asymptote (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 756).

Parsons viewed the system of the theory of action as a special application of these general considerations on scientific theory. It is true that he admitted that the action frame of reference was not the only one in which certain facts of human action can be adequately described for certain scientific purposes. However, he viewed the action frame of reference as more adequate than any alternative frames of reference, such as the natural science schema of space-time or the idealistic schema (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 756). Thus, his sociological theory provides a new approach to the totality of possible knowledge about the empirical reality of human action. As is well known, Parsons defined sociology as “the science which attempts to develop an analytical theory of social action systems in so far as these systems can be understood in terms of the property of common values integration” (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 768). Owing to the analytical reality of this normative value element, sociology can be distinguished from economics, politics, and psychology and can acquire the status of one of these special analytical sciences concerned with human action. It is neither an encyclopedic synthetic science (i.e., synthetic sociology) nor a descriptive historical science. Analytical realism, while acknowledging the limitations of human cognition of external reality in terms of selectivity and abstraction, was concerned with preventing the misunderstanding that sociology deals with fictional unreality. About his own work, Parsons wrote:

It cannot be maintained either that in the formulation attained in the present study this theoretical system is complete, or that it will not, with the further development of the social sciences, be superseded by one as radically different from it as it is from the systems from which it has emerged. But its empirical usefulness as recounted in this study is such that it is quite safe to

say that if and when it is superseded it will be found to have left a substantial permanently valid precipitate of knowledge which, with the appropriate restatement, it will be possible to incorporate into the future broader system. This, and this only, is the sense in which it is claimed that it has given us valid knowledge of empirical reality (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 756-757).

According to Parsons, in those days, there was a strong current of pessimism among students of the social sciences, especially among those who called themselves sociologists: pessimism about there being as many systems of sociological theory as there were sociologists, that there was no common basis, and that all was arbitrary and subjective (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 774). Parsons wrote:

To the present writer this current of sentiment has two equally unfortunate implications. On the one hand, it encourages the view that the only sound work in the social field is detailed factual study, without benefit of theory. On the other hand, for those who refuse to be satisfied with this, it encourages a dangerous irrationalism which lets go of scientific standards altogether. We are told sociology is an art, that what is valuable in it is to be measured by the standards of intuition and inspiration, that it is not subject to the canons of rigorous logic and empirical verification (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 774).

Fighting the two-abovementioned tendencies was one of the reasons why Parsons discovered a common basis in the great four social scientists—Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber—and wrote *The Structure of Social Action* under the banner of analytical realism. For this, surprisingly, he even suggested that his attempt was similar to Edmund Husserl's phenomenological considerations in the *Logical Investigations*. Parsons thought, as the title *The Structure of Social Action* directly shows, that all actions have the common structure, and he insisted as follows.

[T]he action frame of reference may be said to have what many, following Husserl, have called a “phenomenological” status. *It involves no concrete data that can be “thought away,” that are subject to change.* It is not a phenomenon in the empirical sense. It is the indispensable logical framework in which we describe and think about the phenomena of action (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 733 emphasis added).⁴

As Husserl advocated anti-psychologism as a basis of logic, Parsons also sought to provide sociology with the foundation of “rigorous science” (*strenge Wissenschaft*), which can hold out against subjectivism and relativism and make it independent of the arbitrariness of individual scholars. Certainly, the analytical reality of the object may vary with the observer, depending on the observer’s scientific frame of reference, even though the object in question remains the same. However, once the frame of reference adequate to each science is decided, the elements derived from it cannot be contingent. They are not particulars but universals, that is, the general properties that are omnipresent in each concrete object observed through a particular frame of reference. In the case of sociology, if one chooses the action frame of reference, the analytical elements derived from it will be phenomenologically necessary. They cannot be subjective ideal constructs that are dependent on the arbitrariness of each observer. Thus, elements embodying Ideal normative value should be thought as real, and consequently, the situation of there being as many systems of sociological theory as there are sociologists will be avoided. Hence, he concluded *The Structure of Social Action* as follows:

[W]e certainly need not be ashamed of our science [=sociology]. Notable progress on both empirical and theoretical levels has been made within the short space of a generation. We have sound theoretical foundations on which to build (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 775).

3. Theoretical System as Ideal Reality?

Viewed in its entirety, Parsons' analytical realism was a standpoint that included conceptual realism or belief in the reality of Ideas. This standpoint was derived from his earnestness to try to establish sociology as an independent science, so that it would not be dismissed out of hand. This standpoint bears close similarity with that of Husserl, who aimed at a science of Ideality concerning essence, as against empiricism and positivism in modern science. The point that we stress here is that a theoretical system is, in Parsons' opinion, quintessentially Ideal and has no place in the real world. Certainly, a system of scientific theory as Ideal reality is observable through meaningful symbols, so it is possible to say that there is verifiable knowledge. However, Parsons regarded such knowledge itself neither as a thing nor as an event in time, but consisting of "eternal objects," as Alfred North Whitehead described them (see Parsons, [1937] 1968: 763). Actually, what Parsons wanted to say was that the reality of such an eternal object could be proved through the convergence of opinions of the four social scientists: Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber. The central interest of Parsons' study in *The Structure of Social Action* was in "the development of a particular coherent theoretical system, as an example of the general process of 'immanent' development of science itself" (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 12), that is, in the development of the voluntaristic theory of action. This is most clearly shown in the subtitle *A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*. His key point here is that the four social scientists (chosen from within a broad cultural unit, Western and Central Europe at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century) who had almost no direct influence on each other, somehow developed a common body of ideas (see Parsons, [1937] 1968: 13-14).⁵ The convergence exhibited by the theories of four men who had no common background was due neither to coincidence nor to miracle, but proved that Ideas were real and guided their scientific actions.⁶ Parson wrote:

[A] scientist as well as other men may be presumed to have philosophical ideas and that these will stand in determinate reciprocal relations to his scientific theories. Indeed, since eminence in scientific theory implies a high level of intellectual ability, this is more likely to be true of scientists than of most men. It is clear that the *Weltanschauung* and the scientific theories of an eminent scientist cannot be radically dissociated. But this is no reason to believe there is not an immanent process of the development of science itself, and it is this that is the focus of interest here. Above all the motivation of the scientist in entering on his studies will not be treated except in so far as it is determined by the structure of the theoretical system itself with which he works (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 27).

According to Parsons, the system of scientific theory is not a physical object but belongs to the class of non-spatial, atemporal, and meaningful symbol systems, and is a conditioning element of scientific action (see Parsons, [1937] 1968: 763-764). He picked up Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber not just because he borrowed their conceptions for the abstractive theory formation of the voluntaristic theory of action. Rather, the fact that these four social scientists were motivated by the Idea of that scientific theory and made an effort to realize the Idea through each of their works was, for Parsons, the empirical evidence in favor of the validity of the voluntaristic theory of action. Hence, he stressed that his investigation in *The Structure of Social Action* was always empirical. He remarks as follows:

[T]his study should be considered as an attempted empirical verification, in a particular case, of a theory of the process by which scientific thought develops, the theory that was there outlined. ...This study has attempted throughout to be an *empirical* monograph. It has been concerned with facts and the understanding of facts. The propositions set forth have been upon facts, and direct references to the sources for these facts have been given

throughout in footnotes (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 697).

What deserves particular mention here is that the “facts” in this statement have reference to “*the published works of these writers*” (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 697 emphasis added). According to Parsons, published works belong to a class of facts, linguistic expressions, and observation of them involves interpretation of the meaning of the linguistic symbols employed. Hence,

[i]t must be granted that this is empirical observation, otherwise not only this study but all the works of the writers here discussed, and all others which involve the subjective aspect of action, must be denied scientific status (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 697 emphasis added).

Therefore, Parsons’ *The Structure of Social Action* constituted a self-validating argumentative structure, where a scientific theory and an empirical fact validate each other through the works of the great four pioneers. The voluntaristic theory of action, where an actor makes an effort to realize a normative value, is exemplified by the empirical fact that the four social scientists’ real processes of intellectual effort converged in the same Idea, and on the other, this empirical fact is explained by the voluntaristic theory of action.

This led to the belief that the Ideal object of the voluntaristic theory of action was real. In this, Parsons’ orientation may be said to overlap considerably with that of Husserl. According to Alfred Schütz, Husserl “has shown that there are ideal objects of knowledge which are as independent of the knowing subject as real objects are” (Schutz, [1957-58] 1966: 163). And Husserl himself considered such ideal objects as, in the context of modern science, the most original Idea of philosophy that has laid at the basis of European sciences since the time of its first solid formulation by Plato (Husserl, [1930] 1952: 139). Parsons also employs the same sort of reasoning. Husserl thought that in truth, all always see “Ideas” and “Essences” and that they operate with them

in thought and also formulate judgments concerning essences (Husserl, [1913] 1950: 49). Similarly, Parsons thought that in truth, all always act toward realizing Ideas.

Parsons however, did not directly declare the existence of such Ideal objects. Rather, he indirectly indicated their existence through the “subjective category.” For him, the actions of the four social scientists must be understood as scientific rather than arbitrary because the Idea of the voluntaristic theory of action was objectively real as norm and because it had motivated and directed their intelligent efforts. Parsons considered that the voluntaristic theory of action really existed as an element toward which the actual processes of their intelligent efforts were directed, even though it was an idea in their minds. Hence, the voluntaristic theory of action was neither a theory that each of the four social scientists formed subjectively, nor a theory that Parsons, as an individual, constructed. To repeat, for Parsons, the fact that all these four pioneers, without any common background, uniformly aimed at achieving the voluntaristic theory of action was neither coincidence nor miracle, but suggests the reality of hidden necessary Idea and truth.

Their agreement far outweighs the differences that occur on the more superficial levels. What has happened in the minds of these men is not the appearance of an unorganized mass of arbitrary subjective judgments. It is part of a great deep stream of the movement of scientific thought. It is a movement of major proportions extending far beyond the works of the few men here considered (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 774-775).

Parsons thought that science, for it to be science, needs an objective Idea that is independent of subjectivity. In this sense, the voluntaristic theory of action is taken to be objectively real as the Ideality that make sociology a science. In this, Parson would appear to be following Husserl who, in his *The Crisis of European Sciences and the Transcendental Phenomenology (Die Krisis*

der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie), viewed people including himself as the bearers of the teleology in the historical becoming of modern philosophy (Husserl [1936] 1976: 71).

4. Theoretical System as Temporal Reality

In this chapter, we will clarify how the theory of self-referential social systems conceives scientific theory, while bearing in the mind the above considerations about Parsons. First, in this systems theory, the universality of a scientific theory is judged on the basis of whether the theory can be self-applied (can be applied to itself) or not. The natural question then is how Parsons would observe and explain his own scientific actions in the way that he studied the four social scientists. In fact, one could explain his scientific action with the help of the voluntaristic theory of action, that he was also guided by the transcendent Idea of the voluntaristic theory of action and was trying to realize it.

However, Parsons frankly admitted that the process of science is originally dynamic and that *The Structure of Social Action* was not a definitive work. He rigorously warned against frequent claims to finality. While reflecting on the development of his own thought process, that is, the process of repeated reading of the works of the four authors, which resulted in the widening and deepening of his understanding, Parsons said:

The god of science is, indeed, Evolution. But for those who pay their obeisance in a true scientific spirit, the fact that science evolves beyond the points they have themselves attained is not to be interpreted as a betrayal of them. It is the fulfillment of their own highest hopes (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 41).

If science asymptotically evolves in this way, it should be regarded neither

as an Ideal reality nor as an eternal object beyond time, but as an empirical reality that is temporally variable. It is true that Parsons had emphasized on how abstract scientific theory conditions particular scientific actions. However, it should not be overlooked that he also had considered scientific publications as empirical facts. Science is rather a real system consisting of communication through mediums such as books, articles, discourses, and so on, and each scientific theory is an autonomous subsystem further differentiated inside science. In other words, what conditions particular scientific communications and leads them to a definite direction is not a normative Idea on the transcendental level, but other scientific communications on the same level. This is exactly how the theory of self-referential social systems understands scientific theory. On self-application, this theory would view itself also as one of the many communication systems in real society. Even if someone offers the criticism that the theory is ideal (or Ideal) and no place in reality, this criticism must also be disseminated as communication through publications, for example, and must form a social system in reality. That is, “all observations take place *realistically* in *reality*” (Luhmann, 1990: 92). Modern science is empirically observable as a real social activity, so it is sociologically observable. From this viewpoint, not the transcendental Idea of the voluntaristic theory of action but real publications that are empirically observable connected Parsons with the pioneers of sociology. Parsons was, as it were, a second-order observer who observes the four first-order observers through their publications.

The meditational instrument that ensures the structural coupling of first- and second-order observation is publications, which are, from a first-order perspective, produced and read as texts, but which, at the same time, bring a view into the observational way of other scientists (and reflexively then into the own) and only hereby acquires their genuinely scientific meaning. With it, publishing a text (including reporting on the research situation and quoting

other publications) becomes the basal element of scientific production, the operation of the autopoiesis of science (Luhmann, 1995a: 105-106).⁷

The theory of self-referential social systems acknowledges that any scientific theory including this systems theory can only selectively observe the external world. In this regard, it shares with Parsons an opposition to positivistic empiricism. This social systems theory is not naïve realism. It is conditioned by its own present state, and observes in the current “now and so (*Jetzt und So*)” of its own eigentime. To put this the other way around, scientific theory never falls into sheer arbitrariness, because it is ordered through its own eigentime. In the process of self-reproduction of a social system, its eigenvalue is produced and determines the consistency and directionality of further operations (Tada, 2011). As stated above, scientific operations are conditioned, not through Ideas beyond this real world, but through other scientific operations on the same level (of the system itself in question) in this real world. In these meanings, *the theory of self-referential social systems is an empirical theory, although it is not an empiricist theory*. There is no need to think that scientific theory is controlled by analytically real Ideality, or that science is impossible without such Ideality. Even if such eternal true Ideality does not exist in advance, the system of scientific theory protects itself from falling into arbitrary chaos by conditioning the range of possibilities and by spontaneously forming its own temporal order in reality (Tada, 2008). This is expressed adequately in the word “self-reference.”

There is another important thing for science. A system of scientific theory can not only be self-binding through the self-referential operations but also evolve and produce novelty because the system itself is a temporal reality in the actual world. In the fruiting process to *The Structure of Social Action*, those great pioneers appeared as phenomena recurrently in Parsons’ consciousness (conscious system), and their way of appearing had always changed with the transition of Parsons’ inner time. That is, the appearance of the observed object

is selected by the observer, and it is contingent in correlation with observer's eigentime. Likewise, a theoretical system can continuously set different perspectives and offer fresh interpretations without being satisfied with typical understanding about various subjects and themes, and thereby, lead to the emergence of new knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) of reality, because a theoretical system is also a real observing system with its own eigentime. As Max Weber suggested, sociological knowledge achieves more, not through convergence with the same necessary Idea, but rather through such contingency of interpretation (see Weber, [1922] 1988: 555). Because a theoretical system is an empirical and temporal reality consisting of communication, it would be able to usher in newness and variety in scientific knowledge beyond mere construction of types and abstraction of universals. This can explain how the evolution of science is possible. Time is not only a condition of possibility of knowledge, but also a condition of possibility of continually different and new knowledge in the now and so.

Therefore, Parsons' reference to publications as empirical realities can also be supported by the theory of self-referential social systems. Published works are the empirically observable medium of scientific communication and they contribute to the formation of real scientific systems that have eigentime. "It is not until in the form of publications that modern science reaches autopoietic connection capacity. Publications are, so to speak, the payment means of science, the operational medium of its autopoiesis" (Luhmann, 1990: 432). Parsons' way of reference to publications was common to structuralist theory in general. According to structuralism, the concept of structure is related not to empirical reality, but with abstraction in the form of a model of empirical reality. Thus, structuralists increasingly work with published texts of speeches and discourses made somewhere, or with theories and philosophies, rather than with empirical realities. However, in this case, the reality of these published texts would be indisputable for structuralists as well, at least for the author in question (see Luhmann, 1984: 377-378). Unlike structuralism, the theory of

self-referential social systems as a realistic theory takes notice of exactly this sort of social reality.

The theory of self-referential social systems includes the notion that published works contribute toward organizing real theoretical systems. That is, the very theory of self-referential social systems is also a communication system mediated by publications and it can be observed in other second-order observations. Briefly, this systems theory allows self-application. Moreover, this theory also includes discourses confrontational to it. Theories critical of this systems theory also form real communication systems through publications in the actual world. At this point the universal applicability of the theory of self-referential systems becomes evident. For this systems theory, there is no privileged position exempt from empirical observation. Parsons' insistence that "an empirical science is concerned with *processes in time*" (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 762) is valid for science itself. Even the very denial of the empirical reality of social systems generates an emergent temporal social system. In this sense, social systems are undeniable social realities, which are always susceptible to empirical observation. Such is the case with scientific theories. They are not transcendent atemporal Ideas.

Hence, sociology does not need to consider any more whether or not great works in the past necessarily included a common Idea as reality, or even accepting that they did, to attempt to look for the Idea. The important thing for sociology is rather empirical social reality. Therefore, although authors, such as the four pioneers, have had almost no direct contact with each other, their works were not atoms that discretely existed by themselves, but were related to each other as operations in the complex system of science, and only in the system could they acquire meaning as scientific works. Parsons himself embodies such an example. As stated above, in *The Structure of Social Action* Parsons referred to Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, and these thoughts might be said to show a convergence, although the two thinkers had no direct contact. Moreover, in that work, Parsons also referred to Schütz's

The meaningful construction of the social world (Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt) (Schütz, 1932)⁸ (Parsons, [1937] 1968: xxxv), although he had no direct contact with Schütz at the time. In sum, their works, as real social communications, connected with and observed each other. Sociological theories are real communication systems that emerge through publications. And at this point, one can consider the theory of self-referential social systems to be already differentiated from the action theory of the human subject both in name and reality. Action theoretical study of particular theorists and scientists in the history of theory is a real product of communication over attribution, which is based on the anthropocentric or humanistic way of thinking. It is a reduction of the complexity of the science system by hero-worship or great person theory, that is, by the heroic view of history.

5. Conclusion

The theory of self-referential social systems says the following about self-application:

[I]f one works with the concept of self-referential systems, science and one's own research are also subsumed in it. This forces to take leave of all ontological metaphysics and all apriorism. Systems with built-in reflection are forced to give up absolutes. And if science discovers this situation in the domain of its objects, it is inevitably valid for science itself, too (Luhmann, 1984: 656).

This theory as a second-order observer of social systems is itself a temporal social system in reality. Any scientific communication forms empirically observable social systems through publications. In this regard, this social systems theory is also a social system. It is neither a privileged observing position nor an eternal Idea, but the social that emerges through empirically

observable publications and changes constantly. This approach makes possible the self-application of the theory of self-referential social systems. And, as a corollary, this theory would have to acknowledge the reality of other social systems. As long as the observer is understood as a real social system, it would be a contradiction to deny the empirical reality of other social systems. Hence, the conclusion, “the science as autopoietic system has to respect its object as autopoietic system” (Luhmann, 1982: 368) should be never ignored.

In any case, as long as science is a modern social system, the polytheism of values among more and more differentiating theoretical systems is inevitable. Any of those systems, as a real system, makes observations based on its own temporality. Therefore, Parsons’ assumption of value monotheism, that all systems are converging, is not corroborated by the sociological theory of modern society. Rather, as Max Weber’s sociology of understanding (*verstehende Soziologie*)⁹ attempted to demonstrate through the term “value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*),” the theory that takes a realistic approach to value polytheism as an aspect of modern society can critically detect the obviousness (*Selbstverständlichkeit*) that real social systems (first-order observers) take for granted. With critical knowledge, a theory can constantly cross borders from one distinction to another and can always observe its objects from different perspectives. This attitude of observation can be called “difference freedom (*Differenzfreiheit*)” (Tada, 2006). In order to gain the additional achievements of knowledge in the now and so in this way, the theory itself must also be a real system in reality. This is a necessary condition for sociological theory to properly be a sociological theory of modern society.

[Notes]

- 1 There are few works that give an informed account of Parsons’ analytical realism, with some exceptions, for instance, Akasaka (2009).
- 2 According to Parsons, there are three types of empiricism: positivistic empiricism, particularistic empiricism, and intuitionist empiricism. He collectively called them

“empiricist realism” and rejected them, although it was especially toward positivistic empiricism that he directed his criticism. See Parsons ([1937] 1968: 728-731).

- 3 Parsons explained “operation” to Schütz as follows: “The process of reading this letter with a view to understanding what I mean is just as much an *operation* in the methodological sense as is the process of surveying a piece of land. What we mean by the ‘state of mind’ of the actor is simply the unitary referent of certain possible statements of fact arrived at in this way. It is no more and no less an ontological reality than the particle of classical physics or the wave system of certain versions of quantum mechanics” (Parsons, [1941] 1978: 89). See also Parsons ([1937] 1968: 37). In this letter, Parsons referred to a physicist, Percy Williams Bridgman, who advocated operationalism (a branch of empiricism).
- 4 Parsons refers to phenomenology in Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. Although Alfred Schütz, in the review of *The Structure of Social Action* sent to Parsons, had pointed out the linkage between Parsons and Husserl (Schütz, [1940] 1978: 24, 135 n. 46), this was almost ignored, possibly because not only Parsons’ analytical realism but also Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* were poorly understood. To put it briefly, Parsons referred to *Logical Investigations* vol. 1 and vol. 2 (to the original versions published in 1900 and 1901 respectively) in the bibliography at the end of *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, [1937] 1968: xxxvii), and, going by from Parsons’ proclivities, his attention was probably directed to the portion of the book stretching from vol. 1 to the fourth investigation of vol. 2. This portion has a strong suggestion of objectivism and anti-psychologism. As is well known, because the fifth and sixth investigations of vol. 2 (that led to epistemological transcendental phenomenology) dealt with the intentionality of consciousness, these parts were regarded as recession to subjectivism or psychologism, and the jury on them was split at that time. In any case, for Parsons, it is impossible to talk about action in terms that did not involve a means-end relationship, and this is the common conceptual framework in which all change and process in the action field is grasped (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 733). In this sense, one can say that the action frame of reference has an objective status, or, that it even had a sort of transcendental status for Parsons, because it is concerned with not empirical but rather, *a priori* conditions of knowledge. This was “phenomenological” for him, although Husserl, subsequent to his *Logical Investigations*, clearly advocated transcendental phenomenology in *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy (Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie)*. “Every actually or hypothetically concrete entity, described in terms of a frame of reference, must have properties. This is *one of the ultimate necessities of thinking about empirical reality, a phenomenological fact*. Within a given frame of reference there will be found to

be a limited number of these properties which, taken together, are adequate to the description of phenomenon in question” (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 749-750 emphasis added). General properties, phenomenologically and necessarily found through a specific frame of reference, that is, a kind of the “universal,” was what was termed the “analytical element.”

- 5 This coincides with Parsons’ criticism of Durkheim’s “sociological theory of knowledge (*théorie sociologique de la connaissance*).” According to Parsons, this sociological epistemology of Durkheim that results in the relativity of knowledge of each social type would, if it were self-applied, lead to the fallacy that the relativism itself is a product of a particular social type. This is a false doctrine that may be called “social solipsism” (Parsons, [1937] 1968: 447). It seemed that Parsons tried to keep away from concrete reality with analytical realism, because he would resolve this issue, similar to the aporia of relativism pointed out by Husserl, and build the universal foundation of science.
- 6 In this sense, Parsons’ realism seems to be a kind of “argument from miracles” that Hilary Putnam had once put forward. He had written, “realism is the only philosophy that doesn’t make the success of the science a *miracle*” (Putnam, [1975] 1985: 73).
- 7 The change from stratified differentiation to functional differentiation in the transition to modern society might have helped the growth of the perception of novelty as improvement rather than merely deviance. This is presumed to be partially one of the consequences of letterpress printing. What was until then orally circulated and diffuse knowledge began to be transcribed and published, and the printed books encouraged readers to improve the knowledge provided in them. Moreover, formerly texts would get increasingly corrupted through the process of repeated copying by hand. However, the spread of letterpress printing reduced errors and enabled editorial work, and the new books were presumed to be better than the old books. See Luhmann (1995b: 64-73).
- 8 The title of this book’s English version, translated by George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert and published by Northwestern University Press in 1967, is “The phenomenology of the social world.”
- 9 Weber’s *verstehende Soziologie* is generally translated as “interpretive sociology” in English, but it is not certain whether this translation correctly expresses Weber’s attempt or not. He intended with *verstehende Soziologie* not only to interpret the actor but also to causally explain the course and the result of the action. Understanding (*Verstehen*) was thus conceived as a rational method.

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