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The Societal Community:
Conceptual Foundations of a Key Action Theory Concept

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The Societal Community

Conceptual Foundations of a Key Action Theory Concept

(An outline of the main argument)

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The notion of Societal Community (Hereafter, SC) is a key focus of the theoretical work carried out by Talcott Parsons in his last decades of activity[1]. His analysis of the societal community is in fact a cornerstone both of his attempt to interpret adequately the structure of contemporary societies and of his interpretation of historical evolution. The SC, moreover, is crucial for his theory of social integration, the topic Parsons had identified as sociology's turf since *The Structure of Social Action*[2]. On a more biographical note, the recurring attempt to write a book dedicated to the *American Societal Community* can be interpreted as a way to vindicate in full his action theory. Such project, as it is documented in the surviving manuscripts, was clearly targeted to demonstrate that his abstract endeavors could produce a much more adequate analysis of contemporary societies than the more popular, and apparently 'empirical', critical and 'humanist' works. In sum, there are few doubts about the importance that the notion of SC has played in Talcott Parsons' work.

In two previous papers, I have documented how Talcott Parsons' analysis of the societal community has an enduring theoretical relevance. I argued that Parsons' analysis of the societal community may sustain and nurture an adequate theory of ethnic relations (Sciortino, 2004) as well as of social pluralism and cultural diversity in contemporary societies (Sciortino, 2005). Here, I would like to develop my analysis on a different level. I will claim here that a conceptual framework built on Parsons' notion of the societal community present a definitive advantage on rival theoretical offers to provide the conceptual framework needed by some key current debates. I will argue that the notion of the Societal Community has an enduring significance for two intrinsically theoretical reasons: first, it provides a *positive* argument for the existence of structural

[1] The history of such project is however still scarcely known (Lidz, 1989; Gerhardt, 2001) and only relatively few contributions in the secondary literature on Parsons pay an adequate attention to its relevance and novelty. Finally, only recently we witness attempts to develop such component of the Parsonian legacy in the way Parsons himself would have approved: increasing his analytical sharpness and testing its usefulness to understand crucial social phenomena (Lidz, 1989b; Habermas, 1990 [1998]; Alexander, 1998, 2001; Munch, 1999; Gerhardt, 2001; Bortolini, 2002).

[2] His later efforts to develop the notion of SC can also be seen as a way to synthesize – and in many cases to improve upon – the strands of empirical research Parsons had been pursuing since the late '30s on the significance of religious and ethnic pluralism, on the structural features of associational bodies, on the polarizing tendencies involved in

realities different from both hierarchies and markets; second, it provides a theoretical account that it is rooted on sound micro foundations at the social interaction level.

Parsons' framework, in other words, make possible to conceptualize a more complex set of structural forms and to justify analytically their number and differences. From the early '60s, Parsons was working in parallel to a theory of generalized media – the bridge between interaction and social systems – and to a theory of societal evolution. Not surprisingly, these two stream of theoretical works were much more intertwined than it is often recognized.

To achieve such result, I will first briefly review – in a very cursory way – the current state of some key debates both on social change and on contemporary societies. I will argue such debates suffer from the lack of an adequate micro foundation as well as from an enduring difficulty to break away from the legacy of political economy approaches (par. 1). I will subsequently reconstruct the conceptual evolution of the notion of Societal community in Parsons' work. I will show how during the '70s such notion has been revised and improved substantially, thus providing a sophisticated account of a differentiated set of structural forms (par. 2). I will subsequently locate such notion within the context of Parsons' theory of social evolution, that place such notion at the center of his analysis of modernity (par. 3). Finally, I will document how such notion relies on an important conceptual scheme of social interaction, escaping from the endemic resort to ad hoc explanations and residual categories.

1. **Some Problems with contemporary theories of societal change and social differentiation**.

It is difficult to deny that the last decades have witnessed a dramatic growth in the research on structural change. Nurtured both by disaffection with traditional sociological reasoning on the subject and by the dramatic political changes witnessed in the last decades, the issue of structural change has returned center stage. Historical sociology has become a burgeoning field, with a large number of important empirical works appearing every year. The dialogue with social historians has brought about a renewed interest for the historical details of modernization process. Many

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modernization processes (and the kind of mechanisms that can prevent the escalation of their destructive externalities)

sociologists have taken up again the task of analyzing comparatively large-scale social structures, looking both for unexpected continuities and for crucial discontinuities. Several major works – such as Michael Mann's *History of Social Power*, Abu Lughod's *Before European Hegemony*, Philip Gorski's *The Disciplinary Revolution* or Charles Tilly's *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992* - have become cornerstones for the whole discipline. There are few doubts about the fact that such relevance is well deserved. Beside its intrinsic value, the research on structural changes is also the hotbed for many interesting conceptual innovations. It is enough to mention the challenge to nation states-centered wiews of "societies" first developed by World System Analysis ( ) or the stress on the usefulness of network concept to explain critical changes brought about by the studies of contentious politics (Emirbayer, Goodwin, 1994).

Such research programs have greatly improved our understanding of the development of modern societies, as well as highlighted many factors of change previously neglected. Not to mention the sobering effects such corpus of scholarship has had on a discipline all too inclined to find "revolutions" around any corner.

The current wave of interest toward societal change, however, has taken place within an intellectual environment strongly marked by two features:

- a deep suspicion for any generalized theoretical effort, at least of the analytical type. Scholars, may be reacting to the clear-cut assumption of previous modernization theory, has been more than proud to question the need or feasibility of any generalized conceptual framework[3]. It has also been argued that the development of "historical", "empirical" concepts could well substitute analytically grounded concepts;
- a strong preference for the political economy tradition, with its emphasis on the relationships between markets and states as the major – some could say only – focus of long-term change. As Charles Tilly bluntly state, "the program begins by recognizing that

and about the scope and impacts of the educational revolution.

[3]. A good statement of such argument is by Mark Granovetter, (1979).

the development of capitalism and the formation of powerful, connected national states dominated all other social processes and shaped all social structures" (Tilly, 1984:15).

It is likely that such stances have been useful in the first developments of such research fields. The deep and sustained criticism of previous social change theories have been often well taken and a certain polemic energy has been necessary to establish the novelty of such approaches. I would argue, however, that such rooted presuppositions are today one of the main stumbling blocks in the development of adequate research programs both on structural change and on contemporary societies. The development of research, in other words, is putting more and more a strain on the weak conceptual framework employed. The existence of such a strain may be inferred, as Parsons stressed in 1937, by the growing weight of residual categories in such field of research. A few examples may suffice.

As far as historical sociology is concerned, both the growing sophistication of empirical research and the emphasis on comparative work has recently triggered the need to rely on a more precise concept of social action. However, given the lack of an analytical framework, it is not surprising that the current debate has basically reproduced the divide between sponsors of rational choice theory and scholars willing to confute such approach empirically rather than analytically[4]. The attack of utilitarian thinking has been thus contrasted mostly insisting upon the need for local, historically-bounded explanations. Little less than a century later, the stage seems to present again the old play of utilitarians *vs* institutionalists Parsons' work was meant to overcome. The legacy of instrumentalist thinking is equally visible in the tendency to stay away from issues of meaning stressing rather the organizational features of social structures. Here the problem is the lack of a sound microfoundation.

[4]. For a review of the debate, see Roger V. Gould, (2000) and the symposium "Historical Sociology and Rational Choice Theory", AJS, 104, 3, November 1998

As far as the analysis of contemporary societies is concerned, the weight of such widespread assumptions is even stronger[5]. Conceptually, it appear difficult to beyond the dichotomy of state *vs* market, even if such dichotomy is increasingly acknowledged as problematic. A good example of such difficulty may be found in a 1985 paper by Streeck and Schmitter, two of the leading figures of contemporary political economy (Streeck, Schmitter, 1985). The authors of the paper, presented as a charter for future research, stress the need to account for a wider set of differentiated structure. Beside states and markets, they argue, also communities and "associations" are to be included in the picture is the social order of contemporary societies is to be dealt with adequately. Their paper claims that all these four structural forms have their own logic, that cannot be reduced "in the last instance" to the others. The paper has often been prized for its innovative, oecumenical approach. Reading it carefully, however, it is easy to notice how the structural logic of the fourth realm, "associations", is argued strictly on historical grounds – making reference moreover only to Western developed countries – and restricted to associations representing interests in functional terms. In their paper, moreover, there is no attempt to provide a micro foundation for such different ordering structures.

A similar difficulty may be found in organization studies, a field where the dichotomy of market and bureaucracies has been felt problematic earlier than in other areas. It is consequently not surprising that many authors have stressed the need to include also other forms of social coordination, such as networks and "clans" (Ouchi, 1980). Even in the case of organization studies, however, these forms have been thought as being empirically, rather than analytically different from market and hierarchies, thus leaving unanswered the issue of their coordination. Such debate, moreover, appear to be confined within the collectivity level, lacking both micro foundations – why actors enter sometimes networks and some other markets? – and linkages to wider structural arenas.

[5] Under the impact of rational action theory, if any, states have been seen more and more as "markets", thus further reducing the variety and autonomy of structural forms.

In both cases, the micro foundation of such streams of research are largely implicit and strongly associated to the assumption of atomic actions interpreted in strictly instrumental terms.

The situation does not change much if we move to some major contemporary debates on the social life of contemporary developed societies. Let's think first about the large debate on civil society that has marked the last decade of the past millennium. Triggered by the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe with the collapse of the eastern bloc, there has been quite a revival of interest on civil society. Such debates, however, have quickly dissolved in quite sterile terminological conflict, as well as growing attempts to ground the theoretical stances mainly in normative terms. The few attempts to develop a consistent notion of civil society have been unable to provide a satisfactory conceptual framework thus resorting to a negative definition that see civil society as whatever is *neither* market *nor* state (Keane, 1988a; 1988b).

A similar criticism may be leveled to the contemporary debate on social capital. The popularity of this term and the associated debate show that times are ripe for a framework able to go beyond the dichotomy between markets and states. The social capital debate want to pay its due to the structural reality of interpersonal networks linked together by flows of influence and connections. Empirical research on social capital has also shown in quite a detailed way how the logic of such structures cannot be reduced to those of market and hierarchies and how their importance is far from negligible. However, even the debate on social capital has failed in providing a satisfactory micro foundation for its concept, to resorting to either negative conflation (whatever is not market nor hierarchy is social capital) or to many kinds of instrumental thinking.

In short, even such a cursory review document how a satisfactory account of contemporary societies, as well as an adequate framework for the study of social change, require a more critical and sophisticated conceptual work. In many field of social research, there is a growing need to returning to an analytical approach and to focus in a more systematic way on the pre-requisites for a viable structural analysis. Such conceptual framework should be able to explain

in positive the differences between various coordination mechanisms operating in social systems, describe the structural forms produced by the process of societal differentiation and provide a systematic micro foundations of such approaches – a view of social interaction that allow for the variety of such coordination mechanisms as well as for the direction taken by the social differentiation processes. In the following paragraph, I will argue that Parsons' conceptual framework may provide many useful materials precisely for the development of such framework.

2. A brief history of the concept of societal community in Parsons' work.

Parsons has always stressed the importance of focusing on the integrative structures of social systems. He identified early social integration as the key topic for his discipline as well as expressing many times his lack of satisfaction for the available theories, that he deemed unsatisfactory (Parsons, 1942a). According to Parsons, contemporary theories of social integration failed to distinguish adequately among analytically different issues – i.e., among integration and loyalty – and were rooted in a simplified vision of social life. What Parsons was looking for was instead a complex theory of social integration, able to define societal integration as a second-order problem, as a co-ordination of several kinds of co-ordination structures, all of them embedding specific strains and all of them producing significant externalities. Particularly – as he spelled out in detail in his rethinking Durkheim's categories (Parsons, 1960) – societies have to manage the co-ordination of mechanical solidarity, that defines the units of the system as equally included, and organic solidarity, that defines the same units in terms of their differentiated identities. Parsons stressed how, in differentiated society, mechanical solidarity is rooted in the institutions of citizenship (that applies equally to all included individuals), while organic solidarity is expressed most clearly in the institution of the contract, that formalize the unity of differentiated interests and roles. An adequate theory of social integration had to focus on how the solidary structures produced along such dimensions could be made compatible and regulated. Parsons, moreover, felt that such a theory could not rely on a single factor to whom entrust, at least "in the last instance" such a task:

the integrative outcomes of different structural logic needed a theory able to explain how they were combined and regulated. As Parsons rightly stresses in most of his works, social integration requires economic resources, cultural values and political decisions, but they cannot produce it.

A similar concern is to be found in his treatment of the generalized media, particularly as it concerns influence (Parsons, 1963a; 1963b; 1969; 1979a). The ability to identify and develop the idea of a specific generalized medium anchored in the integrative system was considered by Parsons quite important both for explaining the linkage between integrative processes and structures (and between integration and loyalty as two separate but connected problems) and for linking – as analytically independent, empirically interpenetrating - such integrative system with the other societal structures. As we will see later, the analysis of influence as a generalized medium will stay at the core of Parsons subsequent research, even if the outcomes are both fascinating and unsatisfactory (Lidz, 1989b; Gould, 2001).

The first major presentation of the label of "societal community" can be found in Parsons's 1966 book on the theory of social evolution. Having defined the core of a society in terms of "a patterned normative order through which the life of a population is collectively organized", Parsons felt the need to add a second dimension, the societal community, defined as a collectivity displaying "a patterned conception of membership which distinguishes between those individuals who do and do not belong". Further down in the same page, he added a second condition for the existence of such kind of collectivity: "it must maintain the integrity of a common cultural orientation, broadly (through not necessarily uniformly or unanimously), shared by its membership, as the basis of its societal identity" (Parsons, 1966a:10). He also stressed, however, that such collectivity was a plural and differentiated one[1]. Already in such early formulation, we find that the notion of SC has to be elaborated in two directions. First, the relationship between the normative order and the structural organization of such collectivity has to be defined in a way that allows for variance and changes. Second, the relationship between the SC collectivity and the various sub-collectivities existing

within it has to be explored in a way that allow a conceptually adequate treatment of a system of social solidarities.

The subsequent treatments of the SC notion shows how Parsons was conscious of such conceptual constraints and willing to enlarge and clarify the notion on both counts. As matter of fact, from 1966 on, we record a growing tendency both to include in the notion of SC an increasing variety of relationship among solidary structures and to search for an adequate framework for the analysis of its normative definition and regulation. In 1969, he feels the need to specify that the

> "Comparable structural focus of the societal community is the normative system, as embodied above all in law, but extending well beyond that. Such a community must, however, also have an underpinning which directly articulates with the motivational orientations of individuals. It is this underpinning which is the focus of the sociological conception of solidarity" [moreover, although all collectivities are primarily "political" in function, they are grounded in the] "solidarities of various kinds and levels of associational "communities" which, with their institutionally normative "definition of the situation", functions in ways which are at least to a considerable degree independent of collective decision-making and enforcement mechanism" (Parsons, 1969:3)

In the same book, he observes how his previous treatment of influence as a generalized medium failed to address adequately

> "the relation of the influence mechanism to the functioning of plural systems of interpenetrating solidary groupings, as distinguished from its operation within a single such collective system […] Influence, like other media, should be conceived as *transferable* from one solidary grouping to another […] Here the unit, individual or collective, with common membership acts as a 'node' through which influence may flow from one group to other " (Parsons, 1969:431, 434).

The system of solidarities is identified as the mediating variable between the normative system and the motivational orientations of individuals[2]. From one side, such normative system must be compatible with the functioning of a differentiated set of solidary structures. From the other, such structures must be able to command the loyalty of their members in ways compatible with the loyalty to the system they are part of (Mayhew, 1971; Baum, 1975). It is in its relation to such structural pluralism – to what Parsons calls the 'extent of the market' for influence – that Parsons identify a main area for integration research (Parsons, 1969).

A further layer of meaning is added in 1970, with Parsons reflecting on the meaning of the SC within the context of the analysis of equality and inequality in modern society.

> "Diffuse solidarities constitute the structure of modern 'communities'. It is important to our general argument to be clear that there is no one community in a sociologically relevant sense, but that a modern society is a very complex composite of differentiated and articulating – sometimes conflicting – units of community. This is one of the two primary respects in which such societies are 'pluralistic'. […] Even at the level of the societal community as a whole there are major variation, e.g. as to the degrees to which people have transnational affiliations, on the basis of kinship, occupation or other grounds. […] The other primary respect in which modern societies are pluralistic has to do with the functionally specific roles of which occupation is prototypical" (Parsons, 1977 [1970]:333)

Such description pays full attention to the existence, within the system of solidarities, both of vertical inequalities and horizontal differences. This implies again a second-order integration problem: in the mechanical solidarity dimension, there are strains related to the existence of a plurality of collective identities, with differences in what is assumed to descend from the membership in such categories and with the management of the complex of expectations attached to such memberships. In the organic solidarity dimension, there are strains over the allocation of resources among competing ends as well as with the externalities among the different clusters of differentiated interactions. Such complexity is further elaborated in his subsequent book on *The System of Modern Societies*. Here Parsons stresses quite openly how the societal community is:

> "A complex of collective loyalty networks and interpenetrating collectivities, a system where units are characterized *both by functional differentiation and segmentation*. Thus, kinship-household units, business firms, churches, governmental units, educational collectivities, and the like will be differentiated from each other. Moreover, *there will be a plurality of each type* of collective unit […] The normative system that regulates such loyalties must integrate the rights and obligations of the various collectivities as well as the legitimation basis of the overall order" (Parsons, 1971a:27, italics added)

There is room to argue that Parsons, even in its most complacent phases, was far from taking for granted that such complexity could be managed easily. On the contrary, he identified in such configuration a strong potential for conflict and strains:

> "The salient foci of tension and conflict, and thus of creative innovation, in the current situation does not seem to be mainly economic in the sense of nineteenth-century controversy over capitalism and socialism, nor do they seem political in the sense of the

> "Justice" of the distribution of power, though both these conflict are present. A cultural focus, especially in the wake of the educational revolution, is nearer the mark. The strong indication are, however, that the storm center is the societal community […] The most acute problems will presumably be in two areas. First is the development of the cultural system as such in relation to society […] Second is the problem of the motivational bases of social solidarity within a large-scale and extensive society that has grown to be highly pluralistic in structure […] Neither set of problems will be 'solved' without a great deal of conflict" (Parsons, 1971a:121, 141)

Developments of such analyses bring Parsons to question further the existence of a difference in kind between the SC and a variety of other solidary forms. In his study of *The American University* (Parsons, Platt, 1973) and particularly in his essay on ethnicity (Parsons, 1975), he define the SC – together with kinship, religious and educational-cultural associations – as a form of fiduciary association entrusted with a responsibility for the maintenance and development of a tradition (Parsons, 1975:61). The SC, as the other fiduciary forms, is characterized by a dual reference to ascriptive and contractual elements.

> "A diffusely defined collectivity which has the property of solidarity and is a major reference point for the identity of its members [… it has] two primary aspects: first that of a common distinctive cultural tradition applying to a 'population' of members; and, second, something of the equivalent of a social contract, that is, a component of membership status which is in some essential respect voluntary" (Parsons, 1975:58)

Through all these passages, Parsons has established connection between his notion of the SC and a large number of issues. The SC has become a keyword under which Parsons has clustered many societal features that had been at the center of his intellectual interests: the relationship between ascribed and achieved roles and orientations, between specific and diffuse forms of solidary relationships, the deep transformations – and yet continuity - of cultural traditions, the emerging of collegial forms of co-ordination, the social basis of the liberal order, the role of normative elements in shaping both individual action and the integration of the social system. The task of working out systematically the connections among these phenomena is definitely large. At the same time, moreover, the varieties of such references are such that any single presentation of the

notion of SC available in Parsons' texts does not convey the whole range of meaning and research problems Parsons identified with it.

It is then not surprising that Parsons developed during the '70s the ambitious project of writing a full-fledged study of the *American Societal Community,* cashing also upon his previous attempts to write a book on American society (Lidz, 1989). In the surviving manuscript, Parsons show how class, ethnicity and religion – as well as local and regional residence – can all provide basis for structurally significant solidary groupings. With considerable anticipation over other streams of social theory, he places quality-based solidary networks on an equal footing with class-based actors as significant actors in the modern social scene (Parsons, 1979a, chapters 6-8). The manuscript presents also quite an effort to describe carefully the internal differentiation of the normative order, as pertaining to such system of solidarity. Partly refining the argument developed earlier (Parsons, 1977 [1970]), he sees such normative system as developing along the two conceptual pairs of Freedom *vs*. constraints and equality *vs*. inequality. He proceeds on this ground to further elaborate the charting of the basic components of such normative system[3]. The result is a strong combination of liberal and progressive normative elements matched with a fully pluralistic vision of membership in contemporary society. The manuscript pays a great deal of attention to the structural pluralism of the societal community. Such pluralism is described in emancipatory terms, as an introduction of important degrees of freedom in reference to the cultural tradition and as a form of mastery over the fiduciary complex (Parsons, 1979a, Chapter 5). Accordingly, the reference to a cultural tradition, that have characterized Parsons description of the SC since its seminal 1966 analysis, are qualified postulating the existence – side by side with the three components of the citizenship complex identified by T. H. Marshall, of a cultural component, concerning precisely the mode of solidarity to be institutionalized in the SC. Talking about the U.S., Parsons writes that

> "I have suggested that [the cultural component of citizenship] stood at the level of values, precisely the values special to the societal community, under the more general pattern of instrumental activism, and which define the conditions of the mode of solidarity which should be institutionalized in the societal community. This is, I suggest,

> none other than the pattern of institutionalized individualism which has been outlined above" (Parsons, 1979a, chap. 4, p. 21)

The relationship between the SC and its cultural tradition is consequently based on transformation rather than reproduction.

3. **The Societal Community as an evolutionary achievement**.

In the previous paragraph it has been documented how the Parsonian notion of SC has been revised and qualified in order to provide a satisfactory account of the SC as a the integrative subsystem of structurally pluralist societies. This is hardly surprising. Although it is rarely acknowledged, Talcott Parsons is a major theorist of contemporary societal pluralism (Sciortino, 1994). For most of his career – as it is documented in dozens of essays – he has searched a satisfactory conceptual framework to analyze social pluralism in differentiated societies (Parsons, 1961; 1968c).

In his approach, the fact that modern societies are characterized by a plurality of solidary structures is not an historical accident but rather a functional necessity. Parsons, moreover, stresses how such pluralism is produced both by the increase in organic solidarity and by variation across segmental ones (Parsons, 1968c; 1975). There is a well-known pluralism born out of economic and political interests and subcultures. But there is also a pluralism born out of religious diversity, ethnic histories and intellectual specialization[4].

Parsons' essays on pluralism are among the best examples of his anti-nostalgic glance and of his sustained criticism of pseudo-*Gemeinshaft* delusions (Holton, Turner, 1986). For sure, his assessment of contemporary pluralism can be sharply distinguished both from the nostalgic vision of conservative thought and from the Jeremiads of critical theory. Where others see the breakdown of a common cultural tradition in a fragmented set of niche tastes, Parsons stress the development of a sophisticated normative order, able to distinguish the requirement for common membership from conformity pressures exercised by any particularistic tradition. Where others identify in the existence of segmental loyalties a danger for the unity of the "national" societal community,

Parsons stresses how such networks - once embedded in universalistic individual rights - are a source of strength and flexibility of democratic society. Where others lament the "end of the common good", Parsons identify the highly institutional premises of the "freedom from ascription and from compulsory allegiance" (Parsons, 1979a:11). Where other see the eventual corruption of the moral order, Parsons see the emergence of a pluralist societal community existing in relation with, but analytically independent from, economic control, political power and cultural imposition (Parsons, 1971a; 1971c; Mayhew, 1990).

It is within this evaluative context that Parsons develops his theory of the evolution of human societies. Such strand of Parsons' work may be criticized on several grounds. The role attributed to the increase in adaptive capacity as an evolutionary master trend is fairly problematical (Granovetter, 1979). His choice to develop the evolutionary model starting from the most 'developed' unit, according to what Parsons calls the principle of 'the special significance of the most highly developed case' (Parsons, 1979b:53), can also be rightly criticized (Bortolini, 2002). There is consequently ground to question the adequacy of such analysis as a general evolutionary theory (Luhmann, 1984). The same, however, does not apply to such strand of theory if we interpret it as an analysis of the transformation of the integrative spheres, as an attempt to address systematically the structural consequences of the detachment of ascriptive categories from a normatively prescribed hierarchy of higher and lower statuses as well as the breaking of normatively sanctioned connections between membership in diffuse categories and social capacities in other roles. The lasting achievement of Parsons' evolutionary work may well turn up to be his inquiry on the – highly unlikely – structural precondition for the institutionalization of an inclusive "single societal community with full citizenship for all" (Parsons, 1965:740), able to sustain and nurture a fully pluralistic large-scale system of social solidarities.

Social inclusion is not considered by Parsons as a "natural trend of history"[5]. It is triggered, not caused, by differentiation. At any step, societies face very different alternatives. A hierarchical right or a political difference among groups may be re-established. Fundamentalist reactions may

repress the very structural basis of such challenge. Even if differentiation alters the structure of ascriptive loyalties, the outcome may still vary from subordinate incorporation to structural polarization (Parsons, 1968; 1971). The specific solution of "a single societal community with equal citizenship for all" becomes conceivable - let alone feasible – only in very special cases and after a long series of conflicts (Parsons, 1965:740). The assumption by a society of the normative goal of the elimination of "*any* category defined as inferior in itself" (Parsons, 1965:739, i.o.) is a highly unlikely occurrence. To explain how such a goal, although largely unaccomplished, has become embedded in the normative project of modern societies is precisely the target of most of Parsons' evolutionary analysis. Parsons' evolutionary books, in other words, may be read more along the lines of Weber's attempt to understand the pre-condition for the rise of capitalism in Western Europe than as an aspiration to replicate Spencer's ambitions.

Although the notion of SC development is sometimes presented by Parsons as matter of changing the normative definition of societal membership (sustained and protected mostly by juridical means and welfare states provisions), his analysis document that such reformulation of the societal and juridical definition of membership is only a part of the story. As we have already seen in the previous paragraph, Parsons defines modernization as a set of "inclusive *and* pluralizing" forces (Parsons, 1968b:367, italics added). The normative re-definition of membership has to be matched by a structural change in the constellation of social solidarities[6]. Pluralism is not only the structural outcome of the cumulative processes of inclusion. It is also a key element both for further inclusion and for societal resistance to polarizing strains (Parsons, 1968b; 1971a)[7].

In isolation, each of these processes would fail to trigger the development Parsons is defining. The re-definition of membership, without a structural change in the societal configuration, would end up producing only expectational strains and a polarizing backlash inspired by fears of a debasement of the value of membership (Parsons, 1945a; 1965). On the other hand, the increase in societal heterogeneity – that has characterized many city-states and empires of the past – may be easily managed within a stable ascriptive hierarchy of higher and lower. The highly unlikely

success of modern SC is to be found in the institutionalization *at the same time* of social pluralism and democratic individualism.

The modern SC Parsons has identified is both a generalized normative systems - where all actors are linked by common rules and are legitimized, no matter how different their specific identities, by a common membership – and a pluralist structure of social solidarities. It requires a restructuring of the juridical bases of social membership – the citizenship complex – as well as the establishment of institutional procedures and organization focused on the interpretation and adjudication of social conflicts pertaining to the consequences of such common membership. In other words, it requires the detachment of the public sphere both from ascription-based allocation processes and from particularistic cultural traditions. The definition of membership in a modern pluralist society, according to Parsons, is characterized by the fact that the duties of the public sphere are not identified with the "protection" of particular cultural traditions or with the collective rights of any collectivity over its members. It is rather the protection of the pluralism of social collectivities – a kind of societal "anti-trust legislation", so to speak – as well as the right of the individual to choose his/her solidary networks. As Parsons himself writes:

> "The institutionalization of pluralism with reference to criteria, which are clearly ascriptive, requires norms with a double reference. One is the refusal to lend special "public" legitimation to any one among the plural units. (…) On the other hand, unless pluralization is to be prevented by suppression, as is approximately the case with organized religion in some communist countries, there must also be, as in our case with religion, protection of the "free exercise thereof". This combination may be called the "privatization" of a pattern of solidarity, in which either the individual is protected in the activities of the subgroups of his choice or, where the ascriptive element remains, he and the others of his group are protected from discrimination because of membership in it – the case just mentioned of the irrelevance of the subgroup membership of other contexts" (Parsons, 1979:11).

A generalized normative order does allow societal pluralism to develop. At the same time, it is such pluralism that stabilize such normative order, as the differences among categories and groups impedes the success of fundamentalist reaction trying to re-couple norms with the specifics of subgroups. Societal pluralism, in other words, plays a selective role in the evolution of normative

systems. When coupled with common membership, moreover, societal pluralism has also a much more important integrative function. From an action theory perspective, the main integrative problem for a complex social system is not social conflict, but rather social polarization (Parsons, 1942a; 1964; 1968b). Any social system has to avoid a breakdown in the structural interdependencies as well as in the motivational basis of the members (Parsons, 1971a). We know also that Parsons identifies polarizing tendencies in the development of all social systems. In many strands of Parsons' work we find elements for seeing social pluralism as a strong counter-force for such polarizing tendencies. Embedded in a generalized SC, Parsons argues, social pluralism will imply multiple memberships spanning across each cleavage. Far from being an atomized mass of lonely individuals, Parsons and White argue that in such pluralist society "an increasingly ramified network of criss-crossing solidarities has been developing" (Parsons, White 1969 [1960]:251). Multiple memberships are the best check for polarizing tendencies even in condition of heavy strain:

> "the very looseness of the relation between structural solidarities other than the political party and the party structure itself can be said to constitute an important protection against the divisive potentialities of cleavage. The essential fact is that the most important groupings in the society will contain considerable proportions of adherents of both groups [parties]. (…) The pressures of political cleavages – by activating ties of solidarity at the more differentiated structural levels that cut across the line of cleavage – tends automatically to bring countervailing forces into play" (Parsons, 1959:223-4).

4. **The interactional based of societal differentiation**.

When the ink of the books published in 1951 was still fresh, Talcott Parsons had already started a complex revision of its conceptual scheme, in order to make it more relational and to incorporate the existence and autonomy of other actors directly into the basic categories of action. Such effort has produced several important results, many of them still unrecognized. Such achievements provide a consistent and systematic conceptual microfoundation for the notion of societal community, both as a feature of contemporary society and as an evolutionary achievement.

A starting point of my argument is the paper on social interaction Parsons published in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (Parsons, 1968). In a few dense pages, Parsons starts

stressing how social interaction has always by definition an a variety of references. As Parsons himself write,

> "The crucial reference points for analysing interaction are two: (1) that each actor is *both* acting agent and object of orientation *both* to himself and to the others; (2) that, as acting agent, he orients to himself and to others and, as object, has meaning to himself and to others, in *all* of the primary modes or aspects. The actor is knower and object of cognition, utilizer of instrumental means and himself a means, emotionally attached to others and an object of attachment, evaluator and object of evaluation, interpreter of symbols and himself a symbol" (Parsons, 1968:436)

Social interaction is consequently a double contingency process. Interaction is contingent upon both Ego's selections and Alter's reaction to them. Action is consequently contingent upon Ego's ability to anticipate Alter's possible reactions to his selections. If Ego did not know anything about Alter's possible reactions, the only selective criteria would be a merely statistical one. It would imply the loss of the subjective dimension of action. The existence of a relatively shared structure of expectation is consequently not only a constraint on Ego: it is also a pre-condition for the subjective meaning of Ego's action. The implication of such stance are twofold. First, in order to treat adequately the issue of social order it is necessary to avoid to define it purely as a problem of coordination in instrumental terms: as a matter of fact, coordination of action and coordination of meaning are part and parcel of the same issue. Hobbes' problem – why social life is a war of all against all, "solitary, brutish and short" – is intertwined with Machbeth's problem – why social life is not, in most cases, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"[6].

Second, Parsons claims that such interaction may be stable only if it may rely on a *shared basis of normative order*. At first glance, this may appear just as a formulation of an argument advanced by Parsons along all his life. To support this argument, Parsons has to answer to questions. First, it is necessary to understand why stable social interaction require a shared culture. Second, to prove that such shared culture should have a normative quality. As far as the first issue, it is wise to state that Parsons does not deny the existence of interactions taking place without such shared culture. He stresses, rather, that only a shared culture may free the interaction from a strict dependency on face-to-face meaning and stage props, amplify the number of objects interaction may process and entrust each actor with a grammar of motives that allow both expression of their motives and understanding of Alter' reactions. Such cultural order, however, needs also to be normative. Even with a shared culture, the number of options open even in the simplest double contingency interaction would be too large. If the meaning of action is given by the availability of a selective criteria socially understandable and able to take into account the anticipation of Alter's

6. I take the term "Machbeth's problem" from J. Elser….

reaction, it is necessary that – given N actors with S strategies each – Ego has to take into account S^n alternatives. 5 actors with 3 alternatives each produce 243 possible alternatives to compare. 5 actors with 4 alternatives each produce 1024 alternatives to compare. Even the simplest social interaction – in its own facticity – would be far beyond the computational possibilities of the human mind. A subjectively meaningful interaction requires contextual features able to sharply reduce the number of alternatives. This may be done structurally through differentiation, both segmental and functional. The first reduces the number of actors, the second the number of significant alternatives. Differentiation, however, requires also certain degree of socially enforced correspondence between actors and situations. Ego and Alter must know which notion of the *desiderable* (not necessarily of the *desidered*) is appropriate to the specific context, and also they have to define the situation in similar ways. The complexity of interaction must consequently be stabilized by a distinction between cognitive and normative expectations[7]. Such distinction is moreover crucial to maintain the stability of expectation in the face of uncertainty and failure. If every failed expectation should be abandoned, the complexity of interaction would return to unmanageable level quite soon. Normative order, on the contrary, allow to distinguish between unsatisfactory outcomes and interactional failure.

Why the scheme of double contingency interaction should be relevant for the understanding of Parsons' notion of the Societal community? The answer is in the interactional requirements of the common normative structures. Such normative culture requires continuous repair through interpretation. As ethnomethodology has taught us, interactional processes are not "informed" mechanically by normative culture. And such repairs cannot be operated only on the basis of compulsory force or offer of inducements. Such interpretative works, moreover, cannot be pursued in strictly interactional terms. If all the information and rhetorical arguments necessary to persuade Alter would be interaction specific, the level of flexibility of the social order would be quite limited. A sophisticated social order needs the possibility to circulate interpretations as well as resources. And it needs an institutional order able to distinguish between interpretations entrusted with varying degrees of possible interactional success.

Read in this context, Parsons analysis of the interaction media acquires a crucial role. We know that Parsons' analysis on influence in his 1963 papers has been fairly rudimentary. Parsons himself, in his 1969 postscript, admitted to be unsatisfied with the state of the art (Parsons, 1969). Nor such situation changed in the subsequenty years. In his Japanese interview with Tominaga in 1978, Parsons admitted again that his formulation of the structure of the influence medium was still not adequate to the task. And even in the manuscript on *The American Societal Community*, he is

7. Such distinction has been fully elaborated by Niklas Luhmann. I believe however it is fully consistent with the logic

far from having worked out a consistent revision of the previous work on the issue. There is consequently quite a bit of work to be done. For the purpose of the present paper, however, I would like to stress that the general outline of the analysis of communication media is able to present some definitive advantages for our problems[8].

As it will be remembered, Parsons defines the 4 communication media operating in social interaction through the cross-cutting of two distinction relating to the ways with which Ego can attempt to get results from Alter. The first is whether Ego operates through the manipulation of the situation where Alter acts or through the manipulation of Alter's intentions (the channel variable). The second is the distinction of the kind of sanction Ego relies on, negative or positive - from the point of view of Alter – (the sanction variable). The result is a four-fould structure of means of 'getting things done' in interaction, that *may* subsequently develop into generalized media[9]:

		Channel	
		Situation	Intentional
Sanction	Positive	Inducement	Persuasion
	Negative	Deterrence	Activation of committment

As Parsons repeats often, at the level of interaction such means are fairly concrete. They are "tools", available in the interaction and specific to the relationships between Ego and Alter(s). Under specific – and evolutionary improbable – structural conditions, however, such resources may get varying degrees of fluidity, becoming usable in a variety of context, including interaction with actors void of a previous history of successful interaction. Parsons defines such institutional preconditions in terms of the value symbolized by such media, the possibility of defining actors'interests in having or cashing such resource, a definition of the situation (when such resource may be used and within which limits) and a normative framework distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate uses. The more such institutional conditions are accepted and developed, the more interaction-specific resource may be used in a generalized way, they may circulate among an open

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of Parsons' framework.

8. On the other side, it should also be acknowledged that Parsone had a fairly clear view of the problems to be dealt with. In his 1978 interview with Tominaga, as example, he stresses that "there are four primary generalized media in the social system and money is the only one that can be ordered on a linear continuity. I think power can be ordered as an ordinal series and a basic conception of prevailing over is the key to that. […] Well, then we come to influence, as I'd been working with that concept. I do not think it is even an ordinal series. I think it needs a lot more clarification but it's a more complex mode of ordinal which has both a hierarchical dimension and qualitative variants". It is enough to compare such self-critical assessment with the careless analogies adopted in the social capital debate or in Bourdiean sociology to understand the peculiarity of Parsons' position.

9. Such interactional definition of the general mechanisms of social interaction has been first formulated – to my knowledge – in Parsons' paper on power (1963). It has been reformulated in various ways in the subsequent years, with frequent terminological changes. The general logic, however, has remained remarkably stable. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen the formulation of Parsons' 1963 paper on influence.

number of interaction chains (Parsons, 1963). Through their own working, their inflation or deflation, media will mediate among different systemic references (Parsons, 1970).

I would like to argue that such framework is not only useful for a multidimensional understanding of social interaction and for a non reductionist view of social structures. The analysis of the channel and sanction available in interaction do provide indeed also the cornerstone for an interactional foundation for the notion of the societal community both as a feature of contemporary social systems and as an evolutionary achievement. As we have seen, according to Parsons' argument the societal community is a specific structural form, dependent from inputs of economic resources, political power and cultural definitions but not reducible to it. Its connections with generalized media shows it is rooted in a key functional pre-requisite of both interactional and structural stability (normative interpretation and management of the system of solidarities). Whenever in a structured social system there are ongoing activities of normative interpretation there we be specific forms of coordination based on influence. In other words, it is an analytical dimension of any social system, not an historically-bounded definition.

At the same time, the development of such integrative structures in a *differentiated* societal community may be seen as a key issue for evolutionary theory. As I have argued, such development is not less extraordinary than the advent of markets or states. Its differentiation from the matrix of ascriptive expectation, according to Parsons, is an independent dimension of social evolution, an achievement of modernity in its own right. Consequently, the 'social' sphere, beyond market and hierarchies, is not a simple residual category where all the phenomena that do not fit in the dichotomy may be placed. Nor it can be treated only as a surviving rest of a communitarian past and as a set of endangered traditions, as many – like Habermas – would assume. As a structural dimension of societies, it is a complex development that follows a specific logic and it is rooted in specific interactional dynamics of the social system. The scheme of double contingency interaction may help here to see such process as a issue of structural pre-conditions for the fluidity of influence as a regulating media. A pluralist social order needs some fluidity in the working of influence in the regulation of interpretative issues. The more complex the structure of the social system, the more frequent and sophisticated needs to be the activities of normative regulation through interpretation[10]. Social interaction in a pluralist setting is more complex and uncertain, thus exercising a pressure – once the ascriptive matrix has broken down – for more generalized and shared arguments to interpret divergencies and to settle disputes. At the same time, as we have seen, such pluralist order is also the condition for cross-cutting solidarities, a main channel for the circulation of a generalized

[10]. As Parsons stressed in his paper on social evolution, the democratic association – the best embodiment of an association regulated by influence more than by any other thing – may be considered an evolutionary universal, as it allows for quite a degree of structural flexibility and diversity (Parsons, 1962).

influence. Not to mention the fact that the increase in the available knowledge and the complexity and sheer mass of information requires from contemporary citizen much more trust in specific actors in order to select and assess available information. Life in contemporary societies does in fact require more, rather than less, influence than in previous social formations. And such influence has to circulate through an overlapping set of networks linking together a pluralist system of collectivities and identities[11]. Parsons' analysis of the societal community is consequently embedded in his more general research on action theory.

As we have seen in previous paragraphs, both Parsons' theory of social evolution and his treatment of social solidarities have been criticized on many grounds. It has been argued, however, that his framework has the enduring advantage of placing at its centre the differentiation of a pluralist set of social relationships, linked by segmentary and functional relationships, kept together not only by domination and exchange but also by cross-cutting ties of solidarity and persuasion. Such features, moreover, are not the result of wishful thinking or political correctness. They are necessary consequences of the development of a full-fledged analytical framework for sociological analysis. No matter how many critical we may be on Parsons' achievements, his work stand still as the best example of the factual usefulness for sociological research of a sustained and specialized theoretical effort supported by a system of concept analytically defined.

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[11] As Parsons himself writes, "the quantitative dimension of influence should be defined by the scope of the interpenetrating channels within which influence can be exercised on the one hand and from which it can be drawn on the other […] He who has the highest prestige among a set is who can exert his influence in the widest range of different collective subsystems" (Parsons, 1969:437).

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1. The SC "is constituted both as a normative system or order *and* by statuses, rights and obligations pertaining to membership which may vary for different sub-groups within the community" and "the societal collectivity can act effectively as a unit when required, and so can various of its sub-collectivities" (Parsons, 1966a:10, italics in the original).

2. See the definition of solidarity adopted later in Parsons, Platt (1973, 83-85). In other sections of his work, such role is apparently entrusted to the 'political' subsystem.

3. To my knowledge, the first of such attempt may be found in the technical appendix to Parsons (1977 [1970], 370).

4. At a certain point, Parsons even suggest that contemporary society may be characterized also by a noticeable degree of ethical pluralism (Parsons, 1968c).

5. For a contrary opinion,see Lyman (1972:169)

[6]. There is also the need to develop further the very same notion of law in this respect. In Parsons analyses of the SC, the model he has in mind is clearly the *common law* one. It would be interesting to understand how such model can account for the European 'continental' juridical tradition.

7 . Parsons has developed such idea also in a quite interesting correspondence with Eric Voegelin during WWII. A main topic of their correspondence were the reasons why some European countries had been more able than other to resist the "totalitarian solution" to the rise of anxiety and free-floating aggression. Already in such early texts, Parsons focuses on the history of previous inclusions as a key variable for such research. The correspondence may be consulted in the Harvard Archives, HUG (FP) 42.62 box 6.