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**Talcott Parsons, American Society. A Theory of the Societal Community**, edited and introduced by G. Sciortino. Foreword by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007, 524 pp.

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## Book reviews

**Talcott Parsons, *American Society. A Theory of the Societal Community*, edited and introduced by G. Sciortino. Foreword by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007, 524 pp.**

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At last, Talcott Parsons's great book on America has seen the light. A 500-page *tour de force*, *American Society* contains everything Parsonian in a single package: intricate theoretical schemes, optimistic descriptions of the US, difficult prose, and very little sense of humor. Thanks to a scrupulous and dedicated editor, the Italian sociologist Giuseppe Sciortino, a book that in its manuscript form has been read, dissected, and cited by some of the most dedicated students of Parsons's work (Victor Lidz, Uta Gerhardt and Javier Treviño, among others) is now available to the wider public. While the name of the author and the length of the book might stop some potential readers, Sciortino's *Introduction* gives us at least one very good reason to read *American Society* cover to cover: as a whole, Parsons's book proposes a yet-to-be-surpassed theory of social solidarity that succeeds in recognizing "the specific features of solidarity networks and influence-based interactions on an equal analytical footing with market and hierarchies, as an intrinsic dimension of social life" [p. 15]. Needless to say, Parsons's attempt was far from being perfect or definitive, but it surely has many theoretical and methodological resources to offer to contemporary theorists and researchers – starting from his under-rated and fascinating theory of the societal media of interchange.

The manuscript has been organized in ten long chapters that go from the presentation of a late version of Parsons's fourfold scheme to intricate discussions of social class, ethnicity, kinship, religion, lifestyles, politics, and individualism. From the point of view of the history of sociology and the sociology of ideas *American Society* truly is a goldmine. To begin with, the book shows how Parsons wrote with specific facts and individuals in mind. As Randall Collins wrote, writing is like staging a play in one's head, and here the good guys and the villains are quite clear. While the New Left critics are obvious foes, Robert Bellah is one less predictable target of Parsons's "aggrieved indignation." As Jeffrey Alexander underlines in his *Foreword*, Parsons had grown unsatisfied with Bellah's interpretations of American society: *Civil Religion in America*, published in 1967, had won his unconditional approval but Bellah's 1975 book, *The Broken Covenant*, had been a huge delusion. He thought the book was plainly one-sided in its dark tone and in its interpretation of the history of American society. It could even be said that *American Society* is, in some way, an answer to Bellah's critique of America. But the strains were deeper than that, and in *American Society* Parsons was going to critique Bellah's collectivist interpretation of early Puritanism, which he saw much more rooted in an individualistic view of man and his personal relationship to God. From this point of view, *American Society* could be read as a crucial document for reconstructing the intellectual climate and the shifting alliances within American sociology in the 1970s.

That said, it seems to me that the most interesting lesson one could learn from Parsons's interpretation of the structure and history of American society is twofold: first,

societal change and social change never come out of the blue, but have deep roots in history and in the previous structure of society; second, societal change and social change never happen abruptly, but slowly and painfully. These might seem trivial observations, but they are not. One of Parsons's major concerns was explaining that history never jumps from a societal configuration to another, and that new structures and symbols always bear the imprint of the past. Some of his less known published essays from the late 1960s and early 1970s criticize the "expressive revolution," and the New Left alike, exactly for this reason: their claims to change society as if existing structures, ideas, values, inequalities, and power relations were wholly and instantly amendable. Sure, Parsons was not able to foresee many of the great changes of the late 1970s and early 1980s, but one could venture to say that Ronald Reagan (as Nixon before him) was a clear embodiment of the backlash of a society that had been pushed too far – in sheer sociological terms – on the road of change. In this sense, Parsons was much more "realistic" and less "idealistic" than his materialistic opponents.

This is not to deny that some of Parsons's comments about America are evidently overstated and optimistic, and that excessive theoretical intricacies mud many of his analyses – again and again the discussion of some specific feature of American society gives rise to long and complex abstract reasoning. As the undefatigable Sciortino writes in his *Introduction, American Society* is quintessential Parsons, a book "that provides the reader with a great exemplar of Parsons at his best, both in its conceptual strength and in its weaknesses" [p. 15]. Nowhere are Parsons's limits clearer than in chapter three, which is dedicated to a brief history of the US that many will find sketchy and wanting. On the other hand, chapter ten is a fascinating discussion of individualism that is worth the price of the book. Since Parsons's sociology is, after all, an attempt at explaining the sociological viability of an individualistic society, his discussion of the intricacies of the sociological concept of "the individual" and his reflections on the relationship between the various theoretical levels involved in constituting an empirical human individual are particularly fascinating. Moreover, the whole chapter on "institutionalized individualism" could be used as a primer for the many sociologists who are at pains with mastering the necessary abstraction needed to understand social and societal processes. Maybe Parsons went too far in elaborating his analytical scheme, but much of today's sociologists do not even recognize the need of having one.

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