

# “Taking the Biscuit” and the Sociological Theories of Elias, Parsons, and Bourdieu

*“I searched my soul, and discovered that there was nothing anywhere in my upbringing,  
experience, or even primal instincts to tell me how to react ...”*

– Douglas Adams<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This paper has the following structure. First, a micro-scene from daily life is analysed according to the theoretical models of Talcott Parsons and of Pierre Bourdieu. Subsequently, the sociological theories of these two authors, and a third, Norbert Elias, are précied and assessed for their strengths and weaknesses.

## Micro-scene: Taking the Biscuit

The following micro-scene has been asserted<sup>2</sup> by the British author Douglas Adams to be a true occurrence which he incorporated into a novel, and as having happened to him

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Adams, ‘So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish’, *The Ultimate Hitchhiker’s Guide* (New York: Wings Books, 1996), pp.548-549

<sup>2</sup>See Peter van der Linden, *The AFU & Urban Legends Archive*, available at:

<[http://www.urbanlegends.com/misc/stolen\\_cookie\\_douglas\\_adams.html](http://www.urbanlegends.com/misc/stolen_cookie_douglas_adams.html)>, posted: November 29<sup>th</sup> 1993, retrieved: December 10<sup>th</sup> 2003; and Gregg Pearlman, *An interview with Douglas Adams*, EEEEEEE!: A newsletter by and for annoyed San Francisco Giants fans, available at: <<http://www.eeeeeegp.com/NotGiants/Projects/Adams.html>>, conducted: March 27<sup>th</sup> 1987, Last updated: July 15<sup>th</sup> 1996, retrieved: December 10<sup>th</sup> 2003

during the summer of 1976 at Cambridge train station, England. The scenario is narrated here through the voice of the fictional protagonist, Arthur Dent, as it appears in *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*<sup>3</sup>, a satirical science fiction work written by late novelist, who would have been 24 years old at the time of the alleged incident. It was originally told by him on British radio in 1978<sup>4</sup>, and appears also in the posthumously compiled collection of his unpublished writings, *The Salmon of Doubt*<sup>5</sup>.

Numerous variations on this theme have been encountered internationally, involving other foodstuffs which include – Polo mints, Jaffa Cakes, (in the United States: Oreos), a Kit Kat or other generic chocolate bar (in New Zealand: a Moro Bar<sup>6</sup>), a sandwich; and variations on location have included other public eating areas (mall, service station (rest stop), cafeteria, restaurant) as well as settings involving public transportation: the Clapham omnibus, a train compartment and a car ferry.

The following extract is abridged for concision. Digressions from the substance of the incident, all interjections from the auditor (expressions of surprise, clarifying interjections and prompts) and variations upon “he said”, have been omitted. “Biscuits” in

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<sup>3</sup> Adams, (1996)

<sup>4</sup> Gregg Pearlman, (1987), available at: <<http://www.eeeeeegp.com/NotGiants/Projects/Adams.html>>

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Adams, *The Salmon of Doubt: Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003)

<sup>6</sup> Barbara and David P. Mikkelson, ‘The Stolen Biscuits’, *Urban Legends Reference Pages*, available at: <<http://www.snopes.com/crime/safety/cookies.htm>>, last updated: February 9<sup>th</sup> 1999, retrieved: December 10<sup>th</sup> 2003

British English corresponds to “cookies” in American English:

“I arrived at the station ... I was about twenty minutes early. ... So I bought a newspaper, to do the crossword, and went to the buffet to get a cup of coffee. ...

I am also ... buying some biscuits. ... Rich Tea. ... I like them. Laden with all these new possessions, I go and sit at a table. ... It was probably round. ...

So let me give you the layout. Me sitting at the table. On my left the newspaper. On my right the cup of coffee. In the middle of the table, the packet of biscuits. ... What you don't see, ... because I haven't mentioned him yet, is the guy sitting at the table already. He is sitting there opposite me. ...

Perfectly ordinary. Briefcase. Business suit. He doesn't look ... as if he was about to do anything weird. ... He leaned across the table, picked up the packet of biscuits, tore it open, took one out and ... ate it. ...

Well, in the circumstances I did what any red-blooded Englishman would do. I was compelled ... to ignore it. ... Well, it's not the sort of thing you're trained for, is it? I searched my soul, and discovered that there was nothing anywhere in my upbringing, experience, or even primal instincts to tell me how to react to someone who has quite simply, calmly, sitting right there in front of me, stolen one of my biscuits. ...

I stared furiously at the crossword ... couldn't do a single clue, took a sip of coffee, it was too hot to drink, so there was nothing for it. I braced myself. I took a biscuit, trying very hard not to notice ... that the packet was already mysteriously open ... I ate the biscuit. I ate it very deliberately and visibly, so that he would have no doubt as to what it was I was doing. When I eat a biscuit, ... it stays eaten. ...

[He] Took another one. Honestly, ... this is exactly what happened. He took another biscuit, he ate it. Clear as daylight. ... And the problem was, ... that having not said anything the *first* time, it was somehow even more difficult to broach the subject the second time around. What do you say? 'Excuse me ... I couldn't help noticing, er ... ' Doesn't work. No, I ignored it with, if anything, even more vigour than previously. ...

Stared at the crossword again, still couldn't budge a bit of it, so showing some of the spirit that Henry V did on St. Crispin's Day ... I went into the breach again. I took ... another biscuit. And for an instant our eyes met. ... Just for an instant. And we both looked away. But I am here to tell you ... that there was a little electricity in the air. There was a little tension building up over the table. At about this time. ...

We went through the whole packet like this. Him, me, him, me ... Well, it was only eight biscuits, but it seemed like a lifetime of biscuits we were getting through at this point. Gladiators could hardly have had a tougher time. ...

So. When the empty packet was lying dead between us the man at last got up, having done his worst, and left. I heaved a sigh of relief, of course.

As it happened, my train was announced a moment or two later, so I finished my coffee, stood up, picked up the newspaper, and underneath the newspaper ... Were *my* biscuits.

True.”<sup>7</sup>

## “Taking the Biscuit”: a Parsonian interpretation

Examining this situation through the lens of Talcott Parsons' sociological theory, I shall assume that he would probably assess it as a demonstration of the strength of the norm of assiduously avoiding overt conflict and confrontation wherever possible for the sake of social stability. The norm is that for people of the class background of Douglas Adams (a former Cambridge resident and graduate) and for a businessman in the setting of the home

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<sup>7</sup> Adams, 'So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish', (1996), chapter 20, pp.547-550

counties in England, one must “avoid making a scene” in public, particularly not over trifling matters such as biscuits. Underlying this norm is a value: it is understood that never should one resort to physical violence to settle a dispute.

The idiom and social imperative to “avoid making a scene” – generally refraining from unseemly behaviour that might draw attention to oneself – can cover a multitude of role expectation discrepancies to serve the higher purpose of maintaining decorum. In this instance the norm would appear to override a contradictory institutionalised value: what Parsons might describe as a fundamental Western social value of property rights regarding personal possessions. Here, we see a situation in which both people consider an object in the physical world to belong to them. The value of the right to dispose of one’s own personal property as one sees fit is violated ostensibly on the one hand and unwittingly on the other – and the shock engendered by such a deviance is palpable: “Honestly, ... this is exactly what happened. He took another biscuit, he ate it. Clear as daylight”<sup>8</sup>.

However, despite conflict-dampening norms, the sanctity of property rights cannot be forsaken entirely and each participant does continue to assert their claim to what each considers rightfully theirs, albeit within the normative bounds of their roles as buffet

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<sup>8</sup> ib., p.549

customers and as members of the economically productive southern middle-class.

From the informant's presentation of his responses, it is possible to infer that both the value of upholding property rights as well as the norm of not making a scene have been internalised by the informant. He claims of his actions that respectively, "showing some of the spirit that Henry V did on St. Crispin's Day ... I went into the breach again. I took ... another biscuit"; and, "I did what any red-blooded Englishman would do. I was compelled ... to ignore it"<sup>9</sup>. The informant speaks with some pride of his conformity to both expected responses such that it is not unreasonable to argue that his super-ego has been socialised via the sub-systems of integration and pattern-maintenance to achieve gratification in alignment with functional modes of behaviour.

Overall, the vicissitudes of this scene would tend to concur at the micro-level with Parsons' general proposition that "social systems show a *tendency* to maintain their structural patterns"<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *ib.*, p.548

<sup>10</sup> Talcott Parsons, 'An Outline of the Social System', *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*, ed. Talcott Parsons, E. Shils, K. Naegle, J. Pitts (New York: Free Press, 1965), p.39

## “Taking the Biscuit”: a Bourdieu-based interpretation

Bourdieu’s sociological theory would arguably prompt us to interpret this interaction as supplying evidence for the versatility of the habitus. Whilst the informant claims with some validity that he “discovered that there was nothing anywhere in my upbringing, experience, or even primal instincts to tell me how to react to someone who has quite simply, calmly, sitting right there in front of me, stolen one of my biscuits”<sup>11</sup>, his adept participation in this game would seem to belie such an assertion.

The authorial participant cannot at first believe that a subversion of the very rules of property is coming from a besuited and thereby enfranchised figure of an established field – the business field. The dissonance between this experience and the habitus which informs his expectations triggers a displacement reaction whereby he “stared furiously at the crossword”<sup>12</sup> and then attempts complicitly to blind himself by adopting an imaginary relation to the real conditions of the already opened packet of biscuits.

Despite being avowedly “not the sort of thing you’re trained for”<sup>13</sup> the informant’s habitus precludes the possibility of a direct confrontation with the man wearing a suit and

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<sup>11</sup> Adams, (1996), pp.548-549

<sup>12</sup> *ib.*, p.549

<sup>13</sup> *ib.*, p.548

enables the informant to transpose instead, a strategy of redefining the frame of reference, in this case by asserting the primacy of a categorical principle of ownership. His first biscuit is eaten ostentatiously: “I ate it very deliberately and visibly, so that he would have no doubt as to what it was I was doing. When I eat a biscuit, ... it stays eaten”<sup>14</sup>. It is by flagrantly stating his terms of engagement and the nature of the field that the participant hopes to assert the legitimacy of his behaviour in a manner not inconsistent with the elastic rules of the game.

This player very soon improvises a set of workable parameters within which to behave – his well-adjusted habitus rendering a physical response unthinkable – and within two exchanges, the rules of this game have been provisionally defined. The informant explains that already by the third biscuit, it has become clear that a verbal move is inconsistent with his intuitive *sens du jeu*: “having not said anything the *first* time, it was somehow even more difficult to broach the subject the second time around. What do you say? ‘Excuse me ... I couldn’t help noticing, er ... ’ Doesn’t work”<sup>15</sup>. Instead, their habituses predispose both players to dominate the field by employing strategies of competitiveness and brinkmanship.

By furnishing an ability to participate in the game, the individual’s habitus

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<sup>14</sup> *ib.*, p.549

<sup>15</sup> *ib.*

constitutes the field as a meaningful one in which he is a stakeholder contesting valuable interests. In this micro-scene there is absolutely no link between the problem as perceived by the participant from his status position within the field, and the actual objective relations in the distribution of resources; nonetheless, this struggle comes to appear to him – to use Bourdieu’s words – as one “in which it is worth investing one’s energy”<sup>16</sup>.

The categories of perception by which the informant interprets the social world are derived from the schemata of the established order of consumerism, and ensure the reproduction of the ethic of fetishised commodity exchange, of individual possession and consumption. The validation and identification sought by the participant rests upon the glorification of possession: “I am also ... buying some biscuits. ... Rich Tea. ... I like them. Laden with all these new possessions, I go and sit at a table”<sup>17</sup>. Being unable to countenance a representation outside the doxa of ownership, the biscuit scenario is profoundly threatening to the structure of the informant’s symbolic system.

The informant can neither decode the crossword he willingly purchases nor the semiotics structuring his objective situation. The predicament of the analyst is also problematic. In this exercise, by disproportionately intellectualising – as a series of discrete

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<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), p.127

<sup>17</sup> Adams, (1996), p.548

exchanges – what was concretely experienced as but a brief and rapidly escalating segment of life, and by doing so from the assumed vantage point of some academic distance, I would elicit a caution from Bourdieu. My own biases in focussing upon this micro-scene act as a palimpsest of filters consisting not merely of distortion deriving of those social coordinates that manifest a middle class preoccupation with propriety and property, but also distortion residing in the inscribed disposition which would incline me towards selecting such an episode. As a student of the humanities, I have doubtless been predisposed to favour a micro-scene which plays to and derives its narrative piquancy not merely from the self-ascribed English identity of ironic self-depreciation, but also from a sublimated fear of the allegedly dehumanising corporate field. My participation in this analysis is thus structured by the very schemata which I claim to render visible.

### Exposition: Norbert Elias' Civilising Process

Norbert Elias presents an historicised account of the development of manners which generates much broader conclusions about the manner in which society affects our affects. In his conception, societies develop from those which the recurrent “we” might think of as

barbaric<sup>18</sup> or childlike<sup>19</sup>, to those which we consider “civilised”. For Elias, the term civilisation describes various human attitudes and activities which are underpinned by “the self-consciousness of the West”<sup>20</sup>.

Elias observes from his philological studies of German and French cultural texts from roughly the thirteenth century onwards<sup>21</sup> that as people grow to live in closer proximity<sup>22</sup> and societies become more interdependent<sup>23</sup>, there is a trend towards greater “delicacy of feeling”<sup>24</sup> and restraint of one’s instinctual urges. The calibration of this self-control is determined by the nature of the social structure itself, such that as the inequalities in society are reduced, the category of persons in whose company one must exercise restraint becomes universalised: “First it becomes a distasteful offense to show oneself exposed in any way before those of higher or equal rank; with inferiors it can even be a sign of benevolence. Then, as all become socially more equal, it slowly becomes a general offense”<sup>25</sup>.

This civilising process is enforced by means of social sanctions, and by rewards for those whose manners correspond to the vogue of the power holders’ milieu. These social

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<sup>18</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), p.xi

<sup>19</sup> Elias, (1978), p.xiii

<sup>20</sup> *ib.*, p.3

<sup>21</sup> *ib.*, p.266

<sup>22</sup> *ib.*, p.164

<sup>23</sup> *ib.*, p.138

<sup>24</sup> *ib.*, p.115

<sup>25</sup> *ib.*, p.139

prohibitions and ordinances – and the consequences associated with them – become internalised to such a degree that for the socialised adult in civilised society, “Pleasure promising drives and pleasure denying taboos and prohibitions, socially generated feelings of shame and repugnance, come to battle within him”<sup>26</sup>. The exact stimuli for these conditioned responses are “molded according to the social structure”<sup>27</sup> and “imprinted in this form on the child”<sup>28</sup> such that the personality structure is transformed<sup>29</sup> and “takes on the form of a more or less total and automatic self-restraint”<sup>30</sup>.

The degree to which this control is exercised unconsciously is elaborated by Elias with reference to Freud:

the social code of conduct so imprints itself in one form or another on the human being that it becomes a constituent element in his individual self. And this element, the superego, like the personality structure of the individual as a whole, necessarily changes constantly with the social code of behaviour and the structure of society.<sup>31</sup>

This civilising process which, with the advance of civilisation, initially creates a split between an individual’s modes of behaving in public and their behaviour in private, comes – through the operation of sociogenetic shame – to turn into a set of unconscious habits so

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<sup>26</sup> ib., p.190

<sup>27</sup> ib., p.138

<sup>28</sup> ib., p.139

<sup>29</sup> ib., p.190

<sup>30</sup> ib., p.139

<sup>31</sup> ib., p.190

internalised “that we cannot resist them even when alone, in the intimate sphere”<sup>32</sup>.

This advance in the frontiers of shame and the threshold of repugnance<sup>33</sup> is initiated by a small elite in the examples offered by Elias, but he warns against deriving from this that the elites are the agents of change. Comparing the diffusion of successively more civilised behaviours from this nucleus to the wider society as akin to the process of crystallisation in a liquid subjected to conditions of chemical change, Elias writes that “Nothing would be more erroneous than to take the core of crystallization for the cause of the transformation”<sup>34</sup>.

Instead, social change towards more civilised societies is prompted, according to Elias’ interpretation, “not by the development of technology or by scientific discoveries,”<sup>35</sup> but by general transformations of human relations. He describes the process as follows:

After a reshaping of human needs had once been set in motion with the general transformation of human relations, the development of a technical apparatus corresponding to the changed standard consolidated the changed habits to an extraordinary degree. This apparatus served both the constant reproduction of the standard and its dissemination.<sup>36</sup>

One would not therefore be able to claim that it was the emergence of plumbing and sewer systems which changed attitudes towards the performance in public of bodily functions, but

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<sup>32</sup> ib.

<sup>33</sup> ib., p.139

<sup>34</sup> ib., p.116

<sup>35</sup> ib., p.139

<sup>36</sup> ib., p140

rather than it was the need – within a given social structure – to displace the instinctual to “behind the scenes”<sup>37</sup> which prompted the profusion of a technology which would come to promote its own ethos.

Elias’ conception of the process of “civilisation” does not see “rational understanding” as the motor of development, but neither is the social control that is imposed a completely arbitrary one. In his preface to *The Civilising Process*, he writes “We feel that we have got ourselves, through civilisation, into certain entanglements unknown to less civilised peoples; but we also know that these less civilised peoples are for their part often plagued by difficulties and fears from which we no longer suffer”<sup>38</sup>. Elias is aware that the exploitation of differentiated restraint and mannered affectation can serve as a “justification”<sup>39</sup>, shoring up the legitimacy of domination in hierarchical society, and not least in the colonial context. Certainly, he would not claim that there underlies these changes any “demonstrable understanding of particular causal connections”<sup>40</sup> that could warrant an interpretation of enlightened stewardship. Yet he is prepared to brook that the expansion of the threshold for embarrassment may be connected “at some points”<sup>41</sup> with what are, for

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<sup>37</sup> ib., p.139

<sup>38</sup> ib., p.xvii

<sup>39</sup> ib., p.50

<sup>40</sup> ib., p.115

<sup>41</sup> ib., p.116

example, “at first, rationally inexplicable experiences of the way in which certain diseases are passed on or, more precisely, with indefinite and therefore rationally undefined fears and anxieties which point vaguely in the direction subsequently confirmed by clear understanding”<sup>42</sup>.

### Norbert Elias: Evaluation

In extending Elias’ model for the development of mannered behaviour and language to encompass a theory of the internalisation of social structures onto all social behaviour, we risk overlooking fundamental differences between pragmatically adapting in the face of sanctions to the mores of a society, and a conscientious striving towards an abstracted conception of the ethical Right as conceived from a particular socio-historical standpoint. Moral orientations are influenced by social structure. But they also appeal to some universal validity in their claims which motivates individuals to act beyond the remit of what is socially rewarded, in a way that blowing one’s nose cannot.

The question of individual agency is left somewhat unanswered by Elias’ theory. In

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<sup>42</sup> ib.

the court setting at least, individuals are adopting and abiding by the codes that will be socially rewarded in specific encounters, but with historic and social development and via socialisation the “choice” becomes a force of habit via the pressure of sanctions until it is effectively unconscious. I would argue that Elias overstates his claims when he goes so far as to insist that “we cannot resist them even when alone, in the intimate sphere”<sup>43</sup>. The space for an ironic self-awareness of one’s conditioning is diminished by this assertion to a degree inconsistent with the individual capacity for reflexivity about one’s socialised reflexes.

Elias provides a workable model for the development and spread of behavioural and linguistic mannerisms that integrates sanctions at the micro-level – “If a man snorts like a seal when he eats, as some people do, and smacks his chops like a Bavarian yokel, he has given up all good breeding”<sup>44</sup> – with the operation of a macro-system of social control. Yet in my assessment, Elias’ model is more robust at the micro-level than at the macro-level.

When Elias writes of changes in standards being triggered by “the general transformation of human relations”<sup>45</sup>, he means such aspects as a greater density in living conditions, a greater societal interdependence, and a move towards equality of ascribed

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<sup>43</sup> ib., p.190

<sup>44</sup> ib., p.64

<sup>45</sup> ib., p.140

status. It is unclear, however, what causal factors are available to explain these macro-shifts since Elias ascribes sociogenetic and psychogenetic bases to technological developments<sup>46</sup>. He writes that the process of social change “cannot be explained by any one thing”<sup>47</sup>, and although an economic explanation of historical development is not the answer, it would surely be more pertinent in a broader historical context, than the rise of the nation state is for the specific era he examines. As such, although Elias’ model could be illuminating in describing some patterns of behaviour in micro-situations, particularly in societies with an aspirational structure historically grounded in a strong class-consciousness, it is less helpful in explaining the underlying causes of the macro-trends it identifies.

### Exposition: Talcott Parsons’ Macro-functionalism

Talcott Parsons’ macro-functionalism essentially describes a social system as an organism which through institutional mechanisms is able to sustain itself. The overarching goal or outcome of this system is stability and self-sufficiency. This presupposition considers the last two centuries of Judeo-Christian civilisation as fundamentally stable, and thus, the

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<sup>46</sup> ib.

<sup>47</sup> ib., p.139

question for Parsons, is “How is it that this order is maintained?”.

Parson’s answer revolves around four functions: pattern-maintenance, integration, goal-attainment and adaptation<sup>48</sup>. They are listed here in order of the significance Parsons accords to their contribution to the cybernetic control of social action and thus the social system; and it is the first two (pattern-maintenance and integration) which Parsons delineates as the proper remit of the discipline of sociology. Goal-attainment is designated as a function handled by the intra-social environment of polity, and adaptation by the sub-system of economy<sup>49</sup>.

It is pattern-maintenance and integration which operate to define and maintain the values of the Parsonian social system model. Values arise from the interpenetration<sup>50</sup> of these two functions and for Parsons, “The basic concept for the integration and interpenetration of the two is *institutionalisation*”<sup>51</sup>. Thus, institutionally inculcated values act to stabilise society by virtue of the gratification – both psychological and institutional – which they confer upon individuals whose action conforms to their predicates: “A stable system of interaction, therefore, orients its participants in terms of mutual expectations ... they share criteria of

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<sup>48</sup> Parsons, (1965), p.38

<sup>49</sup> Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966), p.29

<sup>50</sup> Parsons, (1965), p.34

<sup>51</sup> *ib.*

behaviour, so that there are common standards of evaluation for particular acts”<sup>52</sup>.

A note here, on terminology. For Parsons, once a society reaches a stage whereby it has a differentiation of roles – involving complimentary contributions by different units of the society to its functioning<sup>53</sup> – it becomes necessary to distinguish between values (“which are shared by the members over and above their particular roles”<sup>54</sup>) and norms (which apply to “define rights and obligations applicable to one role but not to the other ... or, in more complex systems ... various collectivities”<sup>55</sup>).

On a separate point of terminology, Parsons states that the “primary focus”<sup>56</sup> of his model is upon social systems as opposed to cultural systems. This is true in as much as that he is considering social action, action which consists of – or assumes – an interaction with other “actual human individuals who constitute concrete collectivities with determinate membership”<sup>57</sup>. However, given that his model does rely on the normative influence of values and norms, his definition of what a cultural-system focus would entail – centring on ““patterns” of meaning, e.g., of values, of norms, of organised knowledge and beliefs, of

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<sup>52</sup> ib., p.42

<sup>53</sup> ib.

<sup>54</sup> ib.

<sup>55</sup> ib.

<sup>56</sup> ib., p.34

<sup>57</sup> ib.

expressive “form”<sup>58</sup> – must be taken to mean that he himself will place less emphasis on the “how” of the cultural transmission of pattern-maintenance (the domain, he suggests, of socio-cultural anthropology<sup>59</sup>), and concentrate instead upon the effects of pattern-maintenance on the individual. This volatile distinction allows Parsons to ascribe the function of pattern-maintenance to the sub-system of “Maintenance of Institutionalized Cultural Practices”<sup>60</sup>; conversely, the function of integration is determined by him to be carried out by the societal community.

As a result of the functions of pattern-maintenance and integration, behaviour which conforms to the values of the social system is rewarded. Parsons spends some time adapting Freud’s psychoanalytical framework and incorporating it into his model so as to elaborate upon his claim that “the ego is “socially structured”<sup>61</sup>; and that for an individual to be well-integrated into the social system means for them to have been socialised in such a way that they will be gratifying the dictates of their superego by acting out social values.

Individual agency then, would be said to be low in the Parsonian model. Roles created by institutions define the norms along which social action will tend to stabilise, and

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<sup>58</sup> ib.

<sup>59</sup> ib., p.33

<sup>60</sup> Parsons, (1966), p.29

<sup>61</sup> Talcott Parsons, ‘Social Structure and the Development of Personality: Freud’s Contribution to the Integration of Psychology and Sociology’, *Personality and Social Systems*, ed. Neil Smelser, William T. Smelser (New York: John Wiley, 1963), p.68

the overall goal of a self-sufficient and functional society is maintained. Parsons goes further to institutionalise the manner in which individuality and creativity are constructed:

Hence, as the source of his principal facilities of action and of his principal rewards and deprivations, the concrete social system exercises a powerful control over the action of any concrete, adult individual. However, the *patterning* of the motivational system in terms of which he faces this situation also depends upon the social system, because his own personality *structure* has been shaped through the internalization of systems of social objects and of the patterns of institutionalized culture ... individuality and creativity are, to a considerable extent, phenomena of the institutionalization of expectations.<sup>62</sup>

Societal change in Parsons can and does occur, yet conflict is not the primary mechanism by which it is realised. Parsons writes of “orderliness in the process of change”<sup>63</sup> and describes how when changes in values do occur, and when “strain”<sup>64</sup> arises, the pattern-maintenance function offers “tension-management”<sup>65</sup> through cultural forms, and provides a form of systemic “inertia” such that “because of this set of functional exigencies, social systems show a *tendency* to maintain their structural patterns”<sup>66</sup>. Change can be triggered exogenously from environmental factors, it can result from natural processes of growth in the society, and from technical and cultural innovation. Parsons regards

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<sup>62</sup> Parsons, (1965), p.38

<sup>63</sup> ib.

<sup>64</sup> ib., p.39

<sup>65</sup> ib.

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“differentiation”<sup>67</sup> as the most common mode of societal change, one whereby old roles are no longer suitable for the innovative techniques and technologies which arise. The strain of this discrepancy results in the creation of new bundles of roles and prompts a response of “value generalisation” whereby new equilibria are achieved.

As a society evolves from diffuse roles to require a greater role specificity, there is of necessity, a corresponding adjustment of the value patterns: “its value pattern must be couched at a higher level of *generality* in order to legitimize the wider variety of goals and functions of its sub-units”<sup>68</sup>. Thus, Parsons notes, there occurs a shift from particularism to universalism in the conception of subjectivity, from role ascription to the attainment of roles by achievement, and from the affective performance of roles to the value neutral ethic of professionalism.

Fundamental societal value change can and has been brought about internally – “evolved from within”<sup>69</sup> – by “alterations in the definition of the meaning of the life of the individual in society and of the character of the society itself”<sup>70</sup>. For Parsons, when this occurs (which he relates to what Weber would call “charismatic innovation”<sup>71</sup>), he posits that, “The

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<sup>67</sup> Parsons, (1966), p.24

<sup>68</sup> *ib.*, p.23

<sup>69</sup> Parsons, (1965), p.78

<sup>70</sup> *ib.*

<sup>71</sup> *ib.*

focus of the change must be in the cultural system's religious aspects"<sup>72</sup>. Individuals contesting the "*kind of society* considered desirable"<sup>73</sup> present a special case for Parsons: "The special role of the charismatic personality may involve problems specific to personality theory and not reducible either to sociological or cultural terms"<sup>74</sup>.

Severe conflict can result from groups who internalise commitment to the particularism of the former value pattern. Parsons explains: "To the fundamentalist, the demand for greater generality in evaluative standards appears to be a demand to abandon the "real" commitments"<sup>75</sup>. Should a given social system fail to develop independently an innovation which its competitive rivals have attained, then – failing its co-option of the adaptive capacity – it may be physically overwhelmed, undergo a "loss of societal identity"<sup>76</sup> through disintegration, be subsumed (retaining only cultural remnants), or it may continue to maintain its structure in an insulated niche.

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<sup>72</sup> ib.

<sup>73</sup> ib.

<sup>74</sup> ib.

<sup>75</sup> Parsons, (1966), p.23

<sup>76</sup> ib., p.24

## Talcott Parsons: Evaluation

Talcott Parsons' social systems model provides a comprehensive and workable overview of society at the macro-level. Furthermore, it furnishes a conceptual framework, enabling us to make predicative claims regarding the relationship between society's functioning, and individual motivations. However, it is precisely this strong link in Parsons' model between the well-being of society as a whole and the socialised norms of the individual which also generates, I argue, some of its greatest weaknesses as a model. Worse still, there are fundamental uncertainties raised by some of its axiomatic assumptions.

The assumption that society is structured in such a way as to ensure that it will function and sustain itself, seems hopeful, even wishful thinking. Where Parsons has set out the value patterns which must be prioritised for a society to remain competitive in the context of his Darwinian frame of reference, I find it unconvincing to attribute real agency to institutional complexes for building the consensus behind such value shifts. Further down the chain, there is not necessarily a logical link between the most fruitful course of action for a society as recognised by institutions and the successful direction of individual actions towards attainment of such a development. I claim this on the basis that neither is the process

of socialisation a guarantor of inculcated values, nor are institutional incentives universally persuasive. Given that all social systems to be analysed have realistically yet to reach an ideal state of value generalisation, Parsons' model ought in its application to encounter transition periods in which contradictory institutionalised norms are divisive rather than normative, or whereby values may not be negotiable but their applicability to a given situation is open to question by disputing how the situation is defined. His model accounts for neither ambivalence nor ambiguity in these contexts.

It is noted that as a result of their socialised internalisation of values and roles, individuals have a low level of agency in Parsons' macro-functionalism. Pointedly, this is not raised as a theoretical weakness so much as a comment upon its exiguity as a practical *weltanschauung*. Distinct from whether or not this constitutes an accurate portrayal, it is germane to observe that by taking this view Parsons damages some of the human dignity that can be attributed to social action within a more generous conception of the autonomous will.

With his assumption that society is built around shared values, the central one being to function well as a unit, as well as his preoccupation with the question of how society continues to avoid breaking apart, Parsons presents a profoundly US-centric model. Nonetheless, despite its weaknesses, I would maintain that this remains a bold,

comprehensive and internally consistent theory with its greatest strengths at the macro-level.

## Exposition: Pierre Bourdieu's Reflexive Sociology

In Pierre Bourdieu's sociological thought, the objective and subjective worlds cannot be disentangled: "Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents"<sup>77</sup>. What he proposes is a method, the aim of which is to "uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe, as well as the 'mechanisms' which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation"<sup>78</sup>. Whilst for Bourdieu, the distribution of socially efficient resources in and through objective structures serves to define the external constraints of interactions and representations, it is only by also understanding how people explain their actions and perceive of their options, that we are able to account internally for the motivation of social behaviour<sup>79</sup>, and thereby to found a complete model.

Although the premise is that material conditions yield systems of classification

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<sup>77</sup> Bourdieu, (1992), p.127

<sup>78</sup> *ib.*, p.7

<sup>79</sup> *ib.*, p.11

which provide the symbolic templates<sup>80</sup> for the perceptual enactment of social agents, significantly, the correspondence between objective structures and an individual's habitus is not direct. People internalise the social structure and its analytical schemata "particularly into dominant and dominated in the various fields"<sup>81</sup> – but what is reproduced is not an exact copy.

Where Parsons spoke of the pattern-maintenance function acting as an inertial force with regard to the processes of change, in Bourdieu's model, the patterned inertia<sup>82</sup> comes from individuals assuming and accepting that the arbitrary terms of the social structure must necessarily be as they are, simply because long-term immersion in their environment has attuned each person to the order. In such a way, the symbolic systems act as instruments of domination<sup>83</sup>:

The conservation of the social order is decisively reinforced by ... the orchestration of categories of perception of the social world which, being adjusted to the division of the established order (and, therefore, to the interests of those who dominate it) and common to all minds structured in accordance with those structures, impose themselves with all appearances of objective necessity.<sup>84</sup>

Where Parsons has institutionalised functions integrated as part of a whole,

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<sup>80</sup> ib., p.7

<sup>81</sup> ib., p.12

<sup>82</sup> ib., p.13

<sup>83</sup> ib.

<sup>84</sup> ib.

Bourdieu envisions intersecting but increasingly self-regulating<sup>85</sup> fields of power wherein relatively negotiable and contested principles determine the authority hierarchy within them<sup>86</sup>. The values which arise as a result of the conflict within each field are not intentionally directed towards sustaining a social system. Rather they are produced incidentally by the interplay of competing participants each aiming to define the nature and limits of the field in so far as their status position within it allows<sup>87</sup>. Thus Bourdieu can argue, “It is the *structure* of the game, and not a simple effect of mechanical *aggregation*, which is at the basis of the transcendence”<sup>88</sup>.

Symbolic systems are therefore not only instruments of domination, but also the sites of struggles to reconfigure them according to partisan interests. Systems of classification are “at every moment produced by, and at stake in, the power relations between classes”<sup>89</sup>. Conflict characterises the objective world in this neo-Marxist model, where participants vie to change the boundary definitions within each field. Yet given that the subjective actors each perceive the problems and their interests differently, change is multidirectional and does not even necessarily imply any relation to actual deficiencies in the

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<sup>85</sup> ib., p.52

<sup>86</sup> ib., p.17

<sup>87</sup> ib.

<sup>88</sup> ib.

<sup>89</sup> ib., p.14

objective world.

Where, in practice, considerable stability does result, it is because this game is played by participants who are socialised into a “habitus”. As the strategy-generating principle, this is an extensible “system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences ... makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks”<sup>90</sup>. Partially improvised, and yet deriving its form from the social structures and historical context during which it coalesced, habitus is also at base, the “propensity and the ability to get into and to play the game”<sup>91</sup> and as such, it “contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy”<sup>92</sup>. Neither conscious nor taught, the habitus provides an intuitive sense of what the game is<sup>93</sup>, when an uncertain quotient of its rules are in flux and every other player has only a subjective interpretation of its parameters. The habitus can act as a conservative force because it prognosticates upon the limits of the possible as conceived from within the field coordinates of a given level of cultural and economic capital. Yet Bourdieu does allow that education, and contact with other fields, can provoke the kind of reflexivity necessary to

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<sup>90</sup> ib., p.18

<sup>91</sup> ib., p.19

<sup>92</sup> ib., p.127

<sup>93</sup> ib., p.223: “sens du jeu”. Alternatively, “a feel for the game”

modify<sup>94</sup> this.

On the question of individual agency, Bourdieu subverts the terms of discussion. The idea of agency misunderstands the effects and the demands of power as role, and of power as desired commodity. To acquire power in a symbolic hierarchy involves a submission to the dominating principles of a field. If one's habitus pre-disposes one to "play the game" to varying degrees of engagement, then in-game "agency" is a false category since it fails to acknowledge that the will-to-agency is the catalyst of its own undoing. Conversely, those dominated not only "always contribute to their own domination", but furthermore, "*the dispositions which incline them to this complicity are also the effect, embodied, of domination*"<sup>95</sup>. One's socialised habitus can promote docile acquiescence to being dominated in one field, or stimulate a participant to prize dominating in another.

Part of the methodological content of Bourdieu's approach derives from its emphasis on compensating for the biases of the researcher: biases deriving from the sociologist's locus in society and in the academic field, as well as a more general intellectualist bias, which would tend to approach the world as spectacle for analytical interpretation, rather than as a succession of concrete experiences urgently demanding

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<sup>94</sup> ib., p.133

<sup>95</sup> ib., p.24

practical responses<sup>96</sup> from within a resource set limited by cultural and economic capital. To break with one's milieu means not only to investigate the "unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought"<sup>97</sup>, but to reflexively assess – via what Bourdieu calls "participant objectivation"<sup>98</sup> - the ways in which one's "individuality" represents "essentially the *personification* of the exigencies actually or potentially inscribed in the structure of the field or, more precisely, in the position occupied within this field"<sup>99</sup>.

### Pierre Bourdieu: Evaluation

I would argue that the greatest strength of Bourdieu's model lies in the interplay it provides between the objective and subjective realms. Paradoxically this is perhaps also its most vulnerable aspect. The concept of habitus is flexible, and allows us to account for individual differences in the attitudes and behaviour of people from similar social backgrounds. I will emphasise two problems here. In the first instance, the act of searching for factors which might explain why the habitus of a given person could have produced

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<sup>96</sup> ib., p.40

<sup>97</sup> ib.

<sup>98</sup> ib., p.253

<sup>99</sup> ib., p.44

unexpected results, does not this act of inquiry – in practice – amount to asking what factors in individuals’ backgrounds may inform their attitudes? If so, the abstract “habitus” would represent a mystification. It would be possible to counter that this, in itself, represents an over-simplification of the how the habitus mediates the possible, and that were it not for the concept we would never be looking for vital absences – of cultural capital, economic capital, of reflexive extra-field experience – in the first place.

Secondly, whilst the reproduction – albeit imperfectly – of the social structure in the analytical schemata of the individual does provide a convincing explanation for the social inertia against change, this model is explanatory only to the degree that the “fit” between one’s habitus and the objective conditions of one’s existence can be quantified. The danger otherwise, as Bourdieu acknowledges, is to induce a cause through the logical structure of *vis dormitiva*: “why does someone make petty-bourgeois choices? Because he has a petty bourgeois habitus”<sup>100</sup>. At its worst, the concept of habitus can tempt a rhetorical trope of mystifying meta-discourse, but at its best, the concept provides an invaluable mediator between the mechanisms of objective power relations and the motivational frameworks of individual agents.

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<sup>100</sup> *ib.*, p.129

There is an awkward disjuncture in Bourdieu between the ideal of an academic discipline of sociology as a disinterested science carried out by objectivated participants<sup>101</sup> and the inevitably politicised activity that necessarily arises upon entering into the terms of a discourse about the nature of a field. I think that Bourdieu recognises the difficulties inherent here:

Participant objectivation, arguably the highest form of the sociological art, is realizable only to the extent that it is predicated on as complete as possible an objectivation of the interest to objectivize inscribed in the fact of participating, as well as on a bracketing of this interest and of the representations it sustains.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

Bourdieu synthesises the stifling ideological utilitarianism which Parsons would refuse to concede characterises his functionally institutionalised societal model, with the unconsciously understood behavioural patterns of Elias. Yet through the medium of the habitus he returns to us a form of agency and the dignity which derives thereof. Elias may be most relevant in class-centric Europe in certain micro-level situations. Parsons provides a particularly helpful macro-framework which serves to affirm the efficacy of American values.

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<sup>101</sup> ib., p.253

<sup>102</sup> ib., p.260

Of these three sociological theorists however, I would suggest that it is Bourdieu who takes the biscuit of the noumenal world and who most convincingly accounts for the way in which this cookie crumbles along relations of power, into the subjective social realities which inform our social actions.

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