Economics and Sociology, Epistemology and Values: From the Amherst Term Papers to the Early Essays of Talcott Parsons

Maglaras Vasilis

Abstract
This article focuses on the Amherst term papers and the early essays of Talcott Parsons, the essays he wrote before he published The Structure of Social Action. In these essays, Parsons attempts to define the theoretical interests of sociology in contrast to those of orthodox economics and positivism. It is argued in this article that the Amherst term papers are of little interest as they do not introduce original ideas, and all the relevant argumentation that is developed in these essays is unsophisticated and fragmentary. In contrast, the essays of the period from 1928 to 1937 present original epistemological analysis and theoretical cohesion. This article also compares the Amherst term papers with 5 of 21 early essays to discover theoretical and epistemological continuities. The comparison shows that there is minimum relevance of the Amherst term papers to the early essays and accentuates certain ideas that can be considered as common to the said essays.

Keywords
Amherst term papers, early essays, positivism, value factor, orthodox economics

Introduction
Habermas has declared that “any theoretical work in sociology today that failed to take account of Talcott Parsons could not be taken seriously” (Habermas, 1981, pp. 173-196, especially, p. 174). This position of Habermas, while correct on many grounds, does not answer the next questions: Which Parsons? Early or late Parsons? The answers to these questions may even be deemed more significant than a decision about the fundamental importance of the Parsonian theory for modern sociology, as Parsons’ theory is divided into three important phases, even though all the phases are characterized by the theoretical orientation of the early period that attempts to form an overall theory of social action, with voluntaristic, anti-positivist, and antitutillitarian features. Between the first phase of the Parsonian theory dealt with hereinafter, the phase of the early essays or Phase “0” according to Peter Hamilton (see Hamilton, 1999, General Commentary, Vol. I.), and the third phase, there is considerable theoretical distance, thus turning this first phase into a special sociological tradition of its own and probably the most efficient and substantial moment of Parsons’ career as the founder of modern sociology. In Phase “0,” Parsons virtually delineates, though in a less systematic manner, the relationship of sociology with its adjacent social sciences, but mostly with economics. The relationship between economics and sociology, also known as “Parsons’ economic sociology,” characterizes his overall work and especially his early essays. In fact, Turner argues that if someone tries to identify a thematic continuity in the work of Parsons from the Amherst term papers, through the early essays, into The Structure of Social Action (SofSA) and beyond into his collaborative work with Neil Smelser, then surely it would be his perennial interest in the intellectual and academic relationship between economics and sociology. (Turner, 1997, pp. 41-47, especially, p. 42).

However, the modern scholar of Talcott Parsons’ theoretical work, when researching the relevant literature, may come to the unexpected conclusion that, while many analyses have been published on his theory in The Structure of Social Action (SofSA) and after, very little has been said about what might be his most important work, his early essays.

The following analysis shall focus on 5 of the 21 essays of the period preceding the SofSA—“‘Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber,” “Sociological Elements in Economic Thought,” “The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory,” “Pareto’s Central Analytical Scheme,” and “Review of Economics and Sociology, by Adolf Löwe”. We have chosen to concentrate our analysis on the

1Greek Open University,Athens, Greece

Corresponding Author:
Maglaras Vasilis, Greek Open University, P.O. Box 16031, P. C. 11503, Athens, Greece
Email: maglar@ath.forthnet.gr
above-mentioned essays due to the fact that they deal in a very specific manner with the economics–sociology relationship and, in a certain way, they summarize all the relevant discussion that took place from 1928 to 1937. These essays also expose the core of Parsons’ early dispute with the positivists. Especially “Capitalism in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber,” the PhD thesis of Parsons, indicates in the clearest way the epistemological character of his writings in the early period. All the argumentation that takes place during these 9 years of publications is exposed adequately in these 5 essays, which contain the whole of his major sociological and epistemological ideas of this early theoretical phase. One must also have in mind that some, not all, of the remaining essays are reviews of the work of Parsons’ academic environment during his 1st years at Harvard and present specific ideas that, although they expose the overall trend of his thought at the time, are of minor importance in relation to the 5 aforementioned, or are essays that duplicate the main ideas of the said 5.

But before this we will focus our analysis on the 1922 to 1923 period known as the Amherst period, and the essays “The Theory of Human Behaviour in Its Individual and Social Aspects” and “A Behavioristic Conception of the Nature of Morals.” These essays are the first written evidence of Parsons’ brilliant theoretical career that will develop through more than 5 decades of hard work and hundreds of publications. The Amherst papers indicate also in a narrow way the changing path of Parsons’ theoretical journey from the natural sciences to the social sciences and early signs of his following deep interest in the interpretation of social phenomena through a guiding grand theory and a uniform methodology of the social sciences.

The Amherst Papers

The two term papers of Parsons at Amherst mentioned above have received significant attention from the analysts of Parsons’ early essays, although they present the ideas of young Parsons at the College. The question that arises naturally for the scholar of Parsonian theory is, “What is the significance of these essays to the overall early period?” Although these essays show the way for Parsons’ theoretical development, they are of no significant value. This suggestion is not controversial because the Amherst papers cannot stand alone to the epistemological discussions that followed from 1928 to 1937.

From the point of view of the institutional theory that Parsons would develop systematically during his early period, these papers present in a crude and unsophisticated way the epistemological dispute with the positivists. In these essays, the 20-year-old Parsons shapes his way in sociology, confronting positivistic behaviorism, the dominant epistemological trend of his time. Leaving biology for social theory, Parsons concluded that positivist methods do not respond adequately to the explanation of social phenomena. But this does not constitute, of course, a theoretical tradition or a phase by itself. It is definitively an early sign of young Parsons’ theoretical development and one can find theoretical relationships or “a thematic continuity” (Turner, 1997, p. 41) with the early essays, but not a well structured and adequately integrated theoretical argument.

However, if one tries to find differences between the Amherst papers and the early essays, the most obvious among them are the changing epicenter of Parsons’ argument from the institutionalists to the prominent European philosophers-sociologists and the attempt in the early essays to build a cohesive epistemological argument against positivism, rather than summarize relevant antipositivist theories. So, the importance of the Amherst papers is limited to the historical perspective of Parsons’ theory and does not affect, as this article asserts, the substantive development of his overall theory. We must also keep in mind that Parsons himself never gave special attention or reference to the Amherst papers during his early period or in SofSA. As he acknowledges in “The Theory of Human Behaviour in Its Individual and Social Aspects,” “the paper itself may be rather incoherent, the writing of it has done more to bring out the important issues of this course than any other thing in connection with it” (Parsons, 1922, p. 23). Placing these essays in the right historical context, we do find Wearne’s argument just:

The overwhelming conclusion from these essays is that Parsons’s entire intellectual development should be read as a lifelong intellectual response to the issues he confronted when he first “converted” from biological to social sciences. His written response began with these essays. (Wearne, 1996, p. 12)

In the Amherst papers, Parsons had already shaped in his mind the main epistemological trend that he thinks, in this early phase, fits the peculiar and unstable subject matters of the social sciences. He already confronts, epistemologically, society as a whole, marking for the first time his utmost difference from orthodox economics. He notices that “It is evident, however, that at no stage can we completely separate the individual from the society of which he is a part” (Parsons, 1922, p. 9). And “Our conception of society is as an organization of complexes of behavior into which the activities and interests of each individual are inextricably interwoven” (Parsons, 1922, p. 22-23). Society as a whole sets the early conditions of a theory of interpretation of society through its historically shaped values that guide individual and social action. This is already the most significant shift away from positivism that strikes at the heart of the unhistorical perspective of human action, of utilitarianism and the theory of unilinear evolution.

Although these basic ideas look very familiar to the scholar of Parsons’ theory, the identifying of specific theoretical similarities is a much harder project. In fact, one can hardly find extensive or even narrow references to physics, chemistry, or natural sciences in general in the early essays. The content of the Amherst essays indicates very clearly that Parsons was trying to cross over the threshold of natural sciences to social
sciences where he thinks he belongs. At this early stage his effort is to combine his knowledge of physics, psychology, and biology with the recently acquired knowledge of social theory and economics.

More specifically, in the essay “The Theory of Human Behavior in Its Individual and Social Aspects,” Parsons focuses his analytical efforts to attack (a) the epistemology of behaviorism and positivism, as he does in almost all the early essays from 1928 to 1937 and (b) the conception of the unilinear development of human history that this methodology leads to. Although much of the discussion is focused on anachronistic analysis and criticism of the correlations of the human body with psychology and morals, one can find certain basic ideas of special interest, such as the importance of the environment for the modulation of human agency and the understanding of society as a whole of relations and agency interrelations.

The individuals are food material which is digested and built into its fabric by the great organism of society. We must not forget, however, that society is not perfectly static as it would be if this were the only factor in its formation. While the influence of any one ordinary person on society as a whole, or on one of its great institutions is very small, when we have a great number of individuals exerting an influence in substantially the same direction there is bound to be an effect and an appreciable effect on the institutions involved, and because there is this factor is the reason why society and institutions are in a constant state of change.

(Parsons, 1922, p. 8)

It is obvious that young Parsons struggles to defend the notion of society as a whole that is influenced by historically composed institutions and values, as well as to recognize human agency, even though in a general and unsophisticated way, as the main factor of societal change. In conclusion, this essay has limited epistemological interest due to the fact that it introduces a wide range of theories but in a shallow and descriptive way. Psychology, anthropology, biology and chemistry, economics, and social theory all come in a fragmentary and unconnected way to support basic antipositivist theory trends of his time.

The second essay, “A Behavioristic Conception of the Nature of Morals,” dealing extensively with the most central theoretical problem of modernity, the Hobbesian problem of order, identifies values—the normative element or the moral order—as society’s central integrative factor. Parsons mentions that “In the first place individuals cannot live together doing exactly as their own impulses and whims dictate, for any length of time at all before these impulses of different individuals are going to conflict” (Parsons, 1923, p. 2 - 3). This is a very common argument of the whole early phase, especially the 1928 to 1937 period, of how norms are the crucial integrative element of society. To accentuate the importance of values, that is, the sociohistorical continuity of society through its cultural fundamentals, Parsons refers to a very common phenomenon for all societies, art. It is also a concept we find frequently in most of his essays of the period 1928 to 1937. In this second term paper, he argues that normative values and rationality, through the form of craftsmanship and skills, play a definitive role in the form and content of art. This is an argument we find also in a more elaborated way in “The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory,” an essay of 1935. Parsons notes,

But it can scarcely escape the most elementary observer, I think, that for example the Greek architecture of the fifth century has something to do with the value centering in the polis, or that medieval gothic has something to do with the church and its place in people’s lives.

(Parsons, 1935c, p. 307)

“Like Sumner, Parsons highlights that the ‘mores are not enforced by rational action’” (Nielsen, 1996, p. 52). Thus, art is not a purified form of rationality in its material expression but also a cultural phenomenon, the expression of social order and social values.

But all the above arguments of Parsons’ about the role and the importance of values for the guiding of social and individual action do not lead Parsonian thought to the theoretical path of an evaluation of values, an evaluation of the peculiar forms that cultures or historical societies take. This is very obvious in all the Parsonian theory, even from his 1923 essay where he contends that “A scientific and rational criticism makes absolutely no judgments as to ultimate values” (Parsons, 1923, p. 12). Parsons will never change this fundamental epistemological parameter of his theories that would have brought him closer to Hegel and Marx, but will stay loyal to what would be, also due to his own contribution, the dominant trend of American scientific sociology for much of the second half of the 20th century.

All the above argumentation should not drive us to the deception of some kind of ‘radical breaks’ (see Nielsen, 1996) or discontinuity between the different phases of Parsons’ oeuvre, especially between the Amherst term papers and the 1928 to 1937 period. By no means has this article provided such arguments. However, we should not be trapped in a general idea that the Parsonian theory is essentially one and starts from the Amherst term papers and goes to the Social System and beyond. Of course there are not only fundamental changes and different periods but also ideas that persist from the beginning of his career as a social scientist. Either way, we should not read Parsons’ multidimensional oeuvre with dogmatism and prejudegment but examine each time and each concept separately.

The 1928 to 1937 Period—The Epistemological Context

In the 5 “early” essays, mentioned above in the “Introduction” section as the most representative of the 1928 to 1937 period, which is the period that starts with his PhD thesis and goes
until the *SofSA*, Parsons deals with a wide range of theoretical and methodological issues, such as the problem of the scientific explanation of the individual and social action in the positivistic and utilitarian model of economic theory, the issue of the relationship between the means and the ends in the interpretation of a concrete action, the cognitive boundaries of sociology, and with a series of epistemological issues which mainly focus on the problem of choosing between a subjective or an objective interpretation of social phenomena. In our analysis, we will focus on the role of values in the sociological theory, for this idealistic dimension which is introduced by Parsons touches the heart of the methodological arguments of neoclassical economics.

It would be safe to assume that the element which unites all these early essays is the conceptual research on the relationship between economics and sociology. Holmwood argues that while Parsons attempted in his early and mature works to establish a grand theory by classifying economics under a broader social science, in the 1990s the terms were reversed. The now dominant economic science, mainly the positivistic rational choice theories, attempts to integrate sociology as its subsector (see Holton, 1991). It is precisely this “methodological phenomenon” that Parsons fought in his criticism of positivist utilitarianism during his entire scientific carrier.

Holmwood also analyzed this thesis, and referring more thoroughly to the relationship between economics and sociology, he argues that

The logic of his argument identifies “economics” as a distinct discipline concerned with material factors and instrumental, self interested actions, while “sociology” as a distinct discipline is associated with factors which emerge in “economics” (especially, in “institutional economics”), but lie outside its central categories, to some extent issues of power, but, more importantly, issues of norms and values (Holmwood, 2006, p. xv).

Holmwood’s position in this matter is commonly referred to by Parsonian scholars as “convergence” and summarizes Parsons’ overall theoretical attempt in the *SofSA*.

Thus, Parsons, Camic contends, “developed his methodological position through close involvement in a contemporary dispute over the method of economics—in his case, the dispute between neoclassical and institutional economics” (Camic, 1987, pp. 421-439, especially, p. 421). In this way, Camic attempts to correlate the Parsonian methodology with the historical framework of its development. In attempting this, he unsuccessfully associates the intellectual environment in which Parsons’ theory is developed, as well as his social status at the university and the prestige of this status, with his broader desire to develop for sociology a methodology equivalent to that of economics. Thus, by upgrading the overall scientific discipline, his social status as a sociologist would also be upgraded. However, Camic’s “historical interpretation” of the Parsonian methodology seems to be nearing a peculiar anti-theoretical psychologism. Camic has attempted in one more article to explain the reason Parsons did not take seriously the American institutional economists, the convictions of whom are close to that of the early essays. Camic contends that judgments of reputation and influence turned Parsons’s attention away from these theorists (Camic, 1992). Camic’s argument, however convincing it might seem, remains an axiomatic assumption which cannot be proved.

Parsons, in agreement with the positions of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, believed that positivists commit the methodological fallacy of attempting to render through their theories the empirical reality with full accuracy. This methodological fallacy, which is generally known as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (see Trevino, 2001, p. xx), shall be for all of the early essays the central reference point of Parsons’ criticism of positivism. Moreover, Parsons argued that economic theories cannot solve the Hobbesian problem of order “without ad hoc and unstable theoretical assumptions about, for example ‘the hidden hand’ of economic forces resolving the conflicts of social order” (Robertson & Turner, 1991, p. 4, see also, p. 15).³

In this sense, in his theoretical construction, Parsons, as a sociologist, acknowledges early the role of values and in general the social and broader cultural framework under which individual action is subsumed. Therefore, the explanation of social cohesion is not based on the interpretation of each individual’s pursuit of his interests but on the fact that society is a moral entity in which common values characterize and regulate each individual action separately.

Parsons seems to maintain in all the early essays and the Amherst term papers that in contrast to a natural phenomenon which may be studied separately from its natural environment (e.g., experimentally), the world of social phenomena constitutes a complicated entity from which we cannot remove its individual parts to interpret them separately from the entity to which they belong. Sociology must, therefore, constitute a general schema for the study of the action as a whole, for “the part of an organic whole is an abstraction because it cannot be observed existing in concreto apart from its relations to the whole” (Parsons, 1937b, p. 34) Thus, summarizing, we could argue that in the 1928 to 1937 period, Parsons mainly deals with the structural elements of action, such as means, ends, conditions, and its norms.

**The Value Factor**

As it has already become clear so far, Parsons in his early theoretical period, adhering in part to the principles of German Historicism, focuses his methodological interest on the analytical role of the values involved in assembling a valid scientific explanation while interpreting a social phenomenon, and radically subtending at the same time the epistemological unilateralism of the orthodox economists who reduced social phenomena to one principle, that of utility and satisfaction.
Contrary to this, the complex Parsonian explanations aim to incorporate the factor of value as an element that brings to the fore the relational and evaluative character of society.

“Capitalism’ in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber”

In the article “Capitalism in Recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber,” which makes up the published part of his doctoral dissertation, Parsons examines the theories of capitalism, the appearance and definition of the phenomenon of capitalism in the German theories of Sombart and Weber, and, as one would expect, the role of values in these theories. As soon as these ideas of Sombart and Weber were brought forward in relation to the phenomenon of modern capitalism, Parsons hurries to delineate the idea of spirit, which constitutes the guiding thread for both theories, although with a different way for each one, from any kind of psychologism whatsoever: “The whole individual is the ‘atom’ from which they start” (Parsons, 1928, pp. 641-661, especially, p. 648) He thereby averts any association of the idea of spirit with instincts or impulses, that is, the reduction of the study of the modern phenomenon of capitalism to the existence of a suprahistorical human nature, to furtive propensities toward the development of a certain action.

Therefore, subjective action can only be subsumed under this spirit, this new system of values which one cannot evade. Social life in its entirety is subjugated to this closed system that dominates individual goal settings. This conception of the social goes against the individualistic rationalistic concepts of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. It moves the theory’s epicenter away from the study of a constant human nature that can be examined on the basis of suprahistorical objective laws and from the examination of the individual desires which define economic activity. Contrary to this, the theory’s epicenter is on a macro level of social analysis, in which individual will of action has been pushed aside by the inescapable guiding character of the spirit in the entirety of social life. In studying the theories of capitalism in Sombart and Weber, Parsons aspires to form arguments against the positivistic utilitarian tradition—against the general idea of a science composing suprahistorical laws, while interpreting social phenomena with rationalistic criteria on the basis of a simple means–end relation.

Sociological Elements in Economic Thought” and “Pareto’s Central Analytical Scheme”

In the articles “Sociological Elements in Economic Thought” and “Pareto’s Central Analytical Scheme,” Parsons attempts to compose a more complex explanation of socioeconomic phenomena via elevation of the end of the action, that is, the broadening of the historical-evaluative element intrinsically incorporated in every action. This attempt implies neither his abandonment of the causal and scientific explanation nor the acceptance of the desire–satisfaction relation. On the contrary, he claims, his position implies the enriching of the explanation with the true causes of the action, which are values.

Parsons acknowledges in Pareto’s theory certain residual elements which, as he says, make him eventually break with individualism (Parsons, 1936). The logical and nonlogical elements constitute the main field for the elevation of the evaluative and broader cultural character of social action:

Thus a residue which, being a proposition, is after all a complex of linguistic symbols, may manifest sentiments in the sense that it is a symbolic expression of a “state of mind.” I think it is a fair inference that insofar as the non-logical elements of action are value–elements and not those of heredity and environment the manifestation involved is pre-dominantly of this and not the other character. (Parsons, 1936, p. 259)

Parsons contends thereby that Pareto has dealt with, thoroughly albeit not sufficiently, the problem of the reification of the explanation, disassociating the logical action from utility. Moreover, he “treated non-logical action as a genuine residual category” (Parsons, 1936, p. 261), opening the way for empirical research.

“The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory”

In the article “The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory,” Parsons raises anew the question of the role of values in sociological theory, trying, as he did in previous essays, to introduce a normative element into the instrumentalist means–end relation. In reality, he attempts to surpass the separation of the value from the fact that lies in the methodological core of the positivistic model, by tracing the origin of the factor of “ends” and by placing the examination of the factor of “means” in a wider normative frame that supersedes the simple norm of rational choice. Parsons claims that individuals try to achieve an end by employing appropriate means to that end. However, neither these ultimate ends nor the means to be employed are chosen at random. They are determined by the common system of values in which the individuals participate, while the choice of ends comes from a “pool” of common ultimate ends.

Parsons’ effort, in this article as well as in the previous ones, is to examine the individual action from the aspect of the whole society and not from that of the individual actor. He emphasizes the way social structure sets its goals and provides the actors with the necessary means to achieve those. Collective action, however, as it is expressed through the social phenomena, results from the basis of a particular accord in a body of values (in a common culture), in which the actor complies either through its internalization or under the threat of sanctions. Parsons notes,

Thus Greek society would appear to be scarcely understandable without reference to the peculiar conceptions
of what human relations should be, centering about the idea of the polis. So much were these values common to all Greeks that persons who did not share them were unhesitatingly stigmatized as barbarians, and their values dismissed from serious consideration. Similarly in the Middle Ages with the values clustering about the church. Another very impressive source of evidence derives from the study of processes of child development which brings out the enormous importance in the formation of individual personality of the child’s “socialization” in terms of the values of the group. (Parsons, 1935c, pp. 282-316, especially, p. 296).

So, the action of the actor is explained on the basis of a means-end chain. The choice of means and ends is made with reference to a rational element, the environment, that determines the circumstances of action and a reasonable element, that is the subsuming of action to a system of values. In particular, Parsons argues that the ultimate values, as subjective categories of the analysis, contrary to the objective categories of positivistic science, render it in advance impossible for scientific knowledge to entirely determine the action as it is meant by modern positive science (Parsons, 1935c). This category of scientific analysis of action, that is, as exploration of a simple means–end relation, cannot include the ends which comprise the voluntaristic element of the action tracked by Parsons. In reality, every effort to classify these ends in this simple intrinsic means–end relation would “have in fact squeezed out the factor of ends altogether” (Parsons, 1935c, p. 288). With the factor of “ends” being placed outside the horizon of (positivistic) scientific analysis, the latter can be ultimately utilized only to evaluate the means to be employed, as well as to ascertain the degree to which this end is achieved.

The composition of the ends in a system results from an individual’s rational capability to choose for himself or herself the direction of his or her action on the basis of multiple alternative ends and, surely, multiple means. These (individual) systems of ends should not be deemed random. They should be rendered understandable in the light of a sui generis unit called civilization. Parsons, after all, contends that this is also empirically obvious that as in any other case, it would be difficult to understand society in any other form than the Hobbesian natural state in which any notion of cohesion is absent. This would arise simply from the nonclassification of these individual systems in a wider unity or their origin from such a unity, which would identify the possibility of assigning value to the end of the “other.” Such a social cohesion, should it ever be possible to exist, would be unstable and partially fleeting, as it would be more subject to random combinations of interests than to a cultural unity in the context of which norms are determined on the basis of common values.

Nonetheless, he claims that this common value element does not constitute the ultimate point of interpretation of the social procedure and that the understanding of reality should not be entirely prejudiced by this angle of analysis. From a historical point of view, the composition of the social is faced with a variety of such value systems and it would be a mistake (at least for sociology) to attempt an interpretation of whole historical periods on the basis of such systems (Parsons, 1935c).

At this point, it is clear that Parsons, already in his early essays, his doctoral dissertation included, was detached from the simple idea of the unilinear evolution of human society, which was popular among orthodox economists. Although he marked out his own theoretical tools spearheaded by the role of values in the determination and interpretation of individual and ultimately social action, he did not proceed to an evaluation of the multiple forms assumed by the social through this variety of values. He thus riveted his theory in the functional role of values in the formation of social action, denying the potential scientific character of an evaluation of values. He did not, however, deny the construction of general analytical concepts, such as the state or composed ad hoc analytical ideotypical tools, such as bureaucracy.

But how does this ultimate system of common ends of the early Parsonian theory relate to action? Parsons contends that this is done in two ways: (a) directly, in the sense that this ultimate end is also the actor’s immediate end; therefore, it is subject to the analysis of the simple rational means–end relation and (b) indirectly, in the sense that such ultimate ends are latent inside the action. The compatibility control of the action with this common system of ultimate ends arises institutionally, namely, on the basis of normative principles that “regulate” action with criteria different from those of simple rationality (in the instrumental sense). “They are moral norms, not norms of efficiency. They bear directly the stamp of their origin in the common system of ultimate ends” (Parsons, 1935c, p. 299).

The compliance of the individual with these norms arises either due to the authenticity of the norm itself or through the mere identification of the actor’s interest with the “common” interest—which in its turn is divided into identification on account of overlapping interests (private-collective interest) and identification on account of desire to avoid sanctions.

“Review of Economics and Sociology, by Adolf Löwe”

In the article “Review of Economics and Sociology, by Adolf Löwe” (Parsons, 1937a), which is an extensive book review in the American Journal of Sociology, Parsons recognizes that Löwe is right in his thesis that even simple assumptions of orthodox economics, which are viewed as laws of the market, implicitly incorporate noneconomic categories, such as the “economic man” and “competition.” The concept of competition, says Parsons, albeit an individualistic concept, presupposes political and wider institutional categories, such as an existing political system, laws, and a composed system of authority and enforcement which will guarantee individual property, that is, the positive or negative result of competition. The presupposed and preexisting social whole provides the classical economists with the analytical possibility to develop
theoretical contexts of analysis as pure theory, concealing or ignoring the relational or codependent nature of the “economic unit” under examination.

Parsons calls these analytical categories between the “pure” concepts of economics on one hand and of the nonprocessed empirical reality on the other as “sociological ‘middle principles’” (Parsons, 1937a, p. 478). Löwe’s theoretical contribution, according to Parsons, is that he attempts to deal with the dogmatic reification of “pure theory,” not on the basis of “mere ad hoc empirical qualifications,” but through the development of a systematic relation of it with a “neighboring social sciences—sociology” (Parsons, 1937a, p. 478 - 479). It is thus attempted, in a sense, to return the theory back to the classical analyses, as the neoclassical economists severed the relation between economy and politics, separating the action of the individual in economic and social action.

Parsons explains further that a theory’s facts are acknowledged as such only when “they are stated in terms of a conceptual scheme” (Parsons, 1937a, p. 479). Therefore, the analysis of these facts entails the involvement of a wider concept of the social that transcends the simple schemes of positivist economics, schemes such as the abstractions attempted on the basis of supply and demand laws. In social sciences, the (social) phenomenon under observation cannot be detached from the wider environment in which it is developed. The observation of an individual’s economic action should be placed within the historical context of the concrete values of the whole society.

Parsons sees in classical economists a tendency to adulterate pure theory with the introduction of sociopolitical terms. In the “moral sentiment” of Adam Smith and the “habits and customs of the people” of David Ricardo, economic theory acknowledges its analytical boundaries. The “moral sentiment” of Smith is the exact moment when the idea of competition and individual interest is transcended, thereby acknowledging, first and foremost, that individual action is value-defined and takes place within the frame of a totality of social relations that are culturally and historically determined (Parsons, 1935a, pp. 414-453, especially, p. 427).

All of the aforementioned analyses of classical theorists attempted by Parsons in all of his early essays aim ultimately to make clear that human action itself, and consequently social phenomena produced by that action, are codependent and codeetermined. It is impossible to remove a part from the whole and observe it in and of itself, separately from the entirety of social life of which it is a part. This recognition, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that Parsons disdains scientific division of labor and the necessary analytical abstraction, but to the acceptance that the understanding of a social phenomenon presupposes its study as a phenomenon of the society as a whole and the necessity of its incorporation in a greater analytical structure that is called culture. The factor of value, which was neglected by the orthodox economists and positivist theories, should also, according to Parsons, constitute in part the preferential field of sociology, under the wing of which all the different social disciplines could be unified for the integrated and full-scale understanding of a social phenomenon.

Conclusions

This article has focused on the Amherst term papers and has maintained that they do not introduce original ideas and that all the relevant arguments that are developed in these essays, including their structure and theoretical content, are unsophisticated and fragmentary. In contrast, it is argued that the essays from 1928 to 1937 present original epistemological analysis and theoretical cohesion in their discussions of the role of values in the early making of sociology as a scientific discipline, defined against economic reductionism.

We have concentrated on the Amherst papers on the one hand and of the nonprocessed empirical reality on the other as “sociological ‘middle principles’” (Parsons, 1937a, p. 478 - 479). It is thus attempted, in a sense, to return the theory back to the classical analyses, as the neoclassical economists severed the relation between economy and politics, separating the action of the individual in economic and social action.

Parsons explains further that a theory’s facts are acknowledged as such only when “they are stated in terms of a conceptual scheme” (Parsons, 1937a, p. 479). Therefore, the analysis of these facts entails the involvement of a wider concept of the social that transcends the simple schemes of positivist economics, schemes such as the abstractions attempted on the basis of supply and demand laws. In social sciences, the (social) phenomenon under observation cannot be detached from the wider environment in which it is developed. The observation of an individual’s economic action should be placed within the historical context of the concrete values of the whole society.

Parsons sees in classical economists a tendency to adulterate pure theory with the introduction of sociopolitical terms. In the “moral sentiment” of Adam Smith and the “habits and customs of the people” of David Ricardo, economic theory acknowledges its analytical boundaries. The “moral sentiment” of Smith is the exact moment when the idea of competition and individual interest is transcended, thereby acknowledging, first and foremost, that individual action is value-defined and takes place within the frame of a totality of social relations that are culturally and historically determined (Parsons, 1935a, pp. 414-453, especially, p. 427).

All of the aforementioned analyses of classical theorists attempted by Parsons in all of his early essays aim ultimately to make clear that human action itself, and consequently social phenomena produced by that action, are codependent and codeetermined. It is impossible to remove a part from the whole and observe it in and of itself, separately from the entirety of social life of which it is a part. This recognition, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that Parsons disdains scientific division of labor and the necessary analytical abstraction, but to the acceptance that the understanding of a social phenomenon presupposes its study as a phenomenon of the society as a whole and the necessity of its incorporation in a greater analytical structure that is called culture. The factor of value, which was neglected by the orthodox economists and positivist theories, should also, according to Parsons, constitute in part the preferential field of sociology, under the wing of which all the different social disciplines could be unified for the integrated and full-scale understanding of a social phenomenon.

Conclusions

This article has focused on the Amherst term papers and has maintained that they do not introduce original ideas and that all the relevant arguments that are developed in these essays, including their structure and theoretical content, are unsophisticated and fragmentary. In contrast, it is argued that the essays from 1928 to 1937 present original epistemological analysis and theoretical cohesion in their discussions of the role of values in the early making of sociology as a scientific discipline, defined against economic reductionism.

We have concentrated our overall analysis on the value factor and the epistemological dimension of these theories because we believe that they constitute the most important elements of the Parsonian theory of the first period, until the So/SA. We also think that the value factor characterizes the whole Parsonian oeuvre. Moreover, this first period exhaustively mapped a new methodological scheme for the social sciences as young Parsons attempted to stabilize the scientific methodology of sociology and articulate his main arguments against orthodox economics. The assertion of values can also be considered as the “invasion” of European continental theory into the American sociology of Parsons.

We can summarize the main arguments of the article as follows:

1. The value factor argument is very unstable and blurred in the Amherst papers. Parsons has realized the role of culture and values as the driving force of social and individual action but only through the glasses of institutional theory. During this period, his theoretical effort is to escape from the epistemological paradigm of the physical sciences to a new one that fits the world of social phenomena. That is why we find no reference to ultimate values in the 1922 essay and only one reference in the 1923 essay.

2. Parsons’ critique in the Amherst papers of behaviorism, positivism, and orthodox economics is very general, in contrast to the early essays. Parsons follows the institutional economics argument in the 1922 to 1923 essays but draws his own distinctive argument in the early essays, away from historicism and cultural uniqueness.

3. In the early essays, the value factor element is the main feature of this period in which Parsons breaks with positivism.

4. Whereas Parsons’ theory accentuates the role of values as the driving force of social and individual action, his theory does not proceed to an evaluation of these peculiar cultural forms and stays at a descriptive, analytical level.

In conclusion, in this article, we attempted to bring to the fore an important dimension of Parsonian sociology—the role of values in the early essays—and to delineate the main epistemological structure of all the early period essays. We have
tried also to demonstrate that Parsons, using the value factor, attempted to place sociology on a different scientific basis than the positivists and the institutionalists by elevating the essential conditions for the development of a “grand” science of the social. The a posteriori recognition of the failure of this scheme that could have, methodologically, unified the multiple social sciences and especially sociology with economics, should not prevent us from acknowledging Parsons’ valuable and valid, even to this day, contribution to the mapping of sociology’s methodological norms.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes
1. There is a lot of literature on the issue of the relationship between economics and sociology in the essays of Talcott Parsons. See more specifically, Velthuis Olav, 1999, pp. 629-649. However, Howard Brick in his comprehensive, mainly historical, study on the theoretical course of Parsons argues that after the Structure of Social Action (1937b), he gradually turned to the field of pure social research, renouncing the theoretical field of the relationship between economics and sociology (Brick Howard, 2000).

2. We do not know the exact number of the unpublished essays because the relevant archival research has not been completed. However, now known are 21 essays from the early period, published and unpublished. A typical example of an unpublished essay which was brought to light during Camic’s “archival research” at Harvard is the “Prolegomena to a Theory of Social Institutions.” The publication of this essay led to a series of analyses with a certain theoretical value. See the prologue of Charles Camic (1990, pp. 313-319), as well as the analysis of Coleman S. James, “Commentary: Social Institutions and Social Theory,” pp. 333-339. All of the aforementioned essays can be found in the excellent collection of Hamilton, (1999).

3. Turner (1991) and Robertson (1991) argue that Parsons’s criticism of the utilitarian, rationalistic economism remains one of the most valid attacks on the logical core of the positivistic social science, as Parsons uses a method that combines the analysis of values and the dominant sociological theory.

4. In this excerpt is clearly visible the immediate correlation of the value content of the social system with individual action.

References
Brick, H. (2000). Talcott Parsons’s “shift away from economics,” 1937-1946. Journal of American History, 87, 490-514.
Camic, C. (1987). The making of a method: A historical reinterpretation of the early Parsons. American Sociological Review, 52, 421-439.
Camic, C. (1990). A historical prologue to “prolegomena to a theory of social institutions.” American Sociological Review, 55, 313-319.
Camic, C. (1992). Reputation and predecessor selection: Parsons and the Institutionalists. American Sociological Review, 57, 421-445.
Habermas, J. (1981). Talcott Parsons: Problems of theory construction. Sociological Inquiry, 51, 173-196.
Hamilton, P. (Ed.). (1999). Critical assessments, Vols. I, II, III, IV. London, England: Routledge.
Holmwood, J. (Ed.). (2006). Talcott Parsons. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
Holton, J. R. (1991). Talcott Parsons and the integration of economic and sociological theory. Sociological Inquiry, 61, 102-114.
Nielsen, K. J. (1996). Beyond the myths of radical breaks in Talcott Parsons’ theory: An analysis of the Amherst papers. American Sociologist, 27(4), 48-60.
Parsons, T. (1922). The theory of human behaviour in its individual and social aspects. Term Paper, Philosophy III, 1-23.
Parsons, T. (1923). A behavioristic conception of the nature of morals. Term Paper, Philosophy III, 1-24.
Parsons, T. (1928). Capitalism in recent German literature: Sombart and Weber. Journal of Political Economy, 36, 641-661.
Parsons, T. (1929). Capitalism in recent German literature: Sombart and Weber. Journal of Political Economy, 37, 31-51.
Parsons, T. (1935a). Sociological elements in economic thought: I. Historical. Quarterly Journal of Economics, 49, 414-453.
Parsons, T. (1935b). Sociological elements in economic thought: II. The Analytical Factor View. Quarterly Journal of Economics, 49, 646-667.
Parsons, T. (1935c). The place of ultimate values in sociological theory. International Journal of Ethics, 45, 282-316.
Parsons, T. (1936). Pareto’s central analytical scheme. Journal of Social Philosophy, 1, 244-262.
Parsons, T. (1937a). Review of economics and sociology, by Adolf Löwe. American Journal of Sociology, 43, 477-481.
Parsons, T. (1937b). The structure of social action. New York, NY: The Free Press.
Robertson, R., & Turner, S. B. (1991). An introduction to Talcott Parsons: Theory, politics and humanity. In R. Robertson and S. B. Turner (Eds.), Talcott Parsons, theorist of modernity. London, England: SAGE.
Trevino, A. J. (Ed.). (2001). Talcott Parsons today: His theory and legacy in contemporary sociology. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Turner, S. B. (1997). Talcott Parsons on economic and social theory: The relevance of the Amherst term papers. Social Theory and Practice, 23, 41-47.
Velthuis, O. (1999). The changing relationship between economic sociology and institutional economics. American Journal of Economics and Sociology, 58, 629-649.
Weare, C. B. (1989). The theory and scholarship of Talcott Parsons to 1951: A critical commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Weare, C. B. (1996). “The Amherst essays: Talcott Parsons’ initial foray into sociology. American Sociologist, 27, 8-12.

Bio
Maglaras Vasilis is a visiting lecturer at Greek Open University.