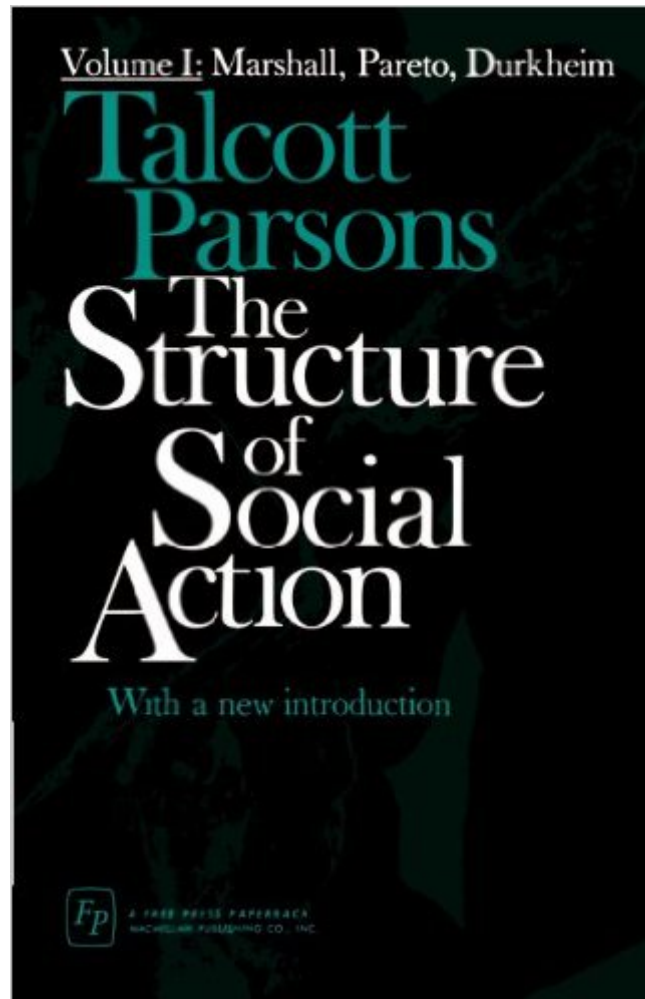


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The Structure Of Social Action, Vol. 1: Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim



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Customer Reviews

First published in 1937, this book is a remarkable scholarly achievement and it richly deserves the status of a classic. It is not an easy read, partly on account of its genuine depth and partly because Parsons was never content with one word where ten or twelve would do. Parsons offers a voluntarist theory of action described as a synthesis of tendencies in the work of Alfred Marshall, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. This is actually a development of Karl Menger's approach to social and economic theory, and this work represents a parallel or simultaneous discovery with Ludwig Mises (praxeology) and Karl Popper (situational analysis). Parsons' first task (in the 1930s) was to rehabilitate the role of theory in sociology and human studies. "Returning to this country (USA) I found behaviorism so rampant that anyone who believed in the scientific validity of the interpretation of subjective states of mind was often held to be fatuously naive. Also rampant was what I called 'empiricism', namely the idea that scientific knowledge was a total reflection of the 'reality out there' and even selection was alleged to be illegitimate". He defended systematic theory against various forms of empiricism which emphasised the accumulation of facts. At the same time he attempted to justify analytical realism against theorists who looked upon theories as merely convenient fictions. Against the empiricists Parsons claimed that there could be no worthwhile fact gathering without some reference to theory, and against the "instrumental" view he maintained that "at least some of the general concepts of science are not fictional but adequately 'grasp' aspects of the objective external world".

This is Parsons' first book, and arguably his greatest. Parsons began thinking about the relationship between sociology and economic in about 1930, and he wrote a few papers on the topic in the Quarterly Journal of Economics in the early 1930's. He was an instructor in the Harvard economics department at the time, but he recoiled at the mathematical turn economics was taking (Samuelson et al), and he did not like the only plausible alternatives, Marxism (Parsons was a mildly left-liberal throughout his life), and Institutionalism (Parsons believed that understanding society required a dialog between theory and evidence, whereas the Institutionalists rejected the idea of theory in favor of a compilation and recitation of the facts---a position Parsons refers to as "positivism," although the term is widely used in that period to cover a variety of purported sins). This book has a long, discursive, and painful section on scientific methodology, the purpose of which is to reject institutional economics (which he was taught by the masters) on the grounds of what Alfred North Whitehead terms "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness." The institutionalists critiqued the abstract methods of the Marshallian and Edgeworthian traditions in favor of detailed description of institutional diversity. Parsons will have none of it. His critique of economic theory is that it cannot solve the problem of order and it has no room for normative elements. His own theory of action, of course, does not suffer from misplaced concreteness.

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