Power, System, and Social Action: Reflections on Social Theory

Cinzia Cilento, Vanvitelli University, Italy

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Abstract
In understanding the social relationship as a moment capable of reciprocal effects structured according to the binomial push/counterthrust, the reference to Georg Simmel and relational theory is inevitable. Therefore, assuming the relationship as the presupposition before sociology, and sociology itself as a problematic investigation of the forms of relation, it is possible to consider phenomena such as marginalization, ostracization, discrimination and incorporation, as forms of reaction of the actor to the social system. In the light of Simmel's arguments with respect to the individual, and by Parsons according to the interactions between systems and subsystems, the following proposal intends to investigate four hypotheses of the relationship between actor and system, analyzing the different forms of power exercised by systems and the socio-spatial orientations of the actor by motivating their origins and investigating their effects.

Keywords: Social Actor, Social System, Power, AGIL

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Introduction

In order to be able to imagine the different orientations of the social actor within the social system and the possible and different relationships that exist between them, it is functional to re-propose the concepts of duality and reciprocity presented by Simmel. Starting from an empirical observation of reality, it is possible to verify how the action of an individual belonging to a community, in addition to the physiological consequences related to the action produced, determines the realization of further effects in the system in which he participates. The set of actions and reactions configures a continuous change of the reference system, which in turn reacts by exercising different forms of power over the acting social actor.

For Simmel, society is what arises from the interactions between individuals and their individual action according to a cause/effect logic, "in the broadest sense of the term [society] manifests itself in a concrete way where several individuals come into action on each other" (Simmel, 1992, 54). Therefore, imagining society as a set of social relations and interactions between individuals, it follows an interpretation of reality that looks at the social fact as an individual fact, that is, the "social is the relational as such, that is, reciprocal action as an inter-action that produces, is incorporated and manifests itself in something that, although not visible, has its own solidity" (Donati, 2006, 46): the formation of the social is therefore both cause and effect of inter-individual action.

If the action of the social actor is for Simmel the foundation of society, the relationship represents the essential element for the existence of a system to be outlined, an entity that is concretized through the intervention of actions and interactions. By virtue of this reciprocity, social actors carry out actions capable of generating forms understood as social spaces within which action unfolds. And it is through forms that society is being structured as a macro-entity, "which indicates a circle of individuals, linked to each other by various forms of reciprocity, whose unity is the same as that observed in a system of bodily masses, such as to influence each other and behave according to the determination they receive."

To provide a different perspective of critical analysis with respect to the forms of interaction and relationship that justify in their union the sociation of which Simmel, Talcott Parsons inserts himself by conceptualizing an overcoming of the sociological paradigm of the Berlin author. If it is true that society is a set of parts, it cannot be investigated by considering only its formal nature, precisely because it has a structural intention.

Generating a new epistemological framework, Parsons, while starting from the analysis of the social relation, describes its relevance in relation to its structure within social systems, which in turn represent autopoietic entities capable of self-regeneration according to the inter-actions that develop within them.

If we want to associate author with paradigm, it is plausible to argue that for Simmel the fundamental notion from which his social theory comes to life is the form of interaction, while for Parsons the essential element from which he conceptualizes a theoretical vision of the world is attributable to social systems of action.

Specifically, "the fundamental starting point is the concept of social systems of action. By this we mean that the interaction of the individual acting takes place under such conditions that it is possible to consider this process as a system in the scientific sense, and to subject it

to the same kind of theoretical analysis successfully applied to other types of systems in other sciences (Parsons, 1951, 11).

Despite the fact that the perspectives of analysis insist on substantially opposite levels, i.e., form in Simmel and content in Parsons, both respond to the request for an interpretation of social reality, more in detail of the relationship between the individual and society. In the theoretical horizon proposed by Parsons, form is declined as a common denominator emerging from a system of social relations, which draw their foundations from the structure of the system.

Taking this perspective of analysis as a theoretical support, it is possible to attempt an in-depth study of the social relations produced by the system and therefore the influence of the reference system on the individual and collective action of the social actors involved.

The following proposal intends to pay attention not only to the social relationship as interaction between individuals, but also to the relationship between social actor and system, in order to hypothesize whether and in what ways the reference system has a guiding function both in individual action and the positioning of the social actor inside and outside the system.

By repeating the question already raised by Gallino, it is therefore possible to explain and predict the specific ways in which an individual, participating in one or more social systems, has acted or will act in different situations, in the presence of different initial parameters of his condition, including, among the latter, internal states such as emotions, needs, goals, values, interpretative schemes, reasoning processes?

The AGIL model represents the essential scheme from which the present research moves, configuring through an elaboration of functional imperatives four modes of influence through the exercise of power of the system over the social actor.

The Functional Organization of Action

Parsons' theoretical approach can be interpreted both as a conceptualization of the social system and as an elaboration on the action of the social actor. Specifically, considered as "action is an element, in a certain sense special, of social systems, and at the same time a consequence of a particular cooperation between these same systems" (Addario, 2019, 7), it is possible to understand the relationship as the unfolding of action between the social system and the social actor, whose action is determined by the system itself.

The action so technically understood by Parsons represents an effect of the primary systems, not an internal element of and to them. According to the author, the social system, in order for it to exist and survive, must satisfy four functional imperatives referred to as adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. Each requirement requires the exercise of a form of power over the structure of the system itself in order for it to maintain order. By intervening on the subsystems and institutions that make up the system, it is inevitable to consider the actions of the social actors that make up the reference system and what can be the methods of maintaining balance advanced by the system.

Therefore, each function corresponds to the achievement of a systemic objective that insists on the surrounding environment through the use of different subsystems. The achievement of

a given objective requires an organization of the system oriented towards a precise organizational state, which is an expression of one of the above functions.

Applying the Parsons' functional scheme to the relationship between system and social actor, keeping the four instrumental and integrative imperatives as the compass of analysis, it can be argued that each function corresponds to an exercise of power whose purpose is represented by the achievement of a precise organizational state; the latter will represent the reason for the positioning of the social actor understood as "the placement of an individual in a network of social relations or relations, that is, in a social structure or system" (Gallino, 1978, 527).

The Social Actor and Positioning in the System

Admitting that there is a relationship between a social system oriented towards the achievement of a certain goal and a social actor, it is appropriate to ask ourselves what could be the ways in which the system relates to the individual; whether the same modalities influence or even be a determining element in the identification of the boundaries of the system and the positioning of the social actor in the system; whether there is an exercise of power by the system and how this is satisfied with regard to the social actor, influencing, determining and defining his relationship with the system.

As Parsons argued, in order for the social system to maintain its structure and succeed in reproducing it, it needs not only the institutions and therefore the subsystems that compose it, but it is necessary that there must be an active participation of social actors in its functioning; Therefore, many complicated processes are necessary to maintain the functioning of any social system; If its members never intervened, a society would cease to exist very soon (Parsons, 1991). By associating each functional imperative with an optimal level to be achieved, an expression of the completion of the internal organizational state of the system, the following proposal for the analysis of the relationship between the social system and the social actor is configured:
    1. Efficacy – Effective Power – Marginalization
    2. Efficiency – Efficient Power – Ostracization
    3. Adaptation – Adaptive Power – Discrimination
    4. Integration – Integrative Power – Incorporation

Starting from the elementary definition of power, it is identified in the "capacity of an individual or collective subject to achieve intentionally and not by accident certain ends in a specific sphere of social life, or to impose his will on it, despite any contrary will and/or active or passive resistance of another subject or group of subjects" (Gallino, 1978, 529); it is possible to associate to each of the functions that define Parsons' functional imperatives a different form of power, which is expressed and concretized in different ways.

According to the analysis, power is also considered as a form of social relationship within which the reference system is placed in a higher dimension than the actor, who, not holding any dominant position, is conditioned by the actions of the holder of power, such as the system.

Going into the merits of the above list, in the first case, if the system has as its main objective the achievement of an effective organizational state through the visualization and pursuit of well-defined goals, in order to satisfy this effective state, it proposes a utilitarian attitude. The

reference system orients its actions according to an approach imbued with economic-instrumental rationality, to which it subjects the social actor through the exercise of effective power. The latter, where it expresses an inability to adapt to the needs of the system, is marginalized by it and therefore positioned at the boundaries of the same.

Therefore, it is possible to understand marginalization as a relationship that is the expression of an action of the system towards the social actor, a determining element of the very concept of marginality since the term "has a meaning only if the social system or systems with respect to which a given subject or plurality of subjects occupies a marginal position are specified (Gallino, 1978, 423).

The social actor, if not seduced by effective power, is subjected to the orientation of the action of the system, which, by virtue of the social actor's rebellion against adaptation, rejects him to the margins, excluding him from the center of systemic power and relocating him instead outside, while constraining him to belong to the marginalizing system.

If we want to find a definition of the social actor forced to the margins, we immediately refer to the figure of the *marginal man* elaborated by Park, who argues that the marginal man is a cultural hybrid, with a divided self and at the same time capable of combining the knowledge and conscience of those who do not participate in certain goods and rights with the attitude and critical judgment of those who are on the margins of society (Ciucci, 2006).
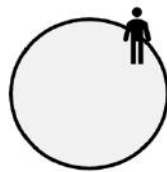

Figure 1. Graphic representation of Marginalization.

Following the theoretical line traced, it is possible to highlight a second relationship between the social system and the social actor, which is not effective but efficient. The system motivates its action according to efficient power, capable of satisfying the structural motivations of the system through the realization of a common project. The system, as the dominant subject of the relationship, directs its action towards a precise and determined goal, the achievement of which itself represents the enterprise.

The efficient function is expressed in totalizing ways, to the point of functionalizing any element and any dimension of the system itself, exercising a form of efficient power over the social actor such that, if not participating in the mission, he will be excluded. The only reaction allowed in the efficient relationship is an action motivated by full cooperation in achieving the system objective, understood as cooperation and therefore the execution of highly specific and predetermined actions. Where this hypothesis does not occur, ostracization represents the orientation of the system towards the social actor.

Efficient power, exercised as an instrument of influence in the maximum expression of the efficient function according to the scheme of functional imperatives, responds to the rebellion of the social actor with expulsion from the system, ostracizing the individual and confining him outside the structural limits of the system itself, thus justifying his inefficiency with respect to the achievement of the set goals.

The social actor represents an object of hostility, to the point of fulfilling the role of foreigner, who is described by Simmel as "fixed in a certain spatial sphere, or in an environment in which the determinacy of limits is analogous to the spatial one; but his position in this sphere is essentially determined by the fact that he does not belong to it from the beginning, that he injects into it qualities that do not derive from it or cannot derive from it" (Simmel, 2018, p. 821), confirming how non-subordination to efficient power constitutes the positioning, in the form of expulsion, of the social actor.
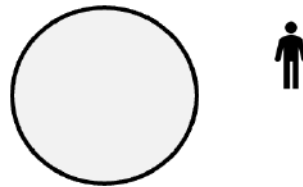

Figure 2. Graphical representation of Ostracization.

With regard to the third orientation, the social system relates to the social actor by exercising a form of adaptive power, through which it preserves the systemic structural balance while not excluding relations with the external environment. The enhancement of the adaptive function, and therefore the exercise of an adaptive power, forces the social actor to adopt a set of passive behaviors designed not to modify and/or hinder the set of actions carried out by the resilient system. The result is an immobility and impotence in action on the part of the social actor, who, unable to resist the intrinsic adaptation of the system, is overwhelmed by it.

Because of the adaptive power exerted by the system, the social actor remains positioned within it, but in a new and different spatial form, which attests to being the victim of a discriminatory systemic action.

Therefore, discrimination represents the relationship between the social system and the social actor that is expressed in the form of adaptive action by virtue of the power exercised by the system over the actor. The system is incapable of integrating or expelling the actor and therefore ghettoizes him, bringing him back to a situation of isolation and confinement. The subject remains in the system, is inserted into it, but is in turn relocated within a subsystem, which provides an illusion of integration: confinement describes a spatial dimension capable of limiting interactions and therefore making the individual and his reactions to the resilient system inactive. The *subsystem* generated by the system can be interpreted in the light of Gordon Allport's *in-group* and *out-group* concepts. *The in-group*, in the proposed orientation, refers to the resilient system and as such is distinguished from the subgroup precisely by virtue of its conformity imposed as a supreme value, i.e., "it is constituted through the recognition of belonging to a 'we' and the sharing of 'a web of habits', with respect to which the individual is constantly called upon to be loyal and compliant" (Alietti, 2023, 109). The

discrepancy of the social actor and therefore the "refusal of the majority group [system] to accept change" (Alietti, 2023, 122) produces discrimination and confinement to the *out-group*.
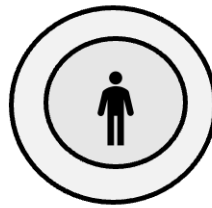
Figure 3. Graphic representation of Discrimination.

Finally, the last guideline describes a relationship between the system and the social actor that unfolds in the form of integrative action. By once again understanding the system as a superordinate entity, through the exercise of an integrated power capable of conditioning the behavior of others, it will tend to preserve its own boundaries and order, stemming any form of violation in this regard, and instead dictating a horizon of meaning that is widely shared.

The social system of reference therefore acts according to traditional modalities inspired by an exercise of integrative power in order to incorporate and make the nucleus of the system the social actor, who, limited in his actions, will recognize as his own structural characteristics those of the system that has skilfully incorporated him.

The relationship elaborated as an action of incorporation of the actor by the system places the subject at the center, at the nucleus, realizing a real annexation to unity. As Mauss argued with respect to the process of "inculturation" and imitation of traditional practices, in this new spatial dimension the social actor lives and acts according to the structures of the system in which he is completely incorporated, becoming a transposition of it.

The system, through integrative power, is the only possible system for the social actor, who conforms and merges within the system itself through the sharing of aims, functions and structural characteristics.

Bourdieu provides an example of this through habitus, a concept that expresses a collective and individual dimension in that what must be normatively said, done, expressed and desired with regard to the objective, social or subjective worlds refers to an implicit and explicit common knowledge internalized by the subjects in their cognitions, behaviors, body postures and feelings (Bourdieu, 1990), an elaboration that provides a key to understanding the fourth proposed positioning.

Figure 4. Graphical representation of the Incorporation.

Conclusion

Starting from Parsons' functional imperatives, it is possible to imagine the main states to which a social system tends, hypothesizing the ways in which the system itself achieves its objectives and conditions the actions of the social actors that constitute it. In particular, by associating specific forms of power with the goals programmed by the system, it is possible to imagine how the social actor suffers, participates or is repulsive towards the exercise of power. On the basis of the effects that this practice produces, the social actor will define his place, his location inside, outside, or on the margins of the system itself, a positioning that will condition his attitude and his actions. In relation to the type of power exercised, the position of the social actor who suffers this power changes, and depending on it, directs his action in a contrary way to the system to which he belongs or associates himself with it, becoming an integral part of it. Phenomena such as discrimination, marginalization, incorporation or expulsion can be read by excluding variables of a typically cultural nature and therefore, according to this interpretation, through the four-field model having as its object of investigation the relationship between social actor and system, it is possible to provide a general overview aimed at understanding how the individual is directed and governed to a certain extent by the system within which he is inserted. At the same time, it should be pointed out that considering the social actor as a neutral agent represents one of the limitations of research. Indeed, the social action of the actor as an autonomous individual is not taken into consideration, but only the choices that he makes in relation to what is required by the system are highlighted. For reasons of systematicity, it has been deliberately chosen not to consider the multiplicity of paths that can be followed by the social actor, elements that would have inevitably made the analysis extremely complex and difficult to frame.

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Contact email: cinzia.cilento@unicampania.it