CHAPTER 14

Action Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of "action" has played a prominent role in sociology ever since the institutionalization of the field as an academic discipline in the late 19th century. For example, Max Weber's (1968) best-known theoretical work, *Economy and Society*, opens with a set of influential definitions regarding the conceptualization of action and its distinction from the notion of behavior. Weber's fourfold typology of action provides the foundational categories for his approach to sociology. But Weber is by far not the only sociologist who developed his theoretical conceptualizations from the notion of action. One generation after Weber, Talcott Parsons synthesized the theoretical achievements of the "founding fathers" of sociology and the utilitarian tradition in an action–theoretical framework that takes the "unit act" as its basic component. His masterpiece of 1937, *The Structure of Social Action*, still has to be seen as the most important such attempt at theoretical synthesis in the middle of the 20th century. The unit act, which stands at the core of the "voluntaristic" approach of Parsons' sociology, gives special emphasis to the role of ultimate values and normative orientations in actions and to "effort" as a category for depicting the active involvement of actors. Other sociologists who stand for the centrality of action theory in the discipline can easily be named. Among them are George Herbert Mead and Alfred Schutz. More recently Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens have based their approaches on theories of action that follow the sociological tradition but make use also of theories of action that have been developed in other disciplines like psychology and philosophy.

This already indicates that the centrality of the concept of action is by far not an exclusive feature of sociology. Most importantly, the discipline of economics developed along a specific model of action that stands in the utilitarian tradition and claims that actors' decisions can be understood from their motivation to optimize their utility. Disputes in economics address the question whether the optimizing assumption is meant as an empirical description of action or as a normative recommendation as to how actors should act. But it is uncontroversial that

Since the task of this chapter is the presentation of a specific action–theoretic approach developed much more extensively in books and articles by the two authors, we rely in a few passages on earlier formulations of our position.

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economic processes should be analyzed on the basis of a particular notion of action. In psychology the cognitive turn during the last decades has increasingly opened up the perspective of founding psychology on a theory of action instead of behavior. In philosophy there are again separate traditions of theorizing about human action, e.g., in analytical philosophy, pragmatism, and some versions of Marxism.

Despite the diversity of the concept of action in the social sciences and in philosophy the debate on action in sociology tends to focus primarily on rational choice theory on the one hand and normative theories of action on the other. Rational choice theories have gained importance in sociology since the 1960s, a development that can be understood as a reaction to the dominance of normative theories during the two preceding decades. This has not silenced, however, normative theories and their critique of the rational actor model. But arguments between the two sides have been exchanged so often now that further theoretical gains are hardly to be expected from the continuation of this controversy. Instead, it would be more fruitful to take advantage of the existing diversity of action theories in the other disciplines for the development of new theoretical insights in sociology. This has been the approach, for instance, of Anthony Giddens (1984) who incorporated findings from developmental psychology and phenomenology into his structuration theory. Giddens emphasizes the role of cognitive rules and routines but also the developmental preconditions of identity formation. However, the alternative that reaches even further beyond the routinized exchanges between rationalist and normativist theories of action seems to us an action–theoretic conceptualization that focuses on the notion of the *creativity* of human action. Such a theory can be based primarily on the tradition of American pragmatism that originated in philosophy and psychology but also has a significant sociological tradition. The central thesis of such an approach is the claim that a third model of action can be added to the two predominant models of action—rational and normatively oriented action—namely, a model that emphasizes the creative character of human action. The intention of such a theory expands to the claim that this third model overarches both of the others. It does not simply draw attention to an additional type of action, relatively neglected to date, but rather asserts that there is a creative dimension to all human action, a dimension that is only inadequately expressed in the models of rational and normatively oriented action.

This proposition will structure our presentation of action theory in this chapter. After a brief outline of the rational actor model and the normative model of action, we will discuss key concepts of such a theory of the creativity of action as it has been developed more extensively in a book of one of us before (Joas, 1996). Subsequently, we will summarize the main results of the debate about Parsons' action frame of reference and develop the agenda for the further elaboration of a theory of the creativity of action. In the last part, we shall apply the outlined theoretical concepts to the understanding of two economic action situations: cooperation and innovation. Here, too, the argument is based on a more extensive elaboration (Beckert, 2002). This will help to clarify the significance of the theory of creativity of action for the understanding of action in one concrete social arena.

THE RATIONALITY OF ACTION AND ITS TACIT ASSUMPTIONS

Within the social sciences the utilitarian rational actor model rose to prominence primarily in economics where it achieved a paradigmatic status for the discipline. In its basic form it assumes that actors enter a situation with preferences between different bundles of goods and

choose the bundle that maximizes their utility. This choice takes place under constraints, most importantly the limitation of goods that an actor owns and therefore can exchange. Sociology has not been unaffected by this model of action. It entered Max Weber's typology of action under the name of "purposively rational action," though it took on some additional meaning in Weber's work as a whole, and has had an increased significance in sociology and political science since the 1960s mainly under the heading of "rational choice theory." The peak of this development was undoubtedly the publication of James Coleman's masterpiece *Foundations of Social Theory* in 1990.

The increased significance of the rational actor model in sociology, however, cannot distract from the fact that this understanding of action has been judged by many sociologists as alien to sociological thinking proper. The competition between economics and sociology is largely founded on radically opposed action theories. The most influential sociological alternative to rational actor theory has been the normative model of action. In it, action is not seen as based on individual preferences but analyzed as being anchored in normative orientations that contribute to the constitution of action goals and to the selection of means. Actors have a shared normative orientation that allows them to coordinate their acts. For Durkheim, but also for Parsons, the stability of social order was only possible because of such common normative action orientations.

The clear-cut opposition of rational actor theory on the one hand and the normative theory of action on the other easily leads to the failure of recognition of a common deficiency that both theories share. Both theories proceed from a notion of rationality and place all action that does not suit the model into a residual category of nonrational action. In economics rational action is contrasted with irrational action which is defined as the deviation from the optimal decision strategy. Vilfredo Pareto distinguished between logical action and nonlogical action, reserving the latter category for all action that did not fit into the first category. Even Max Weber's more differentiated typology of action follows a logic of gradual abandonment. While purposively rational action satisfies completely the conditions for rationality, the three other types are defined by their deficiencies judged from the standard provided by the first type: in value–rational action, consideration of the consequences of action is omitted; in affectual action, consideration of values; and in traditional action, consideration even of ends. The ideal remains an action that rationalizes ends, values, and consequences of action. This holds true independently of the exact determination of the notion of rationality, but the same dilemma can be found in normative theories of action. When we conceive of rationality as morally reflective behavior, this type will be called rational by normatively oriented theories. In opposition to theories that see utility maximization as the norm of rationality, such amoral orientations toward one's own interests are now put into the category of nonrationality.[1]

Defining action theory from a notion of rationality and contrasting the privileged concept of rationality with residual categories of nonrationality dramatizes discussions in action theory as a choice between different notions of rationality. Utilitarian and normative theories of action thus find a common discursive ground. For the theoretical understanding of action, however, the fixation on different concepts of rationality might omit more than it reveals. At the very least, it leaves unquestioned those presuppositions on which the utilitarian and the normative notion of rational action are based alike. Theories that proceed from a type of rational action

[1]Even Habermas (1984/1987), whose communicative notion of rationality certainly is the boldest and most promising new approach in the field of a comprehensive understanding of rationality, develops his types of action out of his types of rationality, and this leads to a rather poor version of *action* theory (see Joas, 1993, pp. 125–153). While we feel quite close to Habermas' theory of rationality, our views on action theory deviate sharply from Habermas' approach.

assume at least three things, whether they have a narrow or a comprehensive, a utilitarian or a normativist understanding of rationality. First, they assume the actor as being able to act in a purposeful manner. Second, they assume the actor as being able to control, to dominate, or to instrumentalize his or her own body. Third, they assume the autonomy of the individual actor toward his or her fellow actors and toward the environment.

While utilitarian and normative theories can admit that these presuppositions do not always hold, this does not have any consequences for their theoretical understanding of action. If an actor cannot clearly define the goals of his or her course of action, if bodily control is lost, or if autonomy cannot be maintained, the chances for rational decisions decrease. But this restricted empirical validity of the theory is attributed to a deficiency of the actor that can be ignored for theory construction because it does not affect the notion of rationality. An illustration of this can be found in the way rationalist theories react to the fact that human beings are not rational actors from the beginning of their lives on, but have to learn over many years how to act in order to enhance utility or to make moral judgments. Instead of incorporating these genetic processes as informative for the theoretical understanding of action, they are vastly ignored because they do not add anything to the predefined rational model of action.

We maintain that the fixation on the notion of rationality constitutes a crucial limitation of both utilitarian and normative theories of action. While these theories can be fruitful analytical tools if the tacit assumptions on which they are based are fulfilled, they remain partial theories of action because they do not systematically integrate the theoretical consequences that derive from the fact that in many instances the tacit assumptions are not fulfilled. By choosing the path of a genetic reconstruction of the three tacit assumptions, within the idea of rational action the central role that the creativity of action plays for the understanding of action and its coordination has to be demonstrated. This can here be done, of course, only in a summary way.

Intentionality

The rational actor model is based on an analytical action frame that focuses on means and ends as its central categories. It assumes that actors possess goals and apply means to achieve these goals while they take constraints on their possible courses of action into account. In this sense goals can be viewed as the causes of action. This teleological perspective on action not only has been the basis for utilitarian theories but has been advocated by classical sociologists such as Weber and Parsons as well. Sociological accounts within the teleological tradition typically take norms and values into consideration as well but otherwise subscribe to the same model of action.

Despite its dominant role in much of sociological theory the teleological model of action has not remained unquestioned within sociology. In modern sociological theory the most refined critique of it can be found in a book entitled *The Notion of Purpose and the Rationality of Systems* written by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1968).[2] On the basis of a critical assessment of Weber's theory of bureaucracy Luhmann rejects the idea that goals can provide sufficient explanation for the selection of means. The reason for this is that the complexity of social situations does not allow for the identification of the multiple causes and their interrelations, which lead to an outcome. It would be impossible for actors to analyze a situation fully enough to understand means–ends relationships accurately. Luhmann proposes instead to see

[2]Niklas Luhmann (1968), *Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität*. Unfortunately, this book has never been translated into English. In American sociology it is not Luhmann's pathbreaking book but the development of the new institutionalism which caused a similar reorientation (see Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).

goal-setting from a functionalist perspective as a means to reduce the complexity of the situation. By setting a goal, the fluidity of human interaction is interrupted through "systematizing the experiential and behavioral potentialities that manifest themselves in natural experience and interpreting them in such a way that they become available for the purposes of comparison and thus accessible to rationalization" (Luhmann, 1968, p. 29; our translation). With regard to the model of ends and means, Luhmann sees it as fulfilling the selective function of perceiving and evaluating the consequences of actions.

Luhmann's critique of the means–ends scheme is usually read as an early step toward his radically functionalist systems theory. In this reading the critique of the teleological model of action provides reasons for leaving action theory altogether behind. Though this is undoubtedly a correct interpretation of Luhmann's further theoretical development, the reading tends to overlook at the same time that his critique of the teleological interpretation of action is based on phenomenological concepts and especially on the pragmatist theory of action as developed by John Dewey. Luhmann and Dewey drew radically different consequences for possible theory development, but they did so based on a fairly similar critique of the teleological model of action. In clear distinction from Luhmann, Dewey used the critique of the means–ends scheme for a radical reformulation of action theory. This opens a path for maintaining action theory in spite of the critique of its teleological version. This path is followed in the theory of the creativity of action.

Dewey's alternative to the teleological understanding of action sets out from the point that ends are not simply anticipations of future conditions that actors bring into being. In the radically "presentistic" metaphysics of pragmatism (Dewey, 1958 [1925]; Mead, 1932) goals belong to the present. Only as such they can become part of the action situation. The central notion Dewey introduces to express the role of goals for the organization of action is the concept of "ends-in-view." By this he refers to the fact that goals are not externally set but emerge in the action process itself in a reciprocal interaction between means and goals. At the beginning of an action process goals are frequently unspecific and only vaguely understood. They become clearer once the actor has a better understanding of the possible means to achieve the ends; even new goals will arise on the basis of newly available means. The more concrete understanding of goals or their change makes in turn a new perspective on available means possible. This reciprocal process between means and ends structures action. It anchors the notion of goals firmly in the action process itself and argues against the external setting of goals as advocated in teleological theories of action. This allows one to perceive perception and cognition not as acts preceding action but as part of the action process that is inherently connected to the situational context. Goal-setting does not take place as a cognitive act prior to action but is based on prereflective aspirations that are operative in the action situation. The aspirations are located in our bodies. The body's capabilities, habits, and ways of relating to the environment form the background to conscious goal-setting, i.e., to intentionality.

If this nonteleological understanding of intentionality provides the basis for a viable theory of action, it radically changes our picture of perception, the regulation of action, the setting of motives and plans, and the creation of goals. Perception now can be interpreted as an action-related phenomenon. The world exists not simply as an external counterpart to our internal self but is structured by our capacities for and experiences of action. It exists in the form of possible actions. Our perception is directed toward the situational context of what we perceive. Since the basic forms of our capacity for action lie in the intentional movement of our body in connection with locomotion, object manipulation, and communication, our world is initially structured according to these dimensions. In our perception we divide the world into categories such as accessible and inaccessible, familiar and unfamiliar, controllable and

uncontrollable, responsive and unresponsive. Only if these action-related expectations are not met, the world transpires to be inaccessible and unfamiliar, uncontrollable or unresponsive for us. In such a situation it becomes an external object. This is, however, an exceptional situation. The typical relationship to the world is characterized by a familiarity that is anchored in our capacity for action.

A second change of our understanding of action due to the introduction of the nonteleological concept of intentionality affects the account of the regulation of action. The fact that every action takes place in a situation plays a role for the teleological theory of action only to the extent that an actor has to take into account the contingent conditions of the situation. These are the available means, the unalterable conditions, but also prevailing norms and values. For the theory of creativity of action the significance of the situation is far greater: Action is not only *contingent* on the structure of the situation but the situation is *constitutive* of action. This means that the situation is not simply a neutral field that actors enter with preset goals; instead, the situation itself exercises a regulative role for our responses in a specific action context. The ability to act presupposes that the actor judges the kind of situation he or she is in; thus, a judgment of the situation entails a judgment about the appropriateness of possible responses. A very accurate term for the conceptualization of the relationship between the actor and the situation has been introduced by Dietrich Böhler (1985), who speaks of a "quasi-dialogical" relationship. Quasi-dialogical means that actions can be understood as responses to demands by the situation. This shall not imply any kind of behavioral determinism of action. Actors do enter situations with goals, but, as the concept of ends-in-view suggests, action plans get changed and reformulated as a result of the confrontation with the situation.

This leads us to the third change in the understanding of action, namely, to the altered role of motives and plans for action. According to the teleological model of action, motives appear to be the cause of action and plans are seen as the anticipation of the course of action to reach the goal that is only put into practice in the actual action process. From the perspective of the theory of creativity of action, action can never be explained solely from the motives and the plans of the actor. The reason for this is that though plans and motives may place us in situations, they do not provide complete answers to the challenges actors confront in the situation. If action is based on our prereflective, practical ways of relating to the situation, the concrete course even of purely individual action can never fully be traced back to some specific intentions. Moreover, even designing a plan or formulating motives must be seen as products of prereflective aspirations and not as the factual causes of action.

This touches already on the fourth change in the understanding of action, namely, at the image we have of the very act of setting and creating goals. According to the teleological view actors design their goals independently from influences of the outside world. Talcott Parsons (1937) has stressed this point in his critique of utilitarianism and answered it by referring to the role of ultimate values for the socially coordinated setting of ends. As Harold Garfinkel (1984) has argued, this, however, is not a satisfactory answer because norms and values could only steer action if they would provide unequivocal answers on how to act in a situation. Garfinkel has persuasively argued, based on his microsociological experiments on social coordination, that this is not the case. An adequate theoretical understanding of values in human action has to conceptualize instead the interaction between the values embodied in prereflective aspirations and the situation where we establish which course of action accords with our values. This concretization or specification of values is an exercise in the creativity of action. In contrast to the teleological or the normative interpretation of action, goal-setting is understood as such a

creative concretization of values. This refers again to a dialogical process between the actor and the situation.

Corporeality

Although the expositions on the first tacit assumption of teleological action theories would gain from further elaboration (but see Joas, 1996, pp. 148–167), we will now turn to the instrumentality of the body as the second tacit assumption. In rational actor theory, but also in Parsons' early version of action theory, the body plays only a marginal role as the locus of cognitive or evaluative mental processes. It is seen as a technical instrument for the processing and expression of information, intentions, and calculations. Otherwise it is simply assumed that the actor exercises an effective disciplinary control over his or her body. One can speak of a sort of theoretical prudishness in much of action theory (Turner, 1984). The anthropologies of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault contributed to an analysis of the historical processes in which bodily control became a dominant aspect of modern culture and identity (Honneth & Joas, 1988). But it seems a fair criticism of these authors to say that they overgeneralize the findings of their historical research and overlook contradicting developments in the civilization process. A similar claim can be made with regard to action theories that ignore the unstable balances of instrumental and noninstrumental relationships to our bodies.

The type of phenomena we have in mind when we speak of a noninstrumental relationship to our body have been expressed in the theory of creativity of action (Joas, 1996, pp. 167–184) in the notions of "passive intentionality" and "meaningful loss of intentionality." They refer to the possibility of loosening the discipline over the body either as an intentional act or as a nonintentional response to a situation. An example for passive intentionality is the process of falling asleep. To repeat the thought, "I want to fall asleep now," again and again, after not having been able to fall asleep for several hours, is not only likely to create the opposite effect but also can be seen as a demonstration of the limits of active intentionality. We can, however, very well intentionally attempt to release control by accepting and sponsoring the prereflective intentions of our body and thereby reach the intended result: falling asleep. Examples from creative problem solving to sexuality can easily be added. "Meaningful loss of intentionality" is the term used for those forms of action in which we lose the ability to act rationally, because the ambiguity of a situation or its emotional quality are so overwhelming that the actor loses his distance to the situation and disciplinary control over his or her own actions. Laughing and weeping are examples for the meaningful loss of intentionality.

While these remarks give reason for the necessity of an anthropological basis for the theory of action, it also must be clarified *how* the role of the body shall be integrated into action theory. The first point here is that the body becomes part of our intentionality via the development of a "body image." This term refers to the way in which an actor experiences his or her body subjectively. The actor has a consciousness about the morphological structure of the body, its parts and its attitudes, its movements, and its boundaries. In the theory of creativity of action it is maintained that the body image is the result of an intersubjective process. Based on writings by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1982) and George Herbert Mead, it is argued that the instrumental relationship to one's body presupposes the constitution of the "permanent object" and that the permanent object presupposes elementary abilities of role-taking (Joas, 1985). It implies that the formation of a body image is connected to the development of the communicative abilities of the child. This goes beyond theories of the body image that

emphasized neurological mechanisms, psychological representations, or as in the case of Merleau-Ponty mostly tried to integrate the cognitive and the affectual dimensions of the body image.

The theory of creativity of action maintains that the relationship between actors and their bodies is shaped by the structures of interaction in which an actor develops. We can respond to bodily signals sensitively but we also can treat our bodies like an instrument that we attempt to subdue to our cognitive intentions. If the actor's body is not immediately given, but only via a body image, and if this body image is the result of an intersubjective process, then we find sociality right in the core of human agency. The term used to describe this aspect is "primary sociality," which means that sociality in this sense is not the result of conscious interaction but precedes the ability to act as an individual.

Sociality

This refers to the third tacit assumption of the rational action models. It is the least tacit of the three assumptions insofar as critical voices on this point always have been quite frequent and in a certain sense even constitutive for the discipline of sociology. For socialization research the question of the social conditions for the genesis of the self, of autonomous individuality, are crucial. Only the narrow versions of rational action simply presuppose the autonomy of individual actors and ignore the problem of the constitution of their autonomy. The normativist models are connected to a theory of the internalization of norms, and the theory of communicative action itself aims at a notion of primary intersubjectivity. This point will not be developed here in any detail (but see Joas, 1985, 1996, pp. 184–195). Only one possible objection against the thesis of primary sociality shall be discussed briefly. The objection is that sociality is only a genetic but not a structural precondition of human action. To refute this objection one has to face the eruptive forms of sociality in which the boundaries of the self are shattered. There are two main approaches to conceptualize the self-transcending experiences or primary sociality in mature persons. One goes back to romantic speculations about the possibility of a return to Dionysus and of the Dionysian as an evasion from the cultural *aporiae* of the modern age. This found its most stimulating expression in Nietzsche whose passionate interest in the self-enhancement of the creative personality sensitized him to the tension between creativity and the exclusionary mechanisms of a self that depends on closure and the maintenance of consistency. Nietzsche was willing to sacrifice identity for the sake of creativity, or, to put it better, to consider creative self-enhancement as a liberation from the coercion to be a determinate, that is, restricted individual. The other version allowed for an integration of creativity and the formation of a consistent self and considered Dionysian experiences as a form of the religious experience that collectivities need for their revitalization. Within sociology, this found its classical form in Durkheim's analysis of the elementary forms of religious life. Durkheim's analyses of collective effervescence and of the origins of the sacred do not refer to the genesis of obligatory rules or norms, but to the genesis of values and world constitutive ideals. The birth of the religious idea for Durkheim lies in the experience of a loss of self-identity. For him the experience of self-transcendence is not a primitive or irrational marginal phenomenon of sociality but the constitutive basis for any affectual social attachment to other individuals, collectivities, or values. From this attachment flow our deepest motives and the cohesion of our personalities. Hence, we have never reached action ability once and forever, but can feel the permanent necessity to reconstruct our identity faced with the unanticipated events of life.

THE "ACTION FRAME OF REFERENCE" AND ITS ELABORATION

This brief summary of an attempt to genetically reconstruct the three tacit dimensions in both the rational and the normatively oriented approaches can answer only a few questions arising in the context of a systematic elaboration of the alternative conception. While such a full elaboration of the theory of creativity of action goes beyond the goals of this chapter, it is at least possible to present some of the main tasks on this agenda. This can be achieved by recalling the questions that arose in the long and rich debate about possible deficiencies of Parsons' action frame of reference (see Camic, 1989; Levine, 1980). For two related reasons, Parsons' (1937) *The Structure of Social Action* represents the appropriate reference point in action theory for measuring the advances made by the presented theoretical conceptualization. First, Parsons provided a definite critique of utilitarian theories of action and thereby achieved a crucial advancement within action theory. Second, the action frame of reference represents the most important systematic statement of action theory and as such has structured much of the later sociological theorizing about action in the 20th century. This significance of Parsons for the framing of later debates allows one to assess the achievements of the theory of creativity of action from its capability to address the systematic problems that have been identified in Parsons' early theorizing and have provided starting points for alternative conceptualizations in action theory. We do not have in mind here the intricate interpretive questions with respect to Parsons' interpretations of sociological classics or regarding the omission of other figures from his attempt at theoretical synthesis. It is exclusively the systematic aspect that is of importance for the further development of action theory.

The debate about the action frame of reference in Parsons' theory, which contained the actor, the situation of action, i.e., conditions and means, the goals of action, norms, and values, produced at least six major unsolved problems for future theory construction: (1) What is the appropriate place of the consequences of action? (2) How can the relationship between actors be integrated into the action frame? (3) How can the cognitive dimension become part of the action frame? (4) What are the limits of the means–end scheme for the analysis of action? (5) How are norms and values being specified in order to serve as orientations in concrete action situations? (6) How do norms emerge and values arise? This list of problems brings together the most relevant elements in the critiques of authors like Niklas Luhmann, Alfred Schutz, Stephen Warner, Harold Garfinkel, Anthony Giddens, and Alain Touraine. These authors quite often went beyond mere criticism and developed their own solutions of the problems or weak spots they had detected in Parsons' theory.

1. The first-mentioned problem had even been addressed in the Parsonian camp itself. In the much neglected chapter on Pareto in Parsons' (1937) *Structure of Social Action*, Parsons himself had important things to say about unintended consequences of action, but he did not really integrate these insights into the action frame of reference at this point of his intellectual development. This changed later on when Parsons and Robert Merton found in the role of unintended consequences of action major support for their plea in favor of functionalism. The epistemological critique of the logic of functionalist reasoning, however, led to a rediscovery of this topic as the point of departure for nonfunctionalist social theories, e.g., in the work of Anthony Giddens.

2. Parsons' action frame contains only one singular actor. It has been argued that the systematic reason for Parsons' omission of Simmel lay in the difficulties he had with the alternative assumption of taking social relationships as the point of departure. A similar point

could be made regarding the only partial integration of George Herbert Mead's achievements and the neglect of symbolic interactionism in the Parsonian school. The followers of Simmel and Mead and, in our days, Jürgen Habermas with his emphasis on communicative action have developed this point much farther.

3. The third question had already been raised in Alfred Schutz's phenomenological critique of Parsons with its emphasis on the subjective perspective of actors. Steven Warner (1978) wrote an important article in which he claimed that paying the cognitive element its due is one of the most pressing problems of action theory. In his last phase, Parsons seemed to take this suggestion seriously and began to incorporate Jean Piaget's cognitive psychology into his own theoretical approach. But again, mostly authors outside the immediate Parsonian tradition went further in this direction. On the basis of the phenomenological literature, Anthony Giddens introduced the important distinction between recognized and unrecognized conditions of action into the action frame of reference.

4. While Parsons stuck closely to the means–end scheme in his first major book and even chose a pertinent quotation from Max Weber for the motto of this work, in his later writings he came closer to integrating an expressivist model of action into his theory (Staubmann, 1995). As has been demonstrated above, the critique of the means–end scheme is crucial both for Luhmann's radicalization of Parsons' functionalism and for the pragmatist alternative.

5. The problem of how norms and values relate to concrete situations of action, whether we can simply assume this relationship to be one of "application" or whether we should rather see it as a creative process of ever risky specification became the crucial dividing line between Harold Garfinkel's "ethnomethodology" and Parsonianism in a narrower sense. Garfinkel had, of course, been influenced by phenomenology; he also could have found inspiration in the pragmatist writings. Ethnomethodology since the 1960s has produced an enormous amount of empirical microsociological findings on these processes of specification; it is an important task for action–theoretical work today to relate these findings back to the systematic elaboration of the action frame of reference.

6. The only authors who early on posed the question of the genesis of values in the context of debates about Parsons' action frame of reference were Alain Touraine, writing outside of the Parsonian school, and Shmuel Eisenstadt, arguing from within. In Touraine's case, the objection that Parsons could not explain the genesis of values was intimately bound up with a version of the ethnomethodological critique, which is directed at the problem of the situation-specific application of values. In his sociological research on industry Touraine had gained the experience that decisions mostly cannot be interpreted as merely applications of general principles to certain situations, but are rather the result of transactions between actors with heterogeneous interests and divergent power potentials (Touraine, 1964). While Touraine was initially in danger of regarding culture as a mere resource in power struggles, he increasingly moved away from this viewpoint and understands culture as intrinsically diverse and conflictual.

If we cannot put culture into a transcendental realm of values (or cognitions), we have to understand how it is not only effective in action but also how it arises from actions and the experiences they entail. Of all Parsons' successors, Shmuel Eisenstadt has placed the most emphasis on the problem of the genesis of values as a subject of research. His background in Martin Buber's philosophy of creativity provided him with the vantage point from which he could perceive such shortcomings in Parsons' work (Eisenstadt, 1995). This point is related to the objections mostly raised by cultural anthropologists and historians: that in his work Parsons does not ascertain "values" through deep hermeneutic penetration into cultures, nor does he represent them in terms of a "thick description" (Clifford Geertz) of their nature. For

Parsons, "values" are analytic constructs abstracted from a culture as a whole and then designated as responsible for concrete actions. This objection has been taken up within the Parsonian tradition by sociologists like Robert Bellah and Jeffrey Alexander. In our opinion, the problem of the genesis of values had already been addressed very forcefully in the pragmatist tradition, mostly in the writings on religion by William James and John Dewey. They derived their solution of this problem from an analysis of the experience of self-transcendence, which had also been so crucial for Durkheim's sociology of religion.

The pragmatist theory of action sketched above in its present form already has taken a number of the problems on this list into consideration. The pragmatist approach clearly goes beyond the means–end scheme and integrates the cognitive dimension. It introduces creativity into its analysis of the specification of norms and values. At least in its Meadian version, the concept of "primary sociality" allows one to avoid a monological concept of action from the outset. The interplay between intentions and the experience of unintended consequences of action also is crucial for the pragmatist model. In a book on the "genesis of values" problem, the pragmatist idea that values originate in experiences of self-transcendence has been elaborated in greater detail (Joas, 2000a). But instead of providing more details about these areas or going deeper into this agenda of the ongoing theoretical project to develop a theory of the creativity of action (see also Camic, 1998; Straub, 1999; Touraine, 1999), we will now illustrate the usefulness of such a pragmatist revision of action theory in a specific area of social theorizing, an area moreover that is usually considered to be a sphere of rational action so that rational action models may seem to be ideally suited for its analysis.

AN EMPIRICAL APPLICATION: COOPERATION AND CREATIVITY IN ECONOMIC ACTION

The paradigmatic status of rational actor theory in economics has made it the privileged starting point for the investigation of economic phenomena. The sociological critique, which has accompanied economic reasoning since the formation of sociology as an academic discipline, chose mostly the path of developing normative countermodels to the assumption of utility maximization. According to this reasoning, economic action cannot be understood as the maximization of individual utility but reflects social norms and values. At the very least the notion of utility maximization has to be understood not as a natural propensity but from its social origin.

The almost ritualized opposition between utilitarian and normative theories of action in understanding economic processes and structures makes it difficult for any alternative conceptualization of action to find recognition. That such an alternative is desirable becomes apparent from the realization that teleological action theories are ill-suited to address crucial problems that become relevant in economic decision-making contexts: Modern economic settings usually are characterized by a high complexity of parameters that determine the causal structure of the situation but cannot be grasped comprehensively through rational calculation. This creates uncertainty for actors with regard to choosing the optimal strategy, a problem that exists independently from the question of which goal to pursue. In complex situations the goal of utility maximization cannot be translated into an optimizing strategy (Beckert, 1996, 2002). The issue becomes even more difficult if goals can only be described vaguely, not for normative but for logical reasons, as it is the case in innovative activities, which are concerned

with the "not yet known." The intentionality of actors cannot be guided by goals, i.e., the telos of action cannot be its cause, if means–ends relationships cannot be recognized at the beginning of the action process.

This takes up Luhmann's critique of the rational actor theory, which has been presented at the beginning of this chapter. The nonteleological theory of intentionality provides concepts for understanding this crucial action problem in economic contexts because the notion of intentionality it advocates is firmly rooted in the dynamic interplay between the goals actors pursue and the evolving features of the situation. To give proof to the claim that the theory of the creativity of action can be fruitfully applied to the understanding of core economic processes, it is useful not to analyze economic action as such but to investigate the problems actors confront in concrete settings. Two such settings, which have created large amounts of research from the rational actor perspective, are cooperation and innovation.

Rational actor theory explains cooperation with reference to rational calculation. In game theory actors choose the strategy that gives them the highest payoff, given their tolerance for risk. This leads to the well-known paradox that under certain conditions cooperation will not take place, though both actors would benefit from it. Responses to this paradox from within the rational actor model refer either to iteration, i.e., that the relation between the players will continue over many rounds of the game, or to the modification of external conditions. Threats or gratification, the investment into the inducement of norms or the installation of control mechanisms change the payoff matrix for players and give rational reasons to cooperate in situations where actors would otherwise not cooperate. Normative critiques of these models explain cooperation not based on utility maximizing but based on social norms that actors have internalized and follow even if it would be in their individual interest not to do so. Though this is a possible explanation for cooperation in situations where rational actor theory fails, it is based on the problematic assumption that actors willingly transcend their individual interests and that their partners will do so as well. Especially in the context of modern market economies this assumption is quite heroic, since it is immediately confronted with the free-rider problem.

But the rational actor model is likewise based on assumptions that are difficult to maintain in real-world situations. Here, it is not the morality of actors but their calculative capabilities that are systematically overestimated. To illustrate this point we turn to some of the calculative demands that are presupposed by the theory. Computer models show that cooperation in prisoner dilemma situations increases if the game is iterated. The rationale behind this is that actors do not defect if they expect higher gains from future cooperation which they will forgo if they cheat their partner now. To make a rational decision whether to cooperate or to defect, however, depends on how many rounds the game will actually be played. There has to be at least knowledge about the expectations that each player has with regard to the length of the game. Otherwise, players follow strategies where they either cooperate too long or not long enough for attaining optimal payoffs. Moreover, to play a strategy successfully depends on the visibility of the moves the other players make. If the other players can hide their moves, a rational reaction is impossible, as Robert Axelrod (1984, p. 100) has noted: "An individual must not be able to get away with defecting without the other individuals being able to retaliate effectively. The response requires that the defecting individual not be lost in a sea of anonymous others."

Hence, to make rational decisions is much more difficult than suggested by clear-cut textbook models. While the mentioned problems can, at least in part, be overcome in laboratory experiments through simplification of the modeled situations and sheer computational capacity, it is quite unlikely that an actor in a real situation will indeed understand all the

parameters proper to make a rational decision. While the pragmatist approach to cooperation maintains that actors may well have the intention to increase their welfare, it proceeds from the concrete action situation and advocates a fundamentally different approach as to how actors reach decisions. In a very condensed formulation it is the interpretation of the situation in acts of role-taking that explains cooperation.

The situation consists of reciprocal expectations that actors hold with regard to their mutual intentions, needs, motives, goals, and strategies. According to Mead's concept of the self, it is the ability of the actor to take the role of the other and to form expectations about his attitudes (Mead, 1934; see also Joas, 1993, pp. 217–237, 2000b). Action can only be reciprocally oriented because of the ability of role-taking. To conceive of action as intersubjectively constituted in role-taking offers an explanation for the anthropological presuppositions for coordinated social acts. But it does in addition to this also shed light on the question of how a person comes to believe that his cooperative move will not be exploited. This is the core problem of prisoner dilemma type situations.

In the process of role-taking it is not the case that an individual consciousness contemplates monologically on the possible reactions of an external object world (be it material or social) from which it is otherwise divorced. Instead, the dialogical processes through which the actor makes the world intelligible are themselves socially shaped by the representation of expectations from other actors. This is reflected in Mead's notion of social control which states that the reaction of an actor is guided by his reflection on the attitude of the group (Mead, 1964, p. 290). In this perspective, goals but also strategies have their origin not in the isolated individual consciousness but reflect the individual's interpretation of expectations of the group. These expectations form "constitutive expectancies" for actors that pattern a cognitive and practical background for decisions. Constitutive expectancies are created and reinforced in social action and supply a basis on which actors can increasingly generalize the expectation of reciprocity of action. The "rules of the game" or the "generalized other" refer to a common basis in the situation that makes cooperation partly independent from intimate knowledge of the person we cooperate with. The expectations are anchored in culturally or institutionally rooted understandings but also in power asymmetries between actors. In fact, economic theory itself can be seen as an important part of this social horizon, shaping expectations and actions of actors in economic contexts (see Callon, 1998). The generalized expectations predispose the decision on cooperation from a social horizon without assuming the elimination of contingency inherent in the situation. It remains always possible for an actor to also disappoint expectations. The freedom to choose a noncooperative strategy creates a fragility in cooperative relations, which makes their implosion an ever-present possibility. Though the fluidity of the situation is limited by the structuring impact of social rules, including legal regulations and reputation, the maintenance of desirable constitutive expectations of other actors remains, from a pragmatist perspective, a continuous task for actors for whose fulfillment they must rely on participation and communication with actors who are relevant for the cooperative act.

In the realm of the economy this communicative reinforcement of cooperation can be easily observed, for instance, in the extended marketing activities of firms. The cooperative problem can be described as a principal agent situation in which the company (agent) holds information about the product that is usually unavailable to the customer. To prevent the breakdown of the market the company has to convince potential customers that it does not take advantage of the asymmetric distribution of information. Banks, for instance, communicate especially the topic of trust to reassure their customers of the security of their investments and prevent a meltdown through panic withdrawal of assets. Even product recalls, although they are costly for companies, provide an opportunity to communicate the company's concern

for the safety of its customers. Communicative reinforcement of cooperative relationships also takes place through performative self-portrayal "on stage" (Goffman). As Giddens (1991, p. 85) has pointed out, expert systems signal trustworthiness through communicative performances of their representatives at entrance points. Lawyers show confidence for winning the case for their client in personal conversations as do flight attendants before takeoff through the performance of ritualized routines. This anchors the willingness to cooperate firmly in the communicative structure of the situation itself. While the pragmatist understanding of cooperation allows one to explain cooperative moves in situations where rational actor theory would expect defection, at the same time it makes the fragility of cooperation apparent. It rejects a model of action that sees decisions on cooperation as a calculative contemplation or as the application of internalized values. In an important theoretical contribution to economic sociology Neil Fligstein (1997, pp. 33*ff*) has identified the ability to induce cooperation as the crucial social skill of strategic actors and as an important prerequisite for the emergence of stable social fields.

The significance of innovation for the economic growth of modern capitalist societies is self-evident. For those not familiar with the history of economics it might be surprising that the integration of endogenic change into economic theory has been one of the most puzzling problems for economics in the 20th century. These problems can ultimately be traced to a specific paradox of innovation: Optimal strategies for innovative activities could only be devised if we would know at the outset what the innovation is. But if we know the innovation, there is no need for innovation anymore. The two principal questions relating to innovation are first the determination of optimal levels of investments for innovations and second the actual understanding of processes of innovative activities. With regard to the latter question, which will be discussed here, there are answers based on both variants of the teleological understanding of action: the rational actor model and normative theories.

Conceptualizations that proceed from the background of the rational actor model see innovative processes as starting with the setting of goals that provide a comparative standard for the evaluation of different means, i.e., the suggested solutions to the problem. One crucial methodological instrument is the phase-model, which portrays innovative processes as based on a plan that is structured in several independent phases and guides the activities of the innovator. There are, of course, more or less sophisticated phase models, but they all come together in subscribing to a teleological interpretation of innovative processes, in which the cognitively recognized end-stage directs the intentional activity of the designer.

Normative theories of innovation are not very widespread, but one attempt has been made by Talcott Parsons and Neil Smelser (1956) in their book *Economy and Society*. According to them the motivation to innovate is rooted in the personality system of actors that has been socialized for an efficient use of resources. Innovative processes start out of a conflict between the personality system and the integrative system of the economy, i.e., the organization of the labor process. The conflict emerges if resources are used inefficiently and is resolved through efficiency-increasing innovations.

The teleological understanding of innovation has been criticized on the basis of empirical studies of actual design processes. The interpretation of innovation as an optimizing problem would presuppose that the task of innovation could be articulated as a well-formed instrumental problem. This is not the case, however, because "design processes are inherently ill-defined, and as such possess poorly specified initial conditions, allowable operations and goals" (Eckersley, 1988, p. 87). As a consequence of this, ends can only stand in an unspecified and unclear way at the beginning of an innovative process. Empirical studies indicate even that ends are developed in the process of invention and become entirely clear

only when the innovation process has been completed. As Donald Schön (1983, p. 68) has argued: The designer "does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames the problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to the decision which he must later convert to action." This finding, which has been confirmed in numerous empirical studies on technological innovations coincides with John Dewey's concept of "ends-in-view," which was presented here in the context of a non-teleological concept of intentionality. According to this concept ends are loosely defined action plans that structure current action on the basis of the perception of the situation.

The correspondence between empirical design studies and the theory of creativity of action becomes apparent also in the description of the research process itself. Donald Schön (1983) summarized the formation and clarification of goals for innovation as a "dialogue" between the designer and the situation in which at the beginning only vaguely understood problems and solutions become clearer until a solution has been reached. This constitutive situation relatedness of innovation finds theoretical backing in Mead's discussion of instrumental action. For Mead the way of appropriation of physical objects is not so distinct from communication with other actors. As in social interaction, the relationship to physical objects demands the actor to take the role of that object. The designer has to indicate to himself expected characteristics of the object, for example, that a brick has a certain weight. By indicating these expectations he takes the role of the object and anticipates its "reaction." The actual lifting of the brick will either confirm the expectation or create a surprise if it is much lighter or much heavier than expected. Then the relationship to the physical object will change. The discrepancy between the perception of a problem in a situation and routines blocks the unreflected continuation of action. The routinized action flow will be interrupted and designers are forced into what Schön (1983) has termed "reflection-in-action," a reflective mode that corresponds to the pragmatist notion of reconstruction. This reflective mode leads actors into an experimental "conversation" with the indicated physical objects ("the situation") until the inquiry has led to a new line of action: a solution to the problem. If one understands innovations as taking place in complex situations, the process of reflection-in-action cannot be depicted as a rational deliberation about means based on known ends. Instead, the "conversation" with the situation is based on the meaning given to objects in interpretations. For this the designer takes the role of the object. At the same time he perceives the characteristics and possible applications of the physical object on the background of the representation of the generalized other. The generalized other can be seen as a frame through which the situation is simultaneously conceived and structured. This includes not only general knowledge on the characteristics of physical objects but also value judgments. It is this expectational background that structures the situation for the innovator. He or she can experiment with the problem until a discovery has been made that qualifies as a solution. In pragmatist terms this solution is intersubjectively created since the generalized other, i.e., the expectational background, is always socially constituted.

CONCLUSION

Whereas models of rational action apply normative preconditions to the study of action, this is not the case with a theory of the creativity of action. The models of rational action, unless they do not pretend to be merely normative, inevitably force phenomena of action to fit the concepts found in the model, or else they must distinguish one concrete, rational kind of action from the other concrete, less rational types of action. By contrast, a reconstructive

introduction of the tacit assumptions found in models of rational action that is informed by the overarching idea of creativity from the beginning is aimed at discovering the specific characteristics of *all* human action. Such a revised theory is concerned not just with one specific type of creative action, but with the creativity of human action as such. This, of course, does not imply that all human actions are said to contain the same degree of creativity in contrast to routines and habits. This cannot be so for the simple reason that every action theory that takes basic pragmatist ideas as its point of departure must assume that creatively found solutions to an action problem will be absorbed into new "beliefs," or more precisely into altered routines. This means that even acts of the utmost creativity assume the preexistence of a bedrock of underlying routine actions and external conditions that are simply taken as given (see Camic, 1986). There are naturally large differences between various acts and actors with regard to creativity; however, an empirical, differential psychology and sociology of creativity is a completely different matter. This, too, would have to start with a general theory of action in order to examine concrete types of creative action, and here we are asserting that such a general theory should regard creativity as a dimension that is present in all human action and should interpret routine as a result of creativity. Consequently, such a general action theory does not contain value judgments on concrete instances of creativity. From this perspective, creativity in itself is neither good nor bad; there are many reasons why routine could be considered praiseworthy, and many a vision of permanent aesthetic or political creativity is a vision of terror that would overtax human capabilities. Whether a particular creative act is good or bad can only be settled in a discourse. Yet the search for a normative agency to justify validity claims is not the same as the search for a model to describe in empirical terms how new validity claims arise.

The advantages of revising action theory in this way extend far beyond the immediate bounds of action theory itself. This has been elaborated in this chapter with regard to cooperation and innovation as two crucial activities in economic contexts. In addition to this, organizations could be analyzed independently of the rational actor model in order to explore the unlikely and highly contingent character of the rational type. In the theory of social movements we also find examples of the consequences of rationalist prejudice, such as the widespread idea that clear goals held by individual actors or the group as a whole are the driving force behind the movements. The theory of the creativity of action would proceed from a radically different starting point. And finally, in a theory of history and the analysis of present-day society, rational models of action theory show an affinity to those interpretations that consider historical developments to be more or less linear "processes of rationalization." What tends to be forgotten here is that, even when trends toward rationality can be empirically observed, they should not be universalized, as there will always be spheres of life and some actors who do not passively submit to the rationalization process. Their resistance sparks countermovements, which may end up prevailing over the tendencies toward rationality (Joas, 2000c). These arenas of research hint at the fact that, contrary to a widespread assumption, action theory is not only suitable for the analysis of microsociological phenomena; it also can serve as the basis for the development of a macrosociological theory liberated from the fallacies of functionalism and evolutionism.

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