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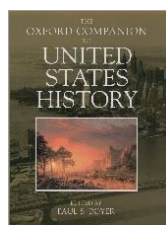
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## The Oxford Companion to United States History

Paul S. Boyer

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## Parsons, Talcott

(1902–1979), sociologist.

Born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the son of a Congregational minister, Parsons studied at Amherst College (1920–1924), the London School of Economics, and Heidelberg (1924–1926). Although his education included little formal training in SOCIOLOGY, it introduced him to the institutional economics of Thorstein Veblen, the functionalism of the anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, and the sociology of Max Weber. He joined Harvard University's sociology department in 1927.

Parsons' sociological theory developed in several phases. During his first two decades at Harvard, and particularly in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), he elaborated a voluntaristic “action” theory that he traced to Weber, Alfred Marshall, Emile Durkheim, and Vifredo Pareto. In the two decades following Harvard's establishment of a new Department of Social Relations in 1946, notably in *The Social System* (1951), he treated social structures in terms of the functions they served, now describing his work as “structural-functionalism” and “systems theory.” From the late 1950s on, returning to interests evident in his earlier work on the professions, he refined his “systems theory” to deal with the interaction of social subsystems and to develop a cybernetic model of the ways the culture controls social change.

From 1945 to the early 1960s, Parsons was *the* major figure in American sociology, serving as president of the American Sociological Association in 1949. During the 1960s, criticism of his system mounted on the left, from the sociologists C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner and from feminists, as in Betty Friedan's *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE* (1963). A revival of interest in the 1980s, however, reestablished his preeminence among American sociologists.

See also SOCIAL SCIENCE.

### Bibliography

Peter Hamilton, *Talcott Parsons*, 1983.

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William Buxton, *Talcott Parsons and the Capitalist Nation-State: Political Sociology as a Strategic Vocation*, 1985.

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