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Complexity Theory & Political Change: Talcott Parsons Occupies Wall Street

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SySc Seminar Jan. 27, 2012

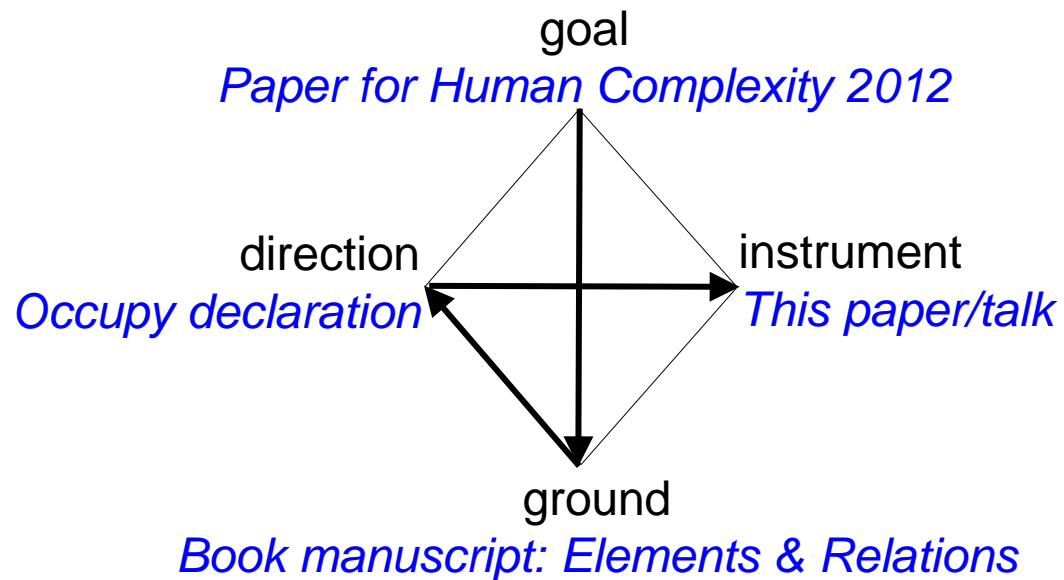
Human Complexity Conference June 1, 2012

Minor edits Dec 9, 2013, March 12, 2021

Conference paper at: https://works.bepress.com/martin_zwick/59/

zwick@pdx.edu

Preface: back-story of this paper/talk



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Key Dates
Submission Deadline:
February 5th, 2012
Decision Date: March 1st
Final Program: March 7th
Conference: May 30th - June 1st, 2012
Location: The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Contact:
Tony Beavers
afbeavers@gmail.com

Home

1st Annual Conference on
Complexity and Human Experience

Modeling Complexity in the Humanities and Social Sciences

May 30th - June 1st, 2012

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The recent increase in the number of formal institutes and conferences dedicated to complexity theory and its application is evidence that complexity science has arrived and is realizing its potential to cut across almost every academic discipline. Research projects



Commentary, from *Elements & Relations*

SySc 521/621 Systems Philosophy, Spring 2012

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+1 552

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Abstract

1. What the **Parsons' model** says (in brief, in this context)
2. **Parsons' model** of societal systems (in more detail)
3. Using the model: **flaws** of societal **structure**
4. **Fixing** the **flaws** & OWS declaration
5. Summary

Abstract

Complexity (systems) theories can assist our understanding of social systems and social phenomena. This paper illustrates this assertion by linking Talcott Parsons' model of societal structure to the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Parsons' model is used to organize ideas about the underlying causes of the 2008 recession that to some extent still afflicts the US economy. While being too abstract to depict the immediate factors that precipitated this crisis, the model is employed to articulate the argument that vulnerability to this type of event results from flaws in societal structure.

This implies that such crises can be avoided only if, in Parsons' terms, structural change occurs in the relations between polity, economy, community, & culture. The Occupy movement has called attention to the need for such fundamental change.

1. *What the model* (as applied here) *says*

- A modern society, as distinct from a pre-modern society, is *differentiated* in that *economy, polity, community, & culture* are distinguishable from (but in interaction with) one another.
- In general, *differentiation* of a whole can be *flawed*: different aspects of a system can be linked together too weakly or too strongly, or one component can unduly influence other components.
- The 2008 US political-economic *crisis* and similar crises in the past are arguably the *result of flawed differentiation*, i.e., *relations* between economy, polity, community, & culture are at least partially *dysfunctional*. This may be the *underlying cause* of many (but not all) of the crises endemic to Western societies. These crises are *systemic*, & avoiding them requires *structural change*.

1. What the model says

2. Parsons' model of societal systems

Parsons' action system (describing harmonies & disharmonies)

Action in societal system; cybernetic hierarchy; Habermas

Dyadic links (examples)

Intra-component structures: polity, economy

3. Flaws of differentiation

4. Fixing the flaws

5. Summary



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Talcott Parsons

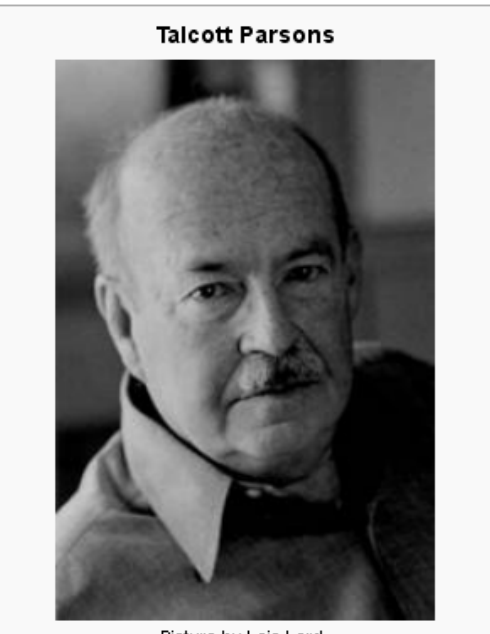
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 This article **may be too long to read and navigate comfortably**. Please consider splitting content into sub-articles and using this article for a [summary](#) of the key points of the subject.
(November 2009)

Talcott Parsons (December 13, 1902 – May 8, 1979) was an American [sociologist](#) who served on the faculty of [Harvard University](#) from 1927 to 1973.

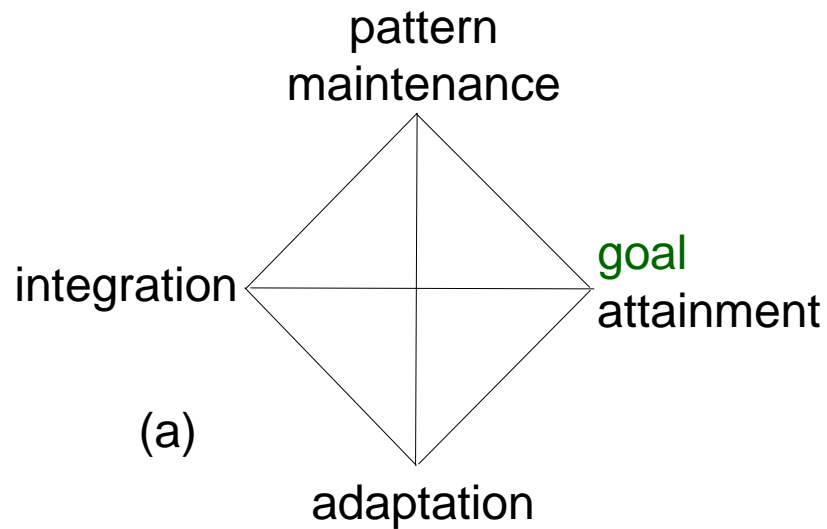
Parsons developed a general theory for the study of society called [action theory](#), based on the methodological principle of [voluntarism](#) and the [epistemological](#) principle of [analytical realism](#). The theory attempted to establish a balance between two major methodological traditions, that of the utilitarian-positivist tradition on the one hand and the hermeneutic-idealistic tradition on the other. For Parsons, voluntarism established a third alternative between these two. More than a theory of society, Parsons presented a theory of social evolution and a concrete interpretation of the "drives" and directions of world history.

Parsons analyzed the work of [Émile Durkheim](#) and [Vilfredo Pareto](#) and evaluated their contributions within the light of the paradigm of voluntaristic action. Parsons was also largely responsible for introducing and interpreting [Max Weber](#)'s work to American audiences. Although he was generally considered a major structuralist functionalist scholar, in an article late in life, Parsons explicitly wrote that the term "functional" or "[structural functionalist](#)" were inappropriate ways to describe the character of his theory. ^{[1][2]} For Parsons "structural functionalism" was the term of a particular stage in the methodological development of the social science; it was never a name for any specific school or specific direction. "Functionalism" itself was a universal method and again not

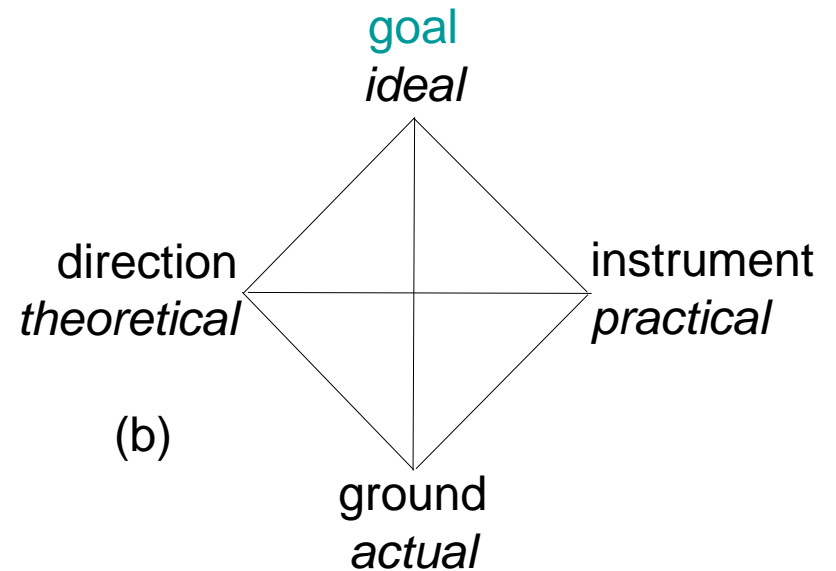


Parsons' action system

Parsons' action system

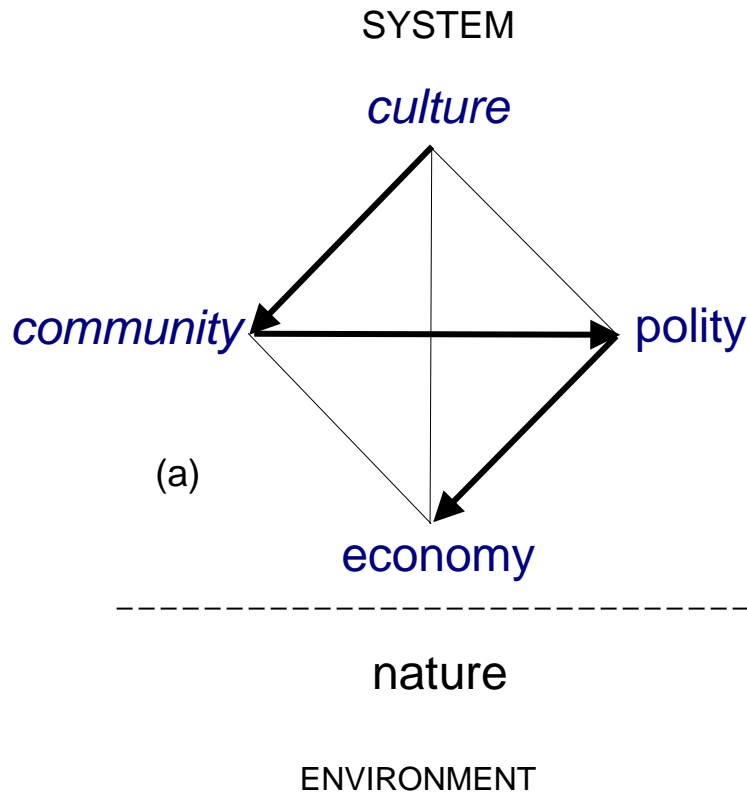


Bennett's similar system
(purposeful action)

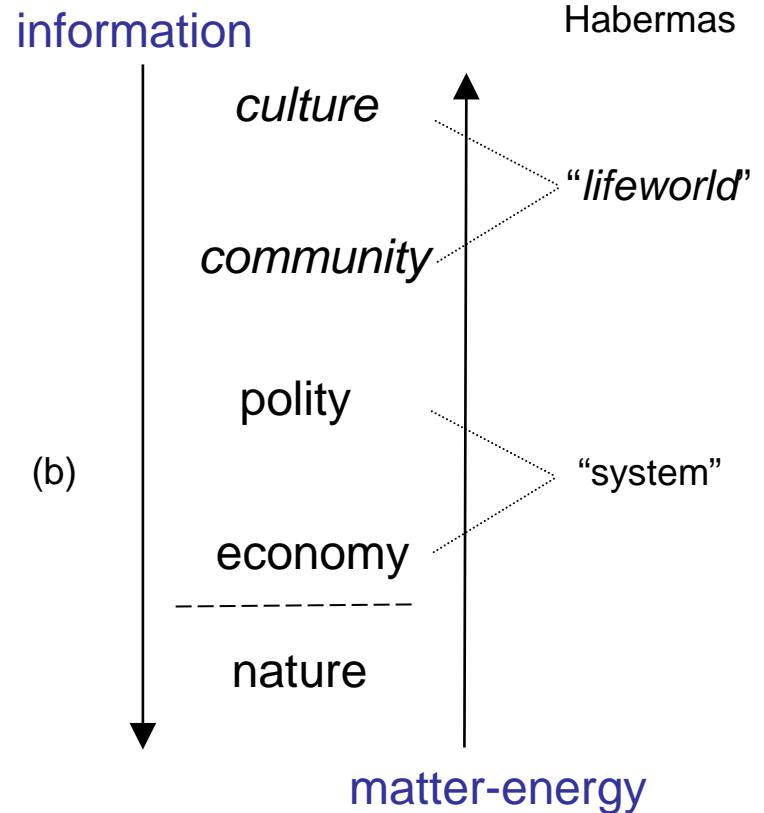


Action in societal system

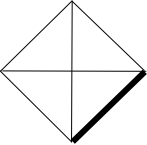
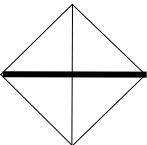
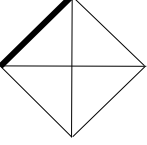
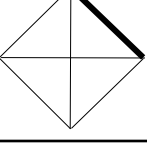
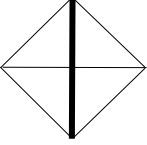
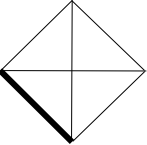
Parsons' tetrad applied to societal systems



Hierarchical information (arrows) & matter-energy flows

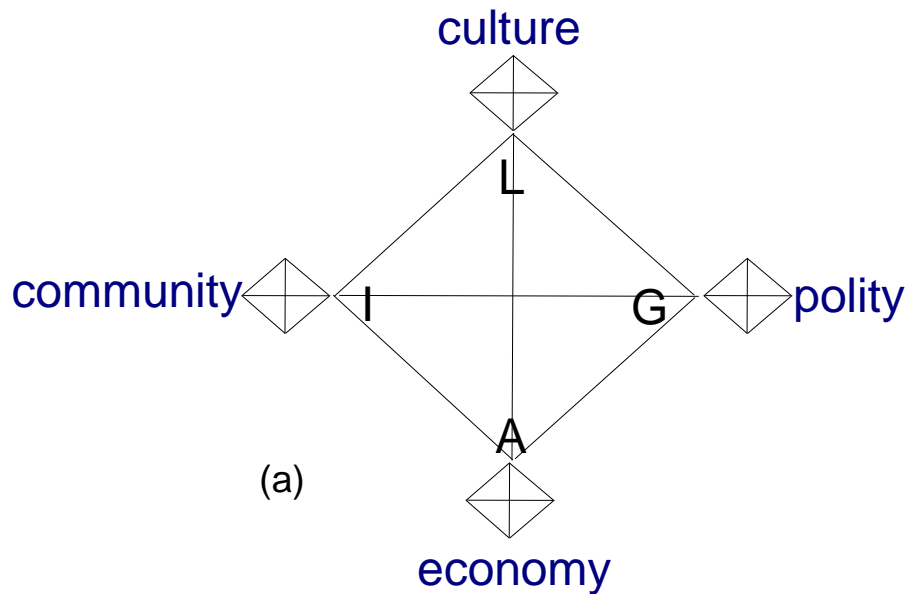


Dyadic links (examples)

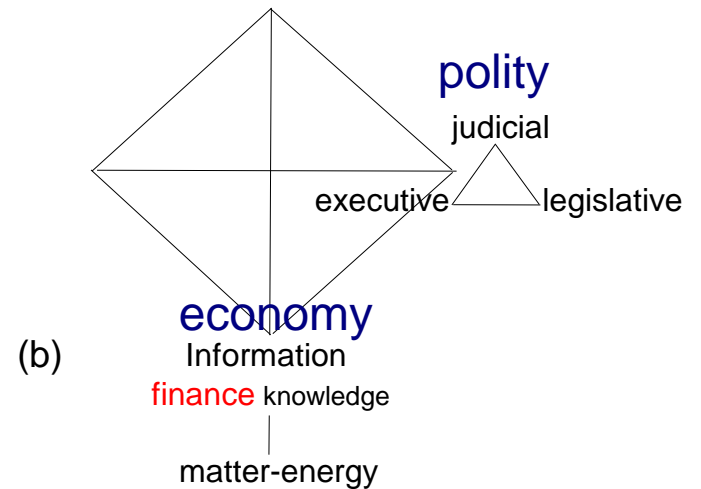
<i>Component dyads</i>	<i>Relations (examples)</i>
Economy-polity 	economy is partially autonomous and partially controlled by the polity
Community-polity 	civil society determines and participates in the political order
Culture-community 	cultural values guide but do not legally constrain private activity
Culture-polity 	church is separated from state
Culture-economy 	culture is independent of, yet supported by, commercial life
Community-economy 	interpersonal relations not dominated by those of economic exchange

Intra-component structures

Parsons' fractal scheme



Other decompositions



1. What the model essentially says
2. Parsons' model of societal systems

3. Using the model: flaws of societal structure

Inter-component flaws:

Economy → polity *reversal* of control

Loss of polity → economy *control*

Economy as *leading part* (structure is non-normative)

Economy → community *negative externalities*

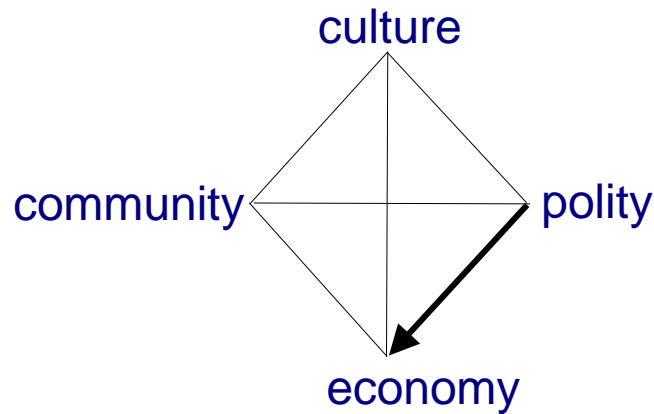
Intra-component flaws within polity, economy

Digression: model relevant to other issues

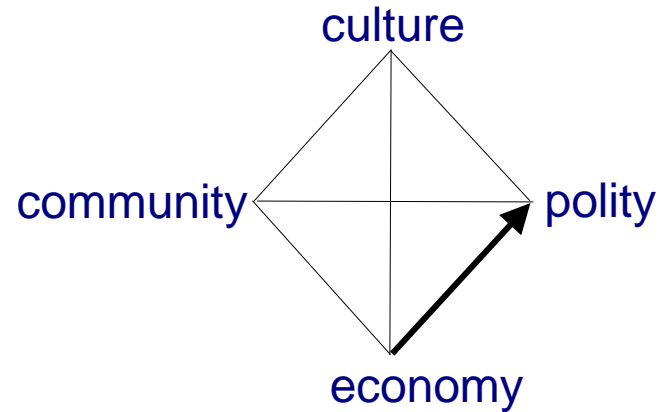
4. Fixing the flaws
5. Summary

Economy → *polity reversal of control*

According to Parsons' model



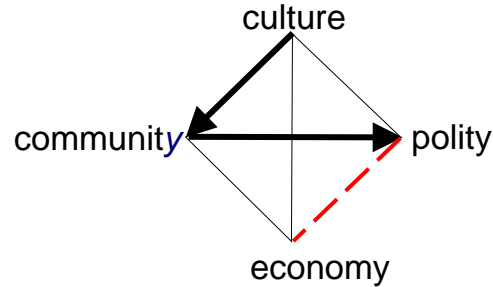
As it arguably is in US today



Because of:
lobbying,
benefits, e.g., campaign contributions
revolving door, etc.

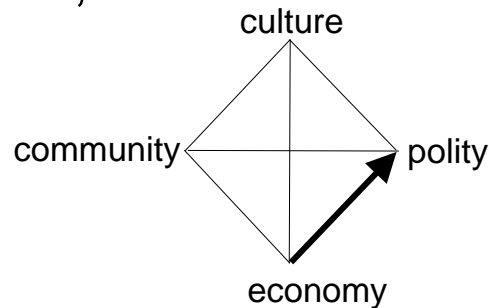
Loss of *polity* → *economy* control

Deregulation,
an **absent** (or ineffective) **link**

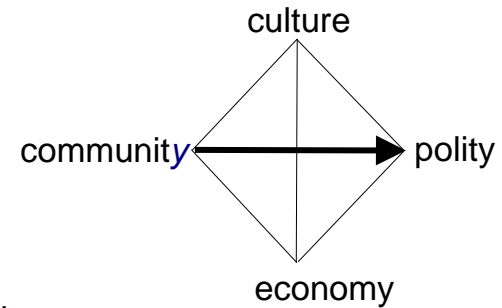


Corporate “personhood,”
structurally, an **error**

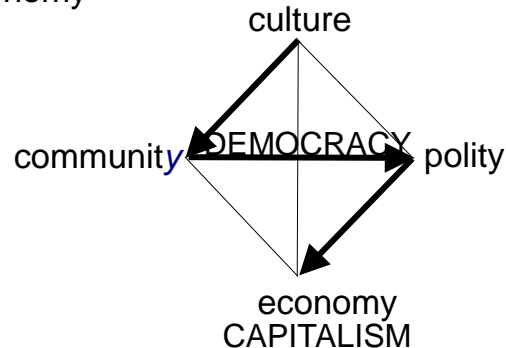
Corporate “personhood”
“one dollar, one vote”



Real personhood
“one person, one vote”



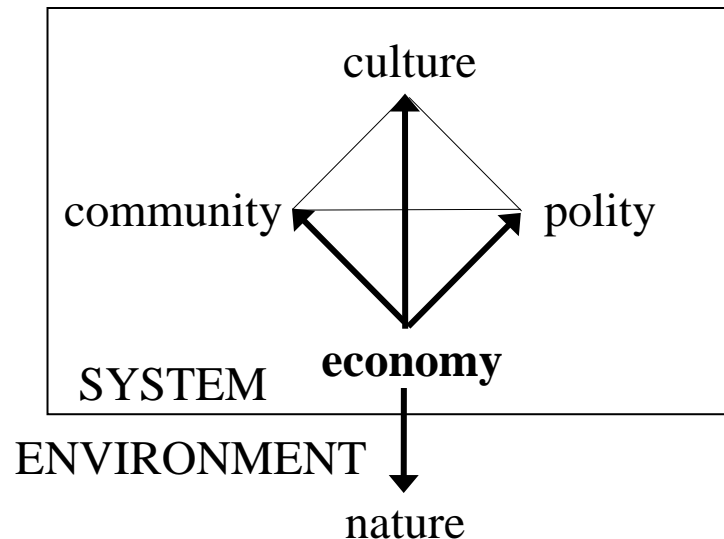
Two organizing principles:
(a consequence of *differentiation*)
democracy vs. capitalism



Economy as “leading part” (this structure is non-normative)

If **economy dominates** other components, it is a “**leading part**” (von Bertalanffy), a “hub.”

Having a “leading part” reflects a structure that is **not normative**, given Parsons’ model.

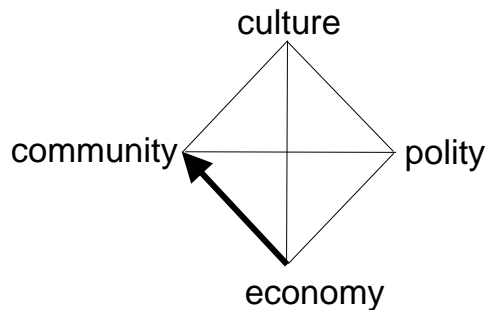


A system with a leading part manifests a “fundamentalism.”

Economy → *community negative externalities*

Immediate effects of 2008 recession:
loss of jobs, homes, savings

Longer term effect of economy as leading part:
extreme *income inequality*



Polity *unable* to prevent *negative externalities* of economy
or force them to be *internalized*.

Intra-component flaws: polity, economy

Polity:

Executive vs. legislative **deadlock**

Regulatory agency (intra-executive) **ineffectiveness**

Economy:

Hypertrophy of (finance sector of) informational sub-component

Profits of this sector **disproportionate** to its function.

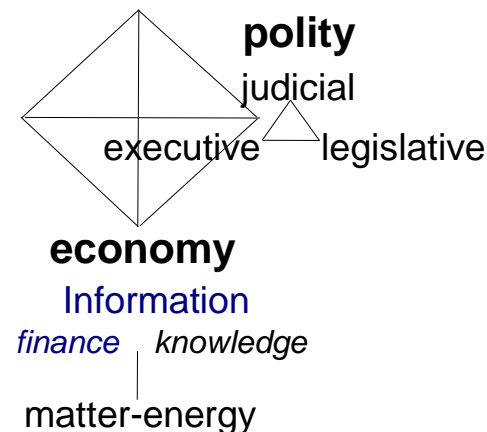
Also hypertrophy of firms

within finance sector:

“too big to fail”.

High **connectivity** in economy
brings **vulnerability** to collapse.

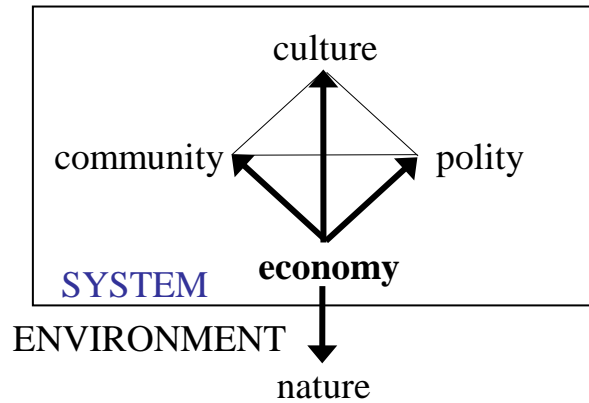
Bubbles show **non-optimality**,
vulnerability to **speculation**.



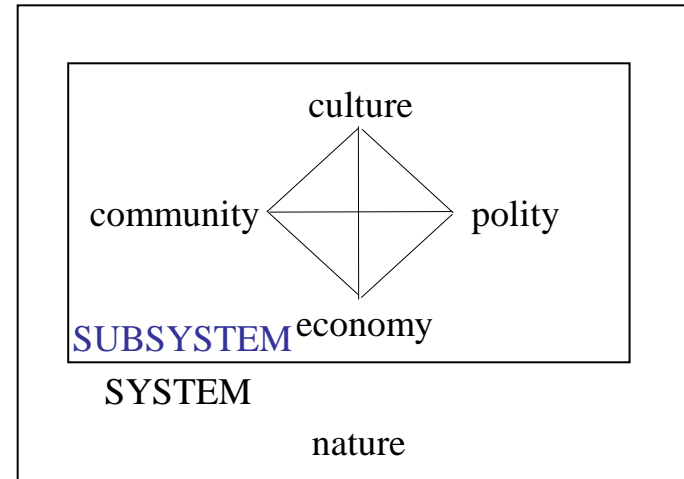
Digression: Parsons' model relevant to other issues

Existing economy → nature link **endangers biosphere**

Present structure **not sustainable**



(a) “texture” (imagined relation)

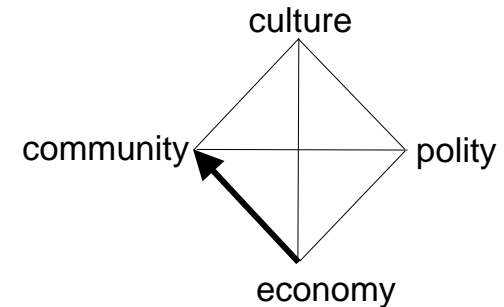


(b) “embeddedness (actual relation)

A smaller issue illustrating a structural flaw:

Employment-based health insurance:

an **irrational** community-economy link



1. What the model says
2. Parsons' model of societal systems
3. Flaws of differentiation

4. Fixing the flaws

Needed changes & some Occupy demands

Weakening economy → polity link

Strengthening polity → economy link

Strengthening community → polity link

5. Summary

Table 1. Needed structural changes

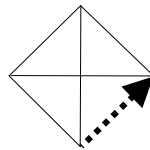
<i>Parsons' model</i>	<i>Some Occupy demands (& other correctives)</i>
Economy → polity (weaken)	Separate “guardian,” commercial functions (Jacobs, Plato)
Polity → economy (strengthen)	Empower regulation keyed to scale
Economy → community (modify)	Prevent, internalize, neutralize negative externalities
Community → polity (strengthen)	Election reform, regulatory transparency

Weakening economy → polity link (1/3)

Guardian ethics for the polity, separated from
commercial ethics for the economy

Public funding of elections

Abolishing corporate “personhood”



Weakening economy → polity link (2/3) *by separating guardian, commercial functions*

- “3. Elimination of All Private Benefits and "Perks" to Politicians. The 99% of the American People demand the immediate **prohibition of special benefits** to all federal public employees, officers, officials or their immediate family members. Public officials, politicians and their immediate families shall be **banned from ever being employed by any corporation**, individual or business that the public official specifically **regulated while in office**. No public employee, officer, official or their immediate family members shall own or hold any **stock** or shares in any corporation or other entity that the public official specifically regulated while in office until a full 5 years after their term is completed.
- There shall be a complete **lifetime ban on the acceptance of all gifts, services, money or thing of value, directly or indirectly, by any elected or appointed public official or their immediate family members, from any person, corporation, union or other entity that the public official was charged to specifically regulate while in office.** The term "specifically regulate" shall mean service on a committee or sub-committee or service within any agency or department of the federal government responsible for the regulation of the person, union, corporation or entity seeking to directly or indirectly confer a benefit to a public official.”

Weakening economy → polity link (3/3)

by other means

- “1. Elimination of the Corporate State ... Private fundings of campaigns from concentrated sources of wealth have corrupted our political system. Therefore, all private funding of political campaigns shall be replaced by the fair, equal and total public financing of all federal political campaigns...
- It has been estimated that 94% of all federal political campaigns are won by the candidate who spends the most money. Our elected representatives spend far too much of their time fundraising for the next election rather than doing the People's business. This constant need for more and more money, causes our politicians to labor under conflicts of interest that make it impossible for them to act in the best interests of the American People.”
- “2. Abrogation of the "Citizens United" Case. The immediate abrogation, even if it requires a Constitutional Amendment, of the outrageous and anti-democratic Supreme Court holding in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. This heinous decision proclaimed by the United States Supreme Court in 2010 equates the payment of money to politicians by corporations, wealthy individuals and unions with the exercise of protected free speech. We, the 99% of the American People, demand that institutional bribery never again be deemed protected free speech.”

Strengthening polity → economy link

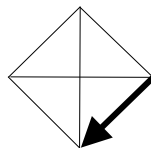
Restoration & enhancement of regulatory powers

Regulation scale-dependent & scale-controlling

Principle of scale should be as important as separation of powers

Regulating connectivity, bubble-producing activity

Problem of inadequate economic theory



Strengthening community → polity link

Campaign finance & other election reforms

(Is it wise to institute term limits and/or abolish Electoral college?)

- 4. Term Limits. Members of the United States House of Representatives shall be limited to...no more than four two-year terms in their lifetime. Members of the United States Senate shall be limited to...no more than two six-year terms... Serving as a member of Congress or as the President of the United States is one of the highest honors and privileges our culture can bestow. These positions of prominence in our society should ... not provide a lifetime career designed to increase personal wealth and... power...
- 19. Abolish the Electoral College, Comprehensive Campaign Finance and Election Reform. ...abolishment of the Electoral College in favor of the Popular Vote in presidential elections... Subject to the ...ban on all private money and gifts in politics, Congress shall immediately enact additional campaign finance reform requiring the Federal Communications Commission to grant free air-time to all federal candidates; total public campaign financing ...; implementation of nationwide uniform election rules applied to all voting districts...; abolition of "gerrymandering"... issuance of free voter registration cards to all citizens...

1. What the model essentially says
2. Parsons' model of societal systems
3. Flaws of differentiation
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5. Summary

*Complexity theory **can augment** social sciences*

Systemic problems require systemic solutions

*Parsons' model a **framework** for discussion*

*Political **principles***

Political principles suggested by use of Parsons' model

Democracy OP must have **primacy** over
Capitalism OP.

Normative **path of control** (community → polity → economy)
needs **strengthening**
(separation of “guardian,” commercial roles)

Regulation must be keyed to **scale** (≠ socialism).

Polity must **protect community & nature** from
negative externalities of economy.

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