

THE “MEETING” WITH I. UNGUREANU’S BOOK. PARADIGMS FOR THE KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIETY

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Abstract

In the series of meetings in which we discussed the book of Ion Ungureanu, Paradigms for the knowledge of society, the 15th meeting brought into question the law of the cybernetic hierarchy of American sociologist Talcott Parsons. In Parsons’ conception, every society is structured into four subsystems: economic, political, community and socializing. According to the cybernetic hierarchy law, “the richest parts in energy have the lowest volume of information and are factors of action conditioning, while the richest parts in information are poor in energy but have the role of action control factors”. This hierarchy between the subsystems of society is cybernetic in the sense that the relationship from the economic subsystem to the political, community and socializing (cultural) subsystems is permanently accompanied by an inverse control relationship, whereby social integration, achievement of goals and adaptation, their exchange instruments (money, power, influence) and the community, political and economic systems themselves are determined by the socializing subsystem.

Keywords: Ungureanu, paradigm, knowledge, Parsons, cybernetic hierarchy.

The law of cybernetic hierarchy – talcott parsons

For starters, we will state the paradigm in discussion, a quote selected by Ion Ungureanu as best defining Parsons’s theory:

“To meet the functional imperatives of adaptation, achievement of goals, integration and continuity as a social system, any society is structured in four subsystems: economic, political, communitarian and socializing. The relationships between these four subsystems (structures) take place after the law of the cybernetic hierarchy: the richest parts in energy have the lowest volume of information and are factors of action conditioning, while the richest parts in information are poor in energy but have the role of action control factors”¹.

Societal activity and functional imperatives of society

Starting from the above statement, we will briefly outline the characteristics of the society which, according to Talcott Parsons, is a two-tier system of action: external

¹ „Pentru a satisface imperativele funcționale ale adaptării, realizării scopurilor, integrării și continuității ei ca sistem social, orice societate se structurează în patru subsisteme: economic, politic, comunitar și socializator. Relațiile dintre aceste patru subsisteme (structuri) se desfășoară după legea ierarhiei cibernetice: părțile cele mai bogate în energie dețin cel mai mic volum de informație și sunt factori de condiționare a acțiunii, în timp ce părțile bogate în informație sunt sărace în energie, având însă rolul de factori de control al acțiunii.” (Ion Ungureanu, *Paradigme ale cunoașterii societății* [Paradigms for the knowledge of society], Iași, Editura Junimea, 2002, p. 103).

(to other societies) and internal (to meet the needs of its members). A first component of society, according to the American sociologist, is the *societal activity*, which, in turn, is *instrumental* (when pursuing the production of the necessary means of action) and *consuming* (when pursuing the appropriation of the results). The second component, as it can be anticipated from the paradigm statement, is related to the one of society's functional imperatives: 1. *the adaptation imperative* (the interference between the social system and its environment); 2. *the imperative of achieving goals* (refers to the system's need to establish precise relations with the environment and structures and processes that facilitate the process of system adaptation to the environment); 3. *the integration imperative* (creation of mediation mechanisms capable of defusing potential conflicts within the system and leading to its strengthening); 4. *the imperative of continuity* ("latent maintenance of the cultural model"², whereby society delimits itself and ensures its continuity as an autonomous system)³.

We can better understand Parsons' motivation to name those *imperative functional* ones, if we take into account an author's statement that "the first law of the social process is to maintain the interaction between people"⁴. In its conception, the failure to accomplish one of these four functions leads to the collapse of the society as a social system. If society consists of interactions aimed at satisfying all functional imperatives, Parsons concludes that society specializes in a subsystem for the fulfilment of each functional imperative: *economic, political, communitarian and socializing*⁵.

The hierarchy of society subsystems

These four subsystems, which are in permanent interaction within the society, have as fundamental characteristics two fundamental properties: 1) are defined by their *borders* and 2) they have *open borders*, which makes Ion Ungureanu conclude that each subsystem is a *result* of the structuring of society (by differentiation), but also an *agent* of structuring (by integration). He also concludes that each subsystem forms the *border* in this way through an exchange system (currency – in the case of the economic subsystem; power and attachments – in the case of political, social and socialist subsystems).

Parsons also believes that these subsystems of society can be hierarchized according to the type of *circulation* (interaction) they generate and/or sustain. In this way, the money determines the largest and most intense social movement,

² „menținerea latentă a modelului cultural”.

³ T. Parsons, G. M. Platt, *The American University*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975, pp. 13-14 *apud* Ion Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

⁴ „prima lege a procesului social, este menținerea interacțiunii dintre oameni” (T. Parsons, *The Social System*, New York, The Free Press, 1951, p. 205 *apud* Ion Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 104).

⁵ Ion Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

while the cultural-value “attachments” are relatively weak from the point of view of their “motivational-energetic”⁶. After this hierarchy, we may be tempted to believe that Parsons takes over the materialist conception of Marx, but Ion Ungureanu gives us the key to understanding this hierarchy:

“... material possession is a social relationship, which means that it implies legitimacy given by the socializing subsystem, through its moral and cultural attachments, guaranteed by the political subsystem and concretized by the communitarian subsystem through social influence”⁷.

Therefore, the specific role of the economic subsystem is given only by its high “energy” capability, but this subsystem is only the tip of the iceberg because at the bottom one can see that these relationships between systems actually determine the structure of the society. Thus, Parsons embodies *the law of the cybernetic hierarchy*.

The law of cybernetic hierarchy

This *hierarchy* between the subsystems of a society is *cybernetic* in the sense that the relationship between the economic subsystem with the political, communitarian and socializing (cultural) ones is permanently accompanied by an inverse relationship of control. And all through which the social integration, the goal achievement and adaptation, the instruments of their exchange (money, power, influence), and the communitarian, political and economic systems themselves are determined by the socializing subsystem. This is why Ungureanu said it “is possible due to its proximity to the cultural system”⁸.

As we have previously said, the first law of society is *to maintain* human interaction. In this case, if in Parsons' conception interaction is “the activity by which the individual interprets «objects» in his environment by giving them a symbolic significance”⁹, the cultural system becomes *the foundation of the society* through socialization, which applies values and symbols in the given society. Also, in Parsons' view, the dominant role of culture in the social system lies in the fact that the only reality that is structured itself is cultural reality:

“Cultural models provide the systems of action with a very stable structural fixation and quite similar to that given by the genetic matrices to the species' types; just as genes focus on the inherited elements, cultural models have their centre of gravity in the learned elements of the

⁶ „motivațional-energetice” (*Ibidem*, p. 105).

⁷ „posesia materială este o relație socială, ceea ce înseamnă că are nevoie de o legitimare, pe care i-o dă subsistemul socializator, prin atașamentele sale morale și culturale, i-o garantează subsistemul politic și o concretizează subsistemul comunitar prin influență socială.” (*Ibidem*).

⁸ „este posibilă datorită vecinătății lui cu sistemul cultural” (*Ibidem*, p. 106).

⁹ „activitatea prin care individul interpretează «obiectele» din mediul său dându-le o semnificație simbolică” (*Ibidem*).

action. Therefore, the social community can survive and develop only if it maintains the integrity of its common cultural orientation, strongly shared by all its members”¹⁰.

Moreover, the

“activation of cultural genes requires the development of sources of energy (economic, political and social) of the «body» of society”¹¹.

We remind that *the cybernetic hierarchy* presupposes a continuous relationship of mutual conditioning and control, which consists of exchanges of elements between all four subsystems of society, that are being conditioned primarily by the economic structures, but *regulated* by the socializing subsystem, thanks to its proximity to the cultural system. In conclusion, Ion Ungureanu states that:

“... we cannot talk about economic activity without considering a set of productive techniques. And all the productive techniques are culturally elaborated. In other words, although it is a cultural condition, the economy is a product or a result of it, and any structural element of the economic subsystem can be explained only by reference to a determined structure of the socializing subsystem”¹².

Also, to highlight the theoretical importance of Talcott Parsons' cybernetic hierarchy, Professor Radu Baltasiu has brought into discussion a response of the author Ion Ungureanu, professor at that time, who, being asked about the link between culture and the economy, replied “Science selects the technique”.

The hierarchical relationships between the economic and the socializing subsystem (behind the cultural one) are mediated by the political and the communitarian subsystems. If economy is the *dynamic* factor of society, in Parsons' view, it is subordinated to the political apparatus, and the instrument of subordination is *the power*, which is concretized in *influence*.

Bibliography

Ion Ungureanu, *Paradigme ale cunoașterii societății [Paradigms for the knowledge of society]*, Iași, Editura Junimea, 2002.

¹⁰ „Modelele culturale furnizează sistemelor de acțiune o fixare structurală extrem de stabilă și destul de asemănătoare cu aceea pe care o dau matricele genetice tipurilor de specii; la fel cum genele se focalizează în elementele moștenite, modelele culturale își au centrul lor de greutate în elementele învățate ale acțiunii. Prin urmare, comunitatea socială nu poate să supraviețuiască și să se dezvolte decât dacă menține integritatea orientării ei culturale comune, puternic împărtășite de toți membrii ei.” (T. Parsons, *Societies. Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1966, pp. 6–10 *apud* Ion Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, p. 106).

¹¹ „activizarea genelor culturale presupune dezvoltarea surselor de energie (economică, politică și socială) ale „corpului” societății” (Ion Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 106–107).

¹² „nu se poate vorbi de activitate economică fără a lua în considerare un set de tehnici productive. Nu există tehnici productive care să nu fie elaborate cultural. Cu alte cuvinte, deși este condiție a culturii, economia este produs sau rezultat al acesteia și orice element structural al subsistemului economic nu poate fi explicat decât prin raportare la o structură determinată a subsistemului socializator.” (*Ibidem*, p. 107).