

Laudatio Helmut Staubmann

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In 1913, George Sarton published the first issue of the journal *Isis*, which was itself one of the first journals explicitly devoted to the history of science. On the front cover of this issue, Sarton listed *Isis*' patrons, among whom the famous French sociologist Emile Durkheim. In his opening essay, Sarton put forward his view on the identity of a yet-to-be-established scientific specialization. He defined his specialization as a "psycho-sociological investigation". A former Ph.D. student of Sarton at Harvard University, named Robert King Merton, became Associate Editor of *Isis* in the late-1930s, first responsible for what was called "the social aspects of science" and, as of 1942, for "sociology". In 1952, only a few years before his death, George Sarton, who was by then generally respected as the dean among the historians of science, still referred to what he called "my sociology of science" (Sarton, 1952, p. 94).

These few facts are a few indications of the close historical affinities between the history and the sociology of science. I may add, as Prof. Rubens mentioned, too, that Robert Merton was in the academic year 1986/87 the first recipient of the Sarton Medal for the History of Science of Ghent University. And I may add that the Ph.D. dissertation of Robert Merton (titled *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England*) was supervised by two Harvard Professors, George Sarton and Talcott Parsons.¹

¹ In 1938, Sarton published Merton's Ph.D. dissertation as volume 4 of *Osiris* – which he had founded as *Isis*' supplement in order "to take charge of the longer memoirs" (Sarton, 1953, p. 238). It may be added that Robert Merton dedicated his influential collection of papers on *The Sociology of Science* (Merton, 1973) to five of his teachers: Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons, George Sarton, L.J. Henderson and A.N. Whitehead. In some reflections and recollections on the occasion of the centennial of Sarton's birthday, Merton (1985) also presented himself as an 'unruly apprentice' of Sarton.

These few facts also allow me to point to the importance of the work in the theory and history of sociology of Prof. Helmut Staubmann. Over the years, Prof. Staubmann has made a great number of pertinent contributions that deal with various themes in sociology. In 2013, for example, Prof. Staubmann published a book titled *The Rolling Stones – Sociological Perspectives* (Staubmann, 2013). Over several decades, however, he has also done pioneering work in the history of sociology, in particular by providing new entries to Georg Simmel's work on aesthetics (see, e.g., Simmel, 2005) and by working on the unpublished legacy of Talcott Parsons, which consists of unpublished manuscripts, unpublished working papers, administrative documents or reports, and professional correspondence (see, e.g., Staubmann & Wenzel, 2000; Staubmann, 2015).

When Parsons (1902-1979) fully retired from Harvard University in 1973, he was no longer the leading theorist of sociology he had been in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, it had rather become common currency to depict Parsons as an out-of-this-world theorist, whose work was void of empirical relevance. Various theoretical alternatives competed against 'Parsonian hegemony'. As Jeffrey Alexander, for example, noted a few years after Parsons' death about the relationship of sociological theory to Parsons: 'If sociology were to be free to develop, this [i.e. Parsons'] domination had to be overthrown. The attacks on Parsons, which spanned the three postwar decades of his life, were often significant. Anti-Parsonian attacks spawned every major movement of theoretical reform, each of which initially presented itself vis-à-vis some particular dimension of Parsons's work' (1984, p. 410). As a consequence of these 'attacks' and associated 'paradigm shifts', Parsons' writings have since the 1960s and 1970s never again received much attention within sociology. It became in fact very unfashionable and very unproductive (in terms of career prospects or reputation mechanisms) to devote serious attention to the work of Parsons. Negative comments about the Parsonian hegemony still abound.

Only in recent years, there has emerged some serious scholarly interest in Parsons' work. Prof. Staubmann is one of the leading figures in this regard; over many years, he has fought with much dedication against the tide. His work relies on extensive periods of study within The Harvard University Archives, to which Parsons' unpublished manuscripts, working papers and professional correspondence were bequeathed. Often in collaboration with Parsons' former student and assistant Victor Lidz, he has edited several

unpublished documents of Parsons, thereby facilitating discussions about and interpretations of Parsons' work within the academia. His efforts now make it possible to discuss the historicity of Parsons' work – instead of just dismissing a particular period of sociological theory as outdated, over-ruled, replaced by something better, etc. Within a few months, Sage will also publish his monograph on Parsons (Staubmann, 2015).

From personal experience, I may tell that usage of the Talcott Parsons Papers of The Harvard University Archives is very laborious and time-consuming – as there is as yet but minimal chronological and alphabetical ordering of the many bequeathed documents. It may also be added that Parsons was a compulsory writer of – often many-page – letters (and many-page means 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 or more densely printed pages).² For Parsons, as well as for many other mid-twentieth century academics, the letter to an esteemed colleague was more or less equal to a publication. Such correspondence was part of the communication system of the discipline. This practice is very different at the moment. In the current academic climate, very different expectations and imperatives exist regarding communication and publication within the scientific system. Much of the work, which Prof. Staubmann has devoted to Talcott Parsons and the Parsons Papers, goes uncounted and hence in important administrative regards unnoticed. But it constitutes a difference which really makes a difference for the history of sociology. For this work, we would like to honour Prof. Staubmann with the Sarton Medal for the History of Science.

² Parsons used to dictate his letters onto a Dictaphone and give the tapes to his secretary; his secretary frequently would not only type, but also sign these letters.

References

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