Talcott Parsons (1902-1979)  
Parsons was the best-known sociologist in the United States, and one of the best-known in the world for many years. His work was enormously influential through the 1950s and well into the 1960s, particularly in America, but fell gradually out of favor from that time on. The most prominent attempt to revive Parsonian thinking, under the rubric "neofunctionalism," has been made by the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, now at Yale University.

Parsons worked at the faculty of Harvard University from 1927-1973. A central figure in Harvard's Department of Social Relations, he produced a general theoretical system for the analysis of society: this came to be called structural functionalism. It was, which he developed in his major publications:
* The Structure of Social Action (1937),
* The Social System (1951),
* Structure and Process in Modern Societies (1960),
* Sociological Theory and Modern Society (1968),

**Ideas**

Parsons was an advocate of "grand theory," an attempt to integrate all the social sciences into an overarching theoretical framework. His early work (The Structure of Social Action) reviewed the output of his great predecessors, especially Weber, Pareto, and Durkheim, and attempted to derive from them a single "action theory" based on the assumptions that human action is voluntary, intentional, and symbolic. Later he ranged over an astonishing range of fields, from medical sociology (where he developed the concept of the sick role) to psychoanalysis (he underwent full training as a lay analyst) to anthropology to small group dynamics (working extensively with Freed Bales), to race relations to economics and education.

Parsons is also well known for his idea that every group or society tends to fulfill four "functional imperatives." The first of these is adaptation, adaptation to the physical and social environment. The second is goal attainment, which is the need to define primary goals and enlist individuals to strive to attain these goals. The third is integration, the coordination of the society or group as a cohesive whole. The last is latency, maintaining the motivation of individuals to perform their roles according to social expectations. Parsons also contributed to the field of social evolutionism and neoevolutionism. He divided evolution into four subprocesses: 1) division, which creates functional subsystems from the main system. 2) adaptation, where those systems evolve into more efficient versions, 3) inclusion of elements previously excluded from the given systems and 4) generalization of values, increasing the legitimization of the ever more complex system. He shows those processes on 3 stages of evolution: 1) primitive, 2) archaic and 3) modern. Archaic societies have the knowledge of writing, while modern have the knowledge of law. Parsons viewed the Western civilisation as the pinnacle of modern
societies, and out of all western cultures he declared United States as the most dynamic
developed. This has causes him to be attacked as an ethnocentrist.
Parsons' late work focused on a new theoretical synthesis around four functions common
(he claimed) to all systems of action, from the behavioral to the cultural, and a set of
symbolic media that enable communication across them. This attempt to span the world
with four concepts was too much for many American sociologists, who were then
undergoing a retreat from the grand pretensions of the 1960s to a more empirical,
grounded approach. Parsons' influence waned rapidly in the US after 1970. Nevertheless,
many of his students, including Robert K. Merton, Neil Smelser, and Clifford Geertz,
remain among the most important figures in the social sciences. His son Charles Parsons
is a distinguished figure in philosophy of mathematics.

Perhaps the most noteworthy theoretical contributions from Parsons were the
formulations of pattern variables, the AGIL Paradigm, and the Unit Act.

Parsons wrote President Dwight Eisenhower's bon mot that freedom means the freedom
to fail as well as to succeed.

Parsons had a seminal influence and early mentorship over Niklas Luhmann, pre-eminent
German sociologist, originator of systems theory.

Parsons used the word gloss to describe how our minds construct reality. This may be a
very important concept to get a handle on. As Carlos Castaneda described it, "A gloss is
a total system of perception and language.... But we had to be taught to put the world
together in this way. A child reconnoiters the world with few preconceptions until he is
taught to see things in a way that corresponds to the descriptions everybody agrees on.
The world is an agreement."

It is this sort of consensus reality that many disciplines, Zen for example, strive to
overcome. Studies have shown that our brains "filter" the data coming from our senses.
This "filtering" is largely unconsciously created and determined by biology, cultural
constructs including language, personal experience, belief systems, etcetera. And
different cultures create different glosses, all called reality. Failure to recognize 'glossing',
then, may explain what happens when cultures collide.

**Pattern variables**
Parsons asserted that there were two dimensions to societies: instrumental and
expressive. By this he meant that there are qualitative differences between kinds of social
interaction. Essentially, he observed that people can have personalized and formally
detached relationships based on the roles that they play. The characteristics that were
associated with each kind of interaction he called the pattern variables, as illustrated on
the following chart:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status identity</td>
<td>Ascription</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functions of relations</td>
<td>Diffuse - Many functions</td>
<td>Specific functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction Style</td>
<td>Particular - Actors, Situations</td>
<td>Universal - Norms, Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of relations</td>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priorities</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some examples of expressive societies would include families, churches, clubs, crowds, and smaller social settings. Examples of instrumental societies would include bureaucracies, aggregates, and markets.