

## FUNCTIONALISM AND ITS CRITICS

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### Summary

Functionalists argue that society should be understood as a system of interdependent parts. They believe that there are specific requirements – functional prerequisites – that must be met in all social systems and that these can provide the basis for the comparative analysis of social institutions.

Functionalism came to the fore in North American sociology during the 1950s. This was a period of affluence, consolidation and growth in Western capitalism. Many commentators believed this marked an 'end of ideology' as Bell termed it. They did not mean that there was an end of ideology as such, but that the once defining ideological conflict of nineteenth century capitalism - essentially, that between a bourgeois ideology of 'radical individualism' and a socialist ideology of 'collectivism' - had lost its relevance. Although North American functionalists were frequently progressive and liberal in their political outlook, the ideas of Marx and Marxism, which continued to

exert a significant impact on sociology in Europe, played little role in their work.

This was the context in which the leading proponents of sociological functionalism, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, came to prominence. They sought to distinguish sociology from other disciplines, such as economics and psychology, and to celebrate its relevance to the new social problems of affluent capitalism. For Parsons, the 'end of ideology', heralded a 'new age of sociology'.

In what follows, the origins of functionalism in anthropology will be considered before going on to consider the key sociological contributions of Merton and Parsons. The final sections of the article will look at the different criticisms directed at functionalism.

### **1. Functionalism in Anthropology**

Although functionalism mainly came to prominence as a school of sociological theory in the 1950s, its origins can be traced to an earlier generation of writers working in the field of anthropology in earlier decades of the twentieth century. These included notably the British-based anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955). Elements of a functionalist way of thinking can also be traced to the work of the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917).

A central methodological precept of these writers was that the actions of individuals are not to be explained by the immediate meanings they have for actors. They are to be explained by the function they serve for the wider social group. On this argument, individual meaning cannot be understood independently of a wider system of collective practices and beliefs within which it is embedded. These collective practices, in turn, are to be explained by the functions they serve for the system of social life as a whole. Different elements of social life depend on each other and fulfil functions that contribute to the maintenance of social order and its reproduction over time.

It is possible to illustrate this way of analysing social life by looking at a typical piece of explanation in early twentieth-century functionalist anthropology. Anthropologists observed how the Hopi tribe of N. America engage in a complex series of rituals and dances prior to the planting of their crops. It seemed clear that their dances cannot be understood as utilitarian behaviour that efficiently produces the rains with which they are closely associated. At the same time, it does not seem right to suggest that the Hopi are behaving irrationally; at least, the claim that they are behaving irrationally looks suspiciously like a judgement from the perspective of our own beliefs based on the superiority of our scientific knowledge. From a functionalist perspective, the Hopi rain-dance is not a form of instrumental activity, but a form of expressive activity that serves to reinforce the bonds of solidarity among the group. This is especially important because the Hopi live in dispersed shelters and the dance brings them together. Of course, in their other activities, such as planting and harvesting their crops, the Hopi show themselves to be competent at organising instrumental activities, too. The Hopi rain dances are thus explained by the *function* they fulfil in the life of the tribe as a whole. The function in question is that of the *reinforcement of group solidarity*.

It is a small step from this to suggest that all social groups have to meet some universal

and inter-connected requirements – for example, as well as group solidarity, sexual reproduction, economic subsistence, social control, socialization and education of new generations, the management of sickness and death, etc. – even if these are all handled differently within different societies.

We may note that, in a typical case of functionalist explanation, the existence of a phenomenon or the production of an action is not explained by its direct efficient causes but rather by its indirect *effects* in relation to a social environment. When the functionalist anthropologist asks ‘why do the Hopi dance for rain?’, the answer is not sought in factors that immediately cause the Hopi to dance on this particular occasion. Rather, the functionalist considers the effects or consequences of the Hopi’s dancing for all the other elements of the Hopi’s life, and notes that these effects have a positive function. The functionalist concludes that if the rain dance did not have this positive function it would not be reproduced. Therefore the dance is explained by its function, by its effects within a social environment. Functionalism here departs from the traditional logic of causal argument where a cause should precede its consequences. Functionalists reverse this sequence and assign causal powers to effects.

Functionalists are aware of the problems of illegitimate teleology, arguing, as did Durkheim, that, “when ... the explanation of a social phenomenon is undertaken, we must seek separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills.” For this reason, Radcliffe-Brown distinguished very sharply between *diachronic* and *synchronic* analysis, between the analysis of change of a system and the analysis of the interaction among parts of a system at a moment in time. The task of anthropology (and sociology) was primarily concerned with synchronic analysis. The flavour of this distinction is well-captured in the following quotation, “any social system, to survive, must conform to certain conditions. If we can define adequately one of these universal conditions, i.e.. one to which all human societies must conform we have a sociological law... [An] institution may be said to have its general *raison d’être* (sociological origin) and its particular *raison d’être* (historical origin). The first is for the sociologist or social anthropologist to discover”.

There are, however, particular problems with functionalist explanation among these anthropological writers of the early twentieth century. Indeed, the division between synchronic and diachronic analysis is something that came to haunt functionalism. This and other problems were directly addressed by the American sociological theorists who came to prominence in the 1950s, including particularly Robert K. Merton, to whom we now turn.

## **2. Robert Merton: Manifest and Latent Functions**

Robert Merton (1910-2003) studied for his doctorate at Harvard University, where Talcott Parsons was a young Assistant Professor. In 1941 he became Assistant Professor at Columbia University in New York where he remained for the rest of his academic career. In his path breaking essay, ‘Manifest and latent functions’, Merton sought to codify functional analysis and, at the same time, to resolve some of the difficulties he attributed to anthropological approaches. The article was first published in a collection of his essays, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, in 1949 and was republished again in

1957 and 1968, as the volume of essays was expanded with new additions.

In order to come up with a satisfactory statement of functional analysis, Merton argued that it was necessary to make a distinction between *latent* and *manifest* functions. The latter refers to the conscious intentions of actors and the former to the objective consequences of their actions, which were often unintended. According to Merton, most of the mistakes with existing functionalism were the result of the conflation of these categories. For example, the historical origins of an item can be explained by reference to the conscious intentions of actors, while its selection and reproduction is to be explained by reference to latent functions.

Merton's starting point was to separate out the scientific substance of functionalism from its own historical origins in anthropology. This was necessary if functionalism was to be a proper framework for empirical research. Otherwise the tendency was for functionalist arguments to supplant research rather than support it. He identified three problematic postulates - the postulates of the *functional unity of society*, of *universal functionalism*, and of *indispensability* –believing each to be characteristic of anthropological functionalism.

The first postulate, that of the functional unity of society, Merton associated primarily with Radcliffe-Brown. He cites the latter's comment that, "the function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system". According to Merton, it may be that some non-literate societies show a high degree of integration, but it is illegitimate to assume this would pertain to all societies. Moreover, it is also possible that what is functional for society, considered as a whole, does not prove functional for all individuals or for some sub-groups within the society.

Similarly, what is functional for an individual or group may not be functional for the wider society. This suggests that alongside the concept of function, it is necessary also to have a concept of *dysfunction*; that is, where the objective consequences of an item are negative for some individuals or groups. Inequality, for example, may have the function of motivating individuals to perform at their different job tasks, but high degrees of inequality may give rise to the alienation of some individuals and groups.

The second postulate of universal functionalism refers to what was a rather old debate in anthropology concerning 'survivals'; that is, practices that have no present role, but are to be understood in terms of the past history of a group. This was used by some anthropologists to construct highly speculative evolutionary histories. Merton argues that if we accept that there are degrees of integration, then practices can 'survive' if they are functional for *some* individuals or groups. This identifies power as a central issue. Merton writes, "far more useful as a directive for research would seem the provisional assumption that persisting cultural forms have a *net balance of functional consequences* either for society considered as a unit or for subgroups sufficiently to retain these forms intact, by means of direct coercion or indirect persuasion."

The final postulate that Merton addressed is that of indispensability. Here Merton directs his criticism at Malinowski's view that every item fulfils a vital function and

represents an indispensable part within a working whole. Merton comments that this is unclear whether it is the *function* that is indispensable or the *particular item held to be fulfilling the function*. Once this is clarified, it is evident that it is necessary to distinguish between functional *prerequisites* – preconditions functionally necessary for a society – and the particular social forms that fulfil those prerequisites. While the former are indispensable (bearing in mind Merton's qualifications concerning the postulate of unity), it is not indispensable that particular forms or items meet those functions. There are always alternative ways of meeting any particular function. Thus, Merton argues that, "just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items".

Each of Merton's qualifications of anthropological functionalism is designed to transform the postulates into *variables* that can be the object of empirical research. Furthermore, by identifying the possibility of *dysfunction* and by suggesting that practices can have different consequences for individuals and groups, depending on how they are placed within a social structure, he explicitly makes power and conflict central issues for research within a functionalist paradigm.

This is in line with another of Merton's ideas about how sociological theory should be built; theory and research should go together and topics should be carefully chosen as lying in the 'middle-range' between minor working hypotheses of everyday research and an all-inclusive unified theory.

In fact, what came to be identified as sociological functionalism, did not develop in the way proposed by Merton, but as a single, all embracing theoretical system as set out by Talcott Parsons. Although, as we shall see, Merton's argument about middle-range theory can be read as a criticism of Parsons, there is a crucial ambiguity in his own position. It is not simply that he suggests that middle-range theory may converge with an all-embracing scheme. The further elaboration of his critique of anthropological functionalism led him directly onto the terrain occupied by Parsons, that of the relationship between the intentions of actors and the objective consequences of their actions.

Merton's terminology of latent and manifest *function* was unfortunate given that his concern was to distinguish between *latent function* and *manifest motive*. It encouraged critics in their view that sociological functionalism neglected agency, just when agency was being identified as a central concern. More importantly, his proposed codification of social inquiry in terms of an analytical distinction between subjective motive and objective function was also the solution that Parsons had proposed. It is this that takes functionalism in the direction of an all-inclusive unified theory away from the middle-range. We now turn to Parsons's general theory.

### **3. Talcott Parsons: Functionalism as Unified General Theory**

Talcott Parsons (1902 - 1979) was educated at Amherst College in Massachusetts, but also spent some time at the London School of Economics where Malinowski was lecturing and at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, where Max Weber had been Professor. In 1927 he took up a position at Harvard University where he remained for

the rest of his academic career. Almost from the outset, Parsons' intention was to produce a scheme of general categories that would form the necessary foundation of social scientific inquiries. Identifying these categories was the objective of his first major book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), a work that came to define European social theory for subsequent generations of North American sociologists. In this work, he described how there had been a break with the past in the work of an 1890-1920 generation of social theorists. The most important of the theorists he addressed were Weber, and Durkheim, but he also wrote extensively about the English economist, Alfred Marshall, and the Italian sociologist and economist, Vilfredo Pareto (Marx was not included, because he belonged to an earlier stage of social science and his lasting insights, Parsons believed, had been incorporated by Weber). Although no single one of them presented all the elements of an appropriate general scheme, taken together they provided an early intimation of the functionalist synthesis of sociological theory that Parsons would present as the basis of professional sociology.

He continued to develop and refine the scheme through all his subsequent writings. He was, in the words of his dedication to *The Social System* (1951), 'an incurable theorist'. Usually, commentators identify three 'phases' in the development of Parsons' theory; an 'early', 'middle' and 'late' phase. In the early phase, Parsons is concerned with the explicit statement of the relationship between action and its interrelationships, in the middle phase he is concerned with the structure and functioning of social systems, and in the later phase, he is more concerned with setting out the process of structural differentiation and a typology of different stages of social development. However, the core assumptions of the approach remain throughout.

### 3.1. Action and the Unit-Act

Any general scheme, Parsons argued, must represent the diverse influences upon social behaviour and must take as its point of reference, human *action*. Hitherto, the dominant approach had been that of *positivism*, which sought to explain behaviour in terms of the 'objective' influences upon it. There was another counter-tradition, that of *idealism*, that emphasised the 'subjective' aspect, but the two traditions had developed as mutually antithetical. Parsons argued that it would not do "merely to say that both the positivistic and the idealistic positions have certain justifications and there is a sphere in which each should be recognised. It is necessary, rather, to go beyond such eclecticism, to attempt at least in outline, an account of the specific modes of interrelation between the two. It is in this connection that the voluntaristic theory of action assumes a place of central importance. It provides a bridge between the apparently irreconcilable differences of the two traditions, making it possible in a sense, to 'make the best of both worlds'".

As a first step in setting out how objective and subjective elements can be combined in a single scheme – the voluntaristic theory of action, or action frame of reference - Parsons identified what he called the *unit act* and its component elements. This unit act, , should not be understood as referring to something that exists *concretely*. It does not have any immediate reference to the concrete individual acts of any person. Parsons was trying, by a process of logical abstraction, to identify the most basic elements of a wider scheme. Any issue of the concrete manifestation of action can only be addressed once that wider scheme has been fully elaborated. Its categories do not refer directly to

concrete entities, although, ultimately, the scheme will be used to generate processes with direct empirical implications. For Parsons, then, unit acts are not the *concrete* building blocks of his theory, as they are within methodologically individualist approaches.

According to Parsons, action is a process oriented to the realisation of an end. It occurs in conditional circumstances that must be calculated upon and utilised by actors in the pursuit of their *ends*. However, *ends* and *conditions* (including *means*) are analytically distinct categories. Action involves *effort* (or agency) to conform with norms (which govern ends and the selection of their means of realisation) since it must transform circumstances. Actors must accommodate and calculate upon conditions if their actions are to be successful. In addition, action, to be rational, must be adequate in terms of the knowledge necessary to the realisation of ends. Thus, Parsons, referred to the ‘intrinsic rationality of the means-end relation’ in terms of the necessary role of ‘valid knowledge as a guide to action’.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**John Holmwood** was an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge, where he studied Economics and Social and Political Sciences. He was a postgraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles before returning to Cambridge to study for a PhD in Sociology. His first job was at the University of Tasmania before taking up a position at the University of Edinburgh. He has held professorships at the University of Edinburgh and at the University of Sussex, where he was also Dean of the School of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies before coming to Birmingham as Professor of Sociology and Head of Department in October 2005. His main research interests are the relation between social theory and explanation and social stratification and inequality. His current research addresses the challenge of global social inquiry and the role of pragmatism in the construction of public sociology. He is the author of *Social Theory and Explanation* (with A. Stewart) and *Founding Sociology? Talcott Parsons and the Idea of General Theory* as well as other edited books and articles.