

Block

# 3

## **ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORIES-I**

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## **BLOCK 3     ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORIES-I**

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### **Introduction**

The study of society and culture has always posed a problem as the object of study has never been clearly defined or understood. Humans had left the study of their own societies to the last; both sociology and anthropology are relatively new subjects as compared to the sciences, mathematics and medicine, even geography. As we shall see in the units that follow, the understanding of what society is, how it came to be and how it is changing or evolving have all been matters of speculation as well as deep reflection by scholars over the ages. The theories that have been summarised in this Block also indicate how human thought is conditioned by the social and political situations and the historical conditions in which they arise. Thus Anthropology itself is understood as a colonial discipline that arose when the Europeans in their need to rule over the colonies wanted to understand them better.

The first unit deals with the classical evolutionary theories which were formulated to understand not as much the people on the colonies but the past of the Europeans, who having shed the theological explanations of human origin given in the Bible wanted to know more about their present civilisation and what led to it.

The second unit reflects on the structural-functional theories that conjured up a vision of utopian social equilibrium in order perhaps to attain such a condition as a result of colonial rule. It was also an intellectual effort to get over the racism of those times and to create a theory of cultural relativism and functionality giving equal importance to all kinds of cultural traits.

In the development of social theories the role of biology and biological theories were of great importance as the freedom from theological bondage was achieved with Darwin's theory and also the concept of organic analogy that had been introduced even by the early French social philosophers. The idea of Positivism, the possibility of having a theory of society was also rooted in Renaissance period of European intellectualism that was also given energy by the French revolution.

The World Wars led to disillusionment with the concept of equilibrium and a synchronic view of society. The theory of function was formulated by Malinowski while whiling away his time in exile in the isolated island of the Trobriand, yet it was a view that was supported by the illusion of isolation that informed much of early structural-functionalism. The Europeans had believed that since they were the first white men (only rarely women) to set foot into many of the societies studied by them, these had been in complete isolation. Some like Raymond Firth and Edmund Leach (also stranded in Burma during the Second World War) looked for movements within the structures. This gave rise to various concepts of social structure that are being explained in unit-III. Thus without relinquishing the concept of structure they introduced some movements within it. But the radical critiques of the classical theories came some time later, in the works of scholars like Eric Wolf, who showed that the illusion of people without histories, without any outside contact was only a European construct.

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# UNIT 1 CLASSICAL THEORIES

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## Learning Objectives



It is expected that after reading this unit, you will be able to discuss the:

- classical theories;
- followers of the theories and their approach to the study of human beings; and
- criticisms that have followed these theories.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Distant land, society, cultures, customs, rituals etc have always fascinated humankind as they wanted to know how these came into existence and how they differ from their own society. In the works of ancient travelers and historians like Heun Sung, these aspects have been reflected long before Anthropology came up as a subject. Herodotus (c.484-425 BC) a historian mainly remembered for his history of the Persian wars wrote detailed accounts of his travels. These early works, although they contained reflections on society could not be completely termed as anthropological. Works which focused on human beings and their society basically belonged to two genres: travelers writing their travel accounts and social philosophers propounding their theories. Eriksen (2008) has rightly stated that it is only when travel accounts (data) and philosophical thinking (theory) is integrated, Anthropology as a subject emerges.

In this Unit the discussion would pertain to some of the works before anthropology emerged as a theory and then move on to the theories that were being postulated when Anthropology was emerging as a subject. These theories have been termed as classical theories as they reflect the era of enlightenment and antiquity. In spite

of the criticism these theories have generated, they are an integral part of Anthropology as they present the perspectives of the early anthropologists who had envisaged the discipline. Theories of Evolutionism, Diffusionism and Historical Particularism are some of the classical theories that are being discussed herein.

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## 1.2 EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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In the early years of anthropology, the focus revolved around evolution-centering on the origin and diversification of human culture and society. These theories focused mainly on evolution of family, marriage, kinship and religion as these were seen as the basic institutions common to all societies. During this era, most of the eminent works by lawyers and sociologists were comparative analogs using the data available from the societies to which Europe was getting exposed as a result of trade and colonisation.

### 1.2.1 Early Evolutionists

In the 1700 Scottish thinkers like Adam Ferguson, John Miller, and Adam Smith reflected that all societies pass through four stages: (i) hunting and gathering, (ii) pastoralism and nomadism, (iii) agricultural, and finally (iv) commerce. The Scottish thinkers based their theories of social evolution on the experiences of the union of Scotland with England in 1707 and the effect it had on its trade. In 1748, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) published *De l' esprit des loix* (The Spirit of Laws) a comparative cross cultural study of legislative systems. Montesquieu looked at legal system as an aspect of the wider social system, closely intertwined with other facets of the society like politics, economy, kinship, family, religion etc. Montesquieu collected some of the data first hand and supplemented them with second hand knowledge. He gave the classification of the different stages of the society- Savagery, Barbarism and Civilisation, later followed by anthropologists like Morgan and Tylor.

The early works were mostly postulated by lawyers such as J.J. Bachofen, Sir Henry Maine, and McLennan. These early works have already been discussed in depth in Block 1, Unit 2 Philosophical and Historical Foundations of Social Anthropology, hence we would just recapitulate herein and not discuss in depth. J.J. Bachofen's contribution lies towards the advocacy of mother right. In his work *Das Mutterrecht* (Mother Right, 1861), Bachofen associated the rule of women during the early stages of the development of society which later gave way to Father right. Sir Henry Maine in his major work *Ancient Law*, (1861) established that the laws of the people are integrated with the social heritage particular to a society and negated the laws of universalism which was being postulated during the time. Maine based his work on the ancient legal systems of Rome, Islamic law and the Brahmanical laws. Patriarchy as the norm of society was relected in Maine's work as opposed to Bachofen's Mother right written during the same time. While on the other hand McLennan based his work on marriage and his work *Primitive Marriage*, (1865) accentuated Bachofen's view on mother right.

### 1.2.2 Contributors to the Theory of Evolution: Major Anthropological Works

Herbert Spencer in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century postulated the theory of **cosmic evolution**. His theory showed the progress of societies over time which was accomplished through competition. The phrase "**survival of the fittest**" owes its origin in the

writings of Spencer, who emphasised on the process of social selection by which only those individuals who have merit come up in society. He was against the notions of social benefits to be given to the poor. His works were developed and published several years earlier to Charles Darwin's work on biological evolution *Origin of Species* (1856).

In 1890 Sir James Frazer published his voluminous work *Golden Bough* on the study of magic and religion in which he gave a detailed description of religious beliefs of societies and cultures from various parts of the globe. The initial volume majorly revolved round the customs pertaining to an ancient Italian priesthood where each priest of the shrine is ritually murdered by his successor. In the later volumes he added data from across the globe, these accounts were mostly based on travelogues and oral stories collected from travelers.

Lewis Henry Morgan regarded as the father of American Anthropology lived among the Iroquois for sometime during the year 1840. He was adopted by one of the Iroquois clans and named *Tayadaowuhkuh* 'he who builds bridges' (Eriksen, 2008). During the stay, Morgan developed an interest in kinship and later carried on a comparative study of Native American Kinship. Morgan introduced the distinction between **classificatory** and **descriptive** kinship which is in use till date. In his work *Ancient Society* (1877) keeping in line with the evolutionary stages of the society as propagated by Montesquieu—Savagery, Barbarism and Civilisation, Morgan explained the changing dimension by introducing three sub-stages each for savagery and barbarism. Morgan tried to link the shift from one stage to the other through technological shifts like the use of fire, bow, and pottery in the savage period, moving on to domestication of animals, agriculture, metal working during the barbarian stage and to alphabet and writing in the civilisation era. Thus, Morgan attributed technological progress as the source behind social progress and change. In other words, if a change occurs for example in social institutions, organisations or ideologies, its root can be traced to a technological change in the society. Morgan's theories were popularised by Friedrich Engels, who had used some of Morgan's theories in his famous work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). For further reading in Engels and other Marxists followers of Marxist theory refer to Block 4 Unit 3 of this Course. Morgan's theory was important as it supported the conviction that materialistic factors—economic and technological—are decisive in shaping the fate of humanity.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Anthropology was getting established as a discipline Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's worked on the theory of evolution of culture. Sir Edward Burnett Tylor was the first British Professor of Anthropology, at the University of Oxford (1896). His work *Primitive Culture* (1871) defined Culture which till date is regarded as the most complete definition of culture.

"Culture, or civilisation, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."(Tylor 1958[1871]:1)

Tylor proposed the theory of **unilinear universal evolution** of society which stated that culture evolved from simple to complex. He further maintained that all societies passed through the three stages of development as suggested by Monstequiue – savagery to barbarism to civilisation. During this period Europe had explored, conquered and colonised most of the countries across the globe. Tylor's theory thus, had a strong foothold, as examples from these colonised areas

showed the various stages of evolution. Based on the principle of *psychic unity of mankind*, Tylor explained the **parallel evolutionary stages** in different cultures.

#### Reflection

***Psychic Unity of Mankind:*** The theory was based on the belief that human beings are born with similar psychological/mental capabilities that had the same thought process, so it would progress in the same line. Spencer's theory of social evolution and survival of the fittest was accentuated by Tylor's theory of cultural survivals.

***Cultural Survivals:*** Tylor explained survivals as those processes, customs, and opinions, which by compulsion of habit are carried forward into a new realm of society, and they thus continue as living examples of an earlier condition of a culture which at present has evolved into a new one.

### 1.2.3 Criticisms

The theory of social evolutionism was denounced by the anthropologists of the modern and post modern era.

- The followers of the social evolution theory were referred to as “Arm Chair Anthropologists” by the next generation of anthropologists who emphasised on primary data collection through field work. Sir James Frazer's work *Golden Bough* is set as an example by the later anthropologists of arm chair writing as the work was entirely based on secondary data. Frazer had never conducted fieldwork nor had any direct interaction with the people under study.
- Anthropologists like Franz Boas, Margret Mead and others of the American School disapproved of the theory of universal evolution based on psychic unity of mankind as it failed to take into account the cultural variations. Herein, Morgan's theory of evolution based on technological progress came under the scanner as the examples from the Polynesian chiefdoms, showed complex political systems, but with no trace of pottery (Eriksen, 2008).
- The comparative method used for these theories merely used the encounter with the other societies to enhance the greatness of the anthropologist's own society. As the reference point was the Civilisation of the Whites, these theories have been condemned as ethnocentric.

### 1.2.4 Neo Evolutionism

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists like Leslie White and Julian H. Steward attempted to overcome the failings of the classical evolutionary theorists by incorporating the methodology of empiricism and also trying to develop rational criteria of measuring evolution. They felt that evolution was a real fact and societies become more complex over time. According to Leslie White, Tylor was correct in every respect except for his methodology. For Leslie White ‘energy’ was the key component which human beings learned to harness in the course of cultural evolution. From the earlier stages when human beings started to harness energy from the natural resources like water, air and fire, slowly moving towards domestication of animals and plants, to the invention of the wheel Leslie White showed how energy conversion spurred cultural evolution. However Leslie White gave too much emphasis on the material dimensions of life which was later criticised by Marshall Sahlins.

Sahlins and Service gave a dual theory of evolution in which they distinguished between general and specific evolution. The former refers to the overall process of evolution of societies and the latter to the regional and local adaptations of

specific societies. The process of general evolution used the concept of adaptability as against adaptation. Some traits give to some societies an evolutionary advantage and they are able to spread across the globe in the process of adaptive radiation. This adaptive radiation is not necessarily a positive process and often involves war and violence. Sahlins cites the example of the discovery of gun powder that enabled European societies to establish control over most parts of the world and lead to a process of social evolution we today recognise as modernisation.

Julian Steward modified the concept of culture to divide culture into two parts, a culture comprising of the techno-economic systems that directly interact with the environment and a peripheral culture that grows by historical and specific conditions of existence of the culture. The relationship between the culture core and the environment is both functional and dialectical and establishes the methodology of cultural ecology.

The specific relationships of core and environment are conditioned by the nature of the environment and while they establish the direction of evolution of cultures, they are not universal but follow a multilinear pattern in which each environmental zone could be expected to have its own mode of evolution and one could generalise across similar environmental zones.

The peripheral culture on the other hand gives to each culture its unique character. Thus while the culture core of all societies having say, a hunting food gathering way of life, will be expectedly similar, their peripheral culture like language, art etc. can be different. The followers of neo-evolutionism also took into account seasonal migration while acknowledging the similarities between cultures. The theory of diffusionism also took into account migration which would be taken up in detail in the next section.

### 1.3 DIFFUSIONISM

Diffusionism theory interpreted the growth of culture in terms of “cultural similarities”, “mutual contact”, “cultural cradle”, “culture area”, “*kulturkreise*” (culture circle). Diffusionists negated the principle of Unilinear Evolution and studied geographical distribution and migration of cultural traits, and reflected that cultures are patch work of traits interwoven with numerous histories and origins. According to diffusionists, various culture complexes develop at various times in different parts of the world and later on diffuse to other parts of the world mainly due to migration. They thus, opined that culture has grown in course of history not because of evolution, but because of transmission of culture due to migration and mutual contact.

#### Reflection

**Culture Trait:** The simplest basic unit into which a culture can be analysed. Such a trait is a specific entity within the culture. A combination of traits is a culture complex. A trait may be diffused independently and may join freely with other traits. (Tylor: 540, 1991)

**Culture Complex:** An organically related group of culture traits in a culture area, e.g., the cattle complex of East African cultures. In diffusion (q.v), the traits of a culture complex will probably remain associated. The traits are usually logically associated with each other. (Tylor: 125. 1991)

**Culture Area:** A region which has a relatively similar way of living common to its component socio-economic systems and cultures. The centre of the culture area has uniform customs but its periphery may be less homogeneous. The concept is more relevant to material culture than to other aspects of culture. (Tylor: 37, 1991)



In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century three main schools of thoughts evolved to study diffusion;

- a) British Diffusionist School
- b) German Diffusionist School
- c) American Diffusionist School

### 1.3.1 British Diffusionist School

The British Diffusionist School mainly talked about ancient Egypt as the cultural cradle of the world. Also known as heliocentric diffusion, the theory was based on the conviction that culture originated from one culture centre. The most prominent British “diffusionists” were Grafton Elliot Smith, W.H.R. Rivers and William James Perry.

Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) the pioneer of the British School advocated that culture first evolved in Egypt and had spread to the far corners of the world from about 4000 B.C. He and Perry believed that cultural development had begun about 6000 years ago. Smith (1928:22) stated that prior to that time, the earth was inhabited by “Natural Man” who were nomads and lacked domestication of animals, agriculture, houses, clothing, but religion, social organisation, hereditary chiefs and formal laws or ceremonies of marriage or burial. In approximately 4000 B.C the inhabitants of the Nile Valley “appreciated the fortunate chance provided them by a “natural crop” of barley and adopted a settled mode of life (ibid: 32). Thus, following the matrix of evolution the Egyptians according to Smith invented pottery, basketry, building houses; started domestication of animals; built towns and learned to bury their dead in cemeteries and began the worship of deity. Having accomplished their own civilisation, they set out to explore the world, and in so doing the Egyptians rapidly spread through diffusion and colonisation. Smith correlated similarities between Egyptian complex of large stone monuments related to the sun worship and that of Megaliths of England such as stone hedge. Thus, arriving at the conclusion that megalithic monuments of England were crude imitations of Egyptian pyramids and mastabas, as a case of migration, he first published his views in an article in 1911. Later he studied Maya pyramids, Japanese Pagodas, Cambodian and Balinese Temples and American burial mounds. Smith published his Pan-Egyptian theory of diffusion in the book entitled *Origin of Civilisation* published in 1928.

W.J. Perry (1887-1949) was an adherent follower of the theory postulated by Smith, he strengthened the hands of Smith in formulating the school though there was no specific theoretical contribution on his part. His books *The Children of the Sun* (1923) and *Gods and the Men* (1927) were the major contributions to the British school of diffusionism which firmly established Egypt as the centre of civilisation.

W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) *The History of the Melanesian Society* published in 1914 leaned heavily on the theory of degeneration. He sought the explanation of contrasts among Melanesian and Polynesian cultures in terms of original complexes which had allegedly been spread by successive waves of migration. Herein, he explained the role of migration, assimilation and acculturation, based on assumption of how boatloads of men migrated to these islands and married local women and assimilated with the islanders, barring their original burial rituals. W.H.R. Rivers was of the opinion that the similarities in cultures could be explained by closely examining the patterns of imitation and migration. Thus, his summation was

in line with the theory of un-inventiveness put forward by his contemporaries Smith and Perry.

### Criticisms

- a) Egypt as the only epicenter of all invention was the greatest flaw that led other anthropologists to denounce this school as extreme diffusionists.
- b) Hypothetical assumption of human beings as un-inventive to explain Egypt as the only centre of invention was not acceptable to the later anthropologists.
- c) Only simple form of diffusion i.e diffusion of culture traits was taken into account while diffusion of culture complex was not emphasised.
- d) Material culture was predominantly explained while non-material aspects of culture were not taken into account.

The British School of Diffusionism was the last one among the three schools to emerge and the first one to disappear.

### 1.3.2 German Diffusionist School

The scholars of the German Diffusionist School were of the opinion that culture traits and complexes emerged independently in many areas and then dispersed to other parts of the world. 'Kulturkries' or Culture-Circle school of thought as it is known, differs from the British school of diffusionism in its basic concept of origin of culture. *Kulturkries* School attributed development of cultures not to one particular place but to several places at several different times. Culture traits and culture complexes were believed to have originated independently at several parts of the world from where it was imitated and diffused to other places due to migration. Thus, according to the German Diffusionist School each culture trait or culture complex had a circle or district leading to the concept of culture circles. Thus, we see that the German School of Diffusion did not completely negate the theory of evolution. The roots of the *Kulturkries* School can be traced to the founder of anthrogeography Friedrich Ratzel.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), Leo Frobrnius (1873-1938), Fritz Graebner (1877-1934) and Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) the herbingers of the German Diffusionist School had followed in the lines of the propogators of the theory of evolution emphasising the uniqueness of each cultural heritage. While at the same time argued that cultural evolution was not unilineal thereby denouncing Tylor's psychic unity of mankind and reflected that technological development alone cannot judge the complexity of a particular culture. The diffusionist aimed at a comprehensive survey of the spread of cultural traits from the earliest times. In this regard Ratzel using the comparative method traced the similarities of the bow and arrow in his work *The History of Mankind* (1896). He studied the similarities in the cross section of the bow shaft, the material and fastening of the bow string and the feathering of the arrow of different societies. Based on the study Ratzel concluded that the bow and arrow of Indonesia and West Africa were related. Using the same technique Ratzel's pupil Leo Frobrnius widened the spectrum of the material culture to masks, houses, drums, clothings and shields to present similarities between Melanesia, Indonesia and West Africa.

Fritz Graebner who was a museum curator in Germany worked on the culture circle and culture strata in Oceania and Africa and further developed the idea and tried to give it a global perspective. In his famous book *Methodder Ethnology*

**Anthropological Theories-I** (1911) he tried to explain the criteria for identifying affinities and chronologies or similarities and historical relationships. Based on the reconstruction of chronology Graebner could identify as many as six historically similar cultural developments which had counterparts in other parts of the world.

- i) Tasmanian culture
- ii) Australian boomerang culture
- iii) Totemic Hunter culture
- iv) Two-class horticulturist culture
- v) Melanesian bow culture and
- vi) Polynesian Patrilineal culture

Father Wilhelm Schmidt born in Australia was a self proclaimed follower of Graebner. To understand the cultures of the world, both Graebner and Schmidt applied two rules as discussed below and divided the world into different strata and circles (Upadhyay & Pandey: 109).

- i) Criteria of Form as called by Graebner and Criteria of Quality as stated by Schmidt reflected that similarities between two culture elements which do not automatically arise out of nature, material purpose of traits or objects, should be interpreted as a result of diffusion irrespective of the distance that might separate the two instances.
- ii) Criteria of Quantity stated that the probability of historical relationship between two items increases as the number of additional articles/items/artifacts showing similarities increases.

Schmidt distinguished four major grades of culture circles which are till date referred to;

- i) Primitive culture circle
- ii) Primary culture circle
- iii) Secondary culture circle
- iv) Tertiary culture circle

### **Criticisms of the German Diffusionist School**

- Diffusionist school focused on what is diffusion but never explained the causes of diffusion and how it takes place. The methodology did not take into account the dynamics of culture change.
- Despite the identification of 4-5 bands with their own migration patterns being reflected upon yet nothing concrete on culture circles could be established.
- Diffusionist school also relied heavily on the museum methodologies. The main component of this school was thus, typology of culture traits rather than on the explanation of the causes of spread of diffusion.

### **1.3.3 American Diffusionist School**

The American School of Diffusionism picked up the threads of the German School of Diffusionism and tried to explain the causes of the spread of diffusion. The

founder of this school was Franz Boas (1858-1942) who was followed by Clark Wissler (1870-1947) and Albert L Kroeber (1876-1960). The culture area approach was a significant part of this school while trying to map and classify the tribal groups of North and South America and show the diffusion of culture traits and complexes.

Diffusion as a cause for similar traits was explained by the American school as a result of adaptation and migration. Thus, the culture area approach was used to show the diffusion of traits among different tribes. The American school divided the world into different culture areas on the basis of geographical regions. This in turn led to the listing of traits found in the cultures. The list consisted of traits which might have been either adapted or migrated due to diffusion. This concept was emphasised by Wissler while Kroeber, Herskovits and Sapir supported the approach. Clark Wissler took into account the historical questions and his biggest contribution was the *age-area hypothesis*. In an age where radio carbon dating was yet to appear on the scene, it was difficult to ascertain the real age of the artifacts. Clark at such a juncture came up with the age area hypothesis that assumed that culture traits tended to spread from the centre towards the periphery of any culture area. This was also known as the ‘law of diffusion’.

Melville Herskovits during this era gave the explanation of ‘culture trait’ and ‘culture complex’ through his work which is best known as the “Cattle Complex of East Africa”. While Kroeber’s contribution was immensely seen towards the theory by listing and generating long list of culture traits. For any particular culture trait like hunting or fishing, the list ran to many thousands of similar culture traits across the globe. Franz Boas in following this approach had taken into account the psychic bases of human beings and thus, the American School did not discard the theory of Psychic Unity as postulated by the Evolutionist School though it also took into account the historical aspects. This shift led to the rise of the School of Historical Particularism.

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## 1.4 SCHOOL OF HISTORICAL PARTICULARISM

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Franz Boas the founder of the School of Historical Particularism believed that grand theories of socio-political evolution or diffusion were not provable. He was of the notion that the theories of all societies as a part of one single human culture evolving towards a cultural pinnacle were flawed, especially those that promoted a western model of civilisation as the apex of cultural achievement. Boas also had reservations in accepting the theories of multilinear evolution of societies. He argued that many cultures developed independently, each based on its own particular set of circumstances such as geography, climate, resources and particular cultural borrowing. Based on this argument, he postulated reconstructing the history of individual cultures, through in-depth investigation that compares group of culture traits in specific geographical areas. The distribution of the culture traits in a specific area were then plotted and further cultural borrowings determined. This gives consent to the reconstruction of individual histories of specific cultures and allows the investigator to draw conclusions as to which cultural elements were borrowed and which were developed individually. Through historical particularism Franz Boas emphasised on the reconstruction of each individual culture to understand the underlying intricacies and intrinsic value of each culture. Boas theory was carried forward and developed by his contemporary scholars and students which include Alfred L. Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Robert Lowie, Paul Radin and Edward Sapir. The theory was also borrowed by the anthropologists working in the

**Anthropological Theories-I** archaeological field as it comprised in-depth study of what had happened in the past.

### **Criticisms**

The main criticism in Historical Partucularism arose because of the heavy concentration of the data collection of the past.

- The ethnographers stated that the huge amount of data collected is difficult for a investigator to sythesize.
- Moreover, the upcoming generations of anthropologists were more interested in studying the cultural process of the present rather than the past.

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## **1.5 SUMMARY**

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The classical theories have their own place of pride in the study of Social Anthropology. These theories were the starting point from which the emphasis on theorising a particular event came up. Though these theories are no longer of prime importance yet they built the foundation for the anthropological thoughts. These theories brings into focus the society of the victorian era and with the passage of time the anthropologists have move forward from the speculation on evolution and the spread of culture (diffusion) to the more relative aspects in the present era. Herein, we have seen that the history of anthropological theories has involved transistion from diachronic perspective to synchronic perspective, which further moved on to interactive perspective. The theories following the classical theories would be taken up in the upcoming units of this block. Hereafter the theory of Functionalism, Structural Functionalism and Neo-Functionalism is going to be discussed.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) Critically discuss the theory of evolution in social anthropology?
- 2) What is the theory of Diffusionism?
- 3) Discuss the British School of Diffusionism.
- 4) Discuss the German School of Diffusionism.
- 5) Analyse the American School of Diffusionism.
- 6) Delineate the theory of Historical Particularism.

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## UNIT 2 FUNCTIONALISM, STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM AND NEO-FUNCTIONALISM

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### Learning Objectives



After reading this unit, you would be able to:

- explain the premises of functionalism;
- compare and contrast the theoretical approach of Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and Talcott Parsons;
- explore the major criticisms of the functional theory that led to the rise of the neo-functional approach; and
- critically evaluate the merits and demerits of neo-functionalism.

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### 2.1 FUNCTIONALISM

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Literally, the word ‘function’ (from Latin, *fungi, functio*, to effect, perform, execute) means ‘to perform’ or ‘to serve’ (a purpose). As a distinct approach, as a way of looking at and analysing society, functionalism emerged first in social anthropology in early twentieth century, and later in sociology, beginning in the 1930s. However, its roots are as ancient as the concept of organic analogy, used in the philosophy of Antiquity by Plato (B.C. 428/7-345/7) and Aristotle (B.C. 384-322). The concept of ‘purpose’ or ‘end’ goes back to Aristotle’s reference to the *telos* (purpose) of things as their *final cause*. The idea of a latent *telos* is also found in Adam Smith’s metaphor of the ‘invisible hand’ as the automatic mechanism that maximises wealth, individual welfare, and economic efficiency through the increase in labour. It is from *telos* that the word ‘teleology’ has come, which means that

‘everything is determined by a purpose’ and the scholars should find out what that purpose is.

### 2.1.1 From Positivism to Functionalism

The thesis of functionalism lies in the philosophy of positivism. Comte who had postulated positivism, also makes use of the analogy of society as an organism. While in the study of social facts, sociologists offer what Durkheim calls ‘sociological explanations’. Each sociological explanation is consisted of two parts: to quote Durkheim (1895: 123) here: ‘...to explain a social phenomenon the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills must be investigated separately.’ The first component of the sociological explanation is the ‘causal-historical explanation’: to delineate the cause(s) which produce a phenomenon by examining historical sources rather than indulging in what Radcliffe-Brown calls ‘conjectural history’. The second component is ‘functional’, i.e., the contribution that a part makes to society ‘in the establishment of...general harmony’ (Durkheim 1895: 125).

Durkheim’s definition of function has tremendously influenced the writings of later functionalists, both in social anthropology and sociology. For him, function is the ‘contribution’ a part makes to the whole for its ‘maintenance and well being’. Thus, function is a ‘positive contribution’: it is inherently good for society (the whole), for it ensures its continuity and healthy maintenance. By making its contribution, each part fulfills one of the needs or needs (*besoin*) of society. Once needs have been fulfilled, society will be able to survive and endure. Durkheim applies this framework of social function in all his studies.

For instance, in his doctoral work, which was on the division of labour, Durkheim (1893) rejects Darwin’s idea that once the size of a human population increases, there will be a struggle for existence and those who happen to be fit will survive, while the rest will be eliminated. Instead of lending support to the theory of competition, conflict and elimination, Durkheim shows that as human population increases, society becomes more and more differentiated with the division of labour moving towards the specialisation of jobs.

Durkheim also rejects the explanations of the division of labour that economists and psychologists had advanced. For him, the function of the division of labour is sociological: it contributes to social solidarity. Modern industrial society is integrated because of the interdependence that comes into existence with the specialisation of jobs. In his study of Australian totemism, he shows that the function of religion is to produce solidarity in society, ‘to bind people in a moral community called church’ (Durkheim 1915).

Durkheim is particularly interested in showing that the function of social facts is moral. Social institutions work to produce the goal of integration. With this perspective, he is able to account for the phenomena that to many may appear ‘unhealthy’ for society. For example, he regards crime as a ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ feature of all societies, because it reinforces collective sentiments and works towards the evolution of morality and law.

### 2.1.2 The Premises of Functionalism

Durkheim is not a ‘functionalist’ in the sense in which this term has come to be used for the approach that the British social anthropologists, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), have espoused. Durkheim does not use the term ‘functionalism’, although he defines the concept of social



function, as we noted previously, and the second part of his sociological explanation deals with the functional explanation. For instance, in his celebrated study of religion, he begins with a consideration of Australian totemism as the most elementary form of religious life, but he does not start speculating it as the earliest form and then, as his predecessors had done, offering theories to explain it. He is rather more concerned with the structure and function of totemism and how its study can help us in understanding the place of religion in complex societies. This emphasis on the study of synchronous (or 'present') societies exerted a tremendous impact on later scholars.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the continuation of the old evolutionary approach and also, its gradual decline. It also witnessed the rise of functionalism. Adam Kuper (1973) thinks that 1922 was the 'year of wonder' (*annus mirabilis*) of functionalism, for in this year were published two monographs that substantiated the functional approach. One was by Brown (who later became Radcliffe-Brown) titled *The Andaman Islanders*, and the other, by Malinowski, titled *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. The impact of anthropological functionalism was felt in other disciplines, particularly sociology. As a result of the writings of these people, functionalism emerged as an extremely important approach, holding its sway till the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In its history of about 150 years, first in the positivism of Comte, then in the 'sociologistic positivism' of Durkheim, and then, in the works of the twentieth-century functionalists, functionalism has come to comprise a number of variants and foci. Society (or culture) is a system like any other system, such as solar system, mechanical system, atomic system, chemical system, or organic system.

- 1) As a system, society (or culture) consists of parts (like, institutions, groups, roles, associations, organisations), which are interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent.
- 2) Each part performs its own function – it makes its own contribution to the whole society (or culture) – and also, it functions in relationship with other parts.
- 3) A change in one part brings about a change in other parts, or at least influences the functioning of other parts, because all the parts are closely connected.
- 4) The entire society or culture – for which we can use the term 'whole' – is greater than the mere summation of parts. It cannot be reduced to any part, or no part can explain the whole. A society (or culture) has its own identity, its own 'consciousness', or in Durkheim's words, 'collective consciousness'.

### **2.1.3 Functionalism in Social Anthropology: Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski**

Both the founders of the British functional approach (Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski) were vehemently critical of the nineteenth-century evolutionism. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) said that it was based on 'conjectural history', and not 'authentic history'.

The scholars who later came to be known as 'functionalists' sought to shift the focus of their study from 'what society was' to 'what society is', and this study should be carried out not by speculative methods, but by living with people in their natural habitats and learning from them, from the field.

### 2.1.3.1 Structural-functional Approach of Radcliffe-Brown

Abandoning the search for origins and the pasts of institutions, and the ways in which cultural traits have diffused from one part of the world to the other, Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 180) defines each society as a 'functionally interrelated system' in which 'general laws or functions operate'. He accepts that Durkheim offered the first systematic formulation of the concept of function and that this concept is based on an 'analogy between social life and organic life'. However, with reference to Durkheim's use of the term 'need' for the conditions that must be satisfied for a system to continue, Radcliffe-Brown thinks that this term would direct us towards a postulation of 'universal human or societal needs'. As a consequence, the theory according to which events and developments are meant to fulfill a purpose and happen because of that will trap us. Known as the theory of teleology, as we said earlier, Radcliffe-Brown suspects that functionalism might become teleological. He thus substitutes for the word 'need' the term 'necessary conditions of existence.' He believes that the question of which conditions are necessary for survival is an empirical one

Radcliffe-Brown disliked the use of the word 'functionalism', which Malinowski propagated with enthusiasm. His objection was that '-isms' (like *functionalism*) are ideologies, schools of thought, philosophies, and realms of opinions. Science does not have either of them.

Moreover, Radcliffe-Brown also looks at the distinction between an organism and society. For instance, an organism dies, but a society continues to survive over time, although it may be changed and transformed. An organism can be studied even when its parts have stopped working. In other words, the structure of an organism can be studied separately from its function, which is not the case with society. He writes (1952: 180):

The concept of function...involves the notion of a *structure* consisting of a *set of relations* amongst *unit entities*, the *continuity* of the structure being maintained by a *life-process* made up of the activities of the constituent units.

Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functional approach comprises the following assumptions:

- 1) A necessary condition for survival of a society is a minimal integration of its parts.
- 2) The concept of function refers to those processes that maintain the necessary integration or solidarity.
- 3) And, in each society, structural features can be shown to contribute to the maintenance of necessary solidarity.

For Durkheim, the central concept is of solidarity, while for Radcliffe-Brown, it is the 'structural continuity' of society. For example, in an analysis of the lineage system, according to Radcliffe-Brown, one must first assume that some minimal degree of solidarity must exist for it to continue. Then, one must examine the processes associated with the lineage system, assessing their consequences for maintaining social integration. One of the processes the investigator would come across is the role of lineage systems in adjudicating conflicts in societies where they are land-owning groups. They define who has the right to land and through which side of the family it would pass. In these societies, lineage is a 'corporate

group'. Descending through these steps, one will explain the integration of the economic system. Then, one will move to the other systems of society, analysing at each level the contribution a part will make to the structural continuity of the whole.

### 2.1.3.2 Functionalism of Malinowski

By comparison to Radcliffe-Brown, it is Malinowski who claims the creation of a separate 'school', the 'Functional School'. The aim of functional analysis for him (1926: 132) is to arrive at the

"explanation of anthropological facts at all levels of development by their function, by the part they play within the integral system of culture."

He (1926: 132-3) assumes that

"in every civilisation every custom, material object, ideas and belief fulfills some vital function, has some task to accomplish, represents an indispensable fact within a working whole."

Whereas Radcliffe-Brown begins with society and its necessary conditions of existence (i.e., integration), Malinowski's starting point is the individual, who has a set of 'basic' (or 'biological') needs that must be satisfied for its survival. It is because of the importance that Malinowski gives the individual that the term 'psychological functionalism' is reserved for him, in comparison to Radcliffe-Brown's approach which is called 'sociological functionalism' because in this, society, is the key concept.

Malinowski's approach distinguishes between three levels: the biological, the social structural, and the symbolic (Turner 1987: 50-1). Each of these levels has a set of needs that must be satisfied for the survival of the individual. It is on his survival that the survival of larger entities (such as groups, communities, societies) is dependent. Malinowski proposes that these three levels constitute a hierarchy. At the bottom is placed the biological system, followed next by the social-structural, and finally, by the symbolic system. The way in which needs at one level are fulfilled will affect the way in which they will be fulfilled at the subsequent levels.

The most basic needs are the biological, but this does not imply any kind of reductionism, because each level constitutes its distinct properties and needs, and from the interrelationship of different levels that culture emerges as an integrated whole. Culture is the kernel of Malinowski's approach. It is 'uniquely human', for it is not found to exist among sub-humans. Comprising all those things – material and non-material – that human beings have created right from the time they separated from their simian ancestors, culture has been the instrument that satisfies the biological needs of human beings. It is a need-serving and need-fulfilling system. Because of this role of culture in satisfying biological needs that Malinowski's functionalism is also known as 'bio-cultural functionalism.'

One more difference between Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski may be noted here. A concept fundamental to Malinowski – the concept of culture – is a mere epiphenomena (secondary and incidental) for Radcliffe-Brown. He believes that the study of social structure (which for him is an observable entity) encompasses the study of culture; therefore, there is no need to have a separate field to study culture. Further, whilst social structure is concerned all about observations, what anthropologists see and hear about the individual peoples, culture is in the minds of people, not amenable to observation in the same way as social structure is.

Radcliffe-Brown wants to make social anthropology a branch of natural science, which would be possible when there is an empirically investigable subject matter.

The basis of Malinowski's approach is a theory of 'vital sequences', which have a biological foundation and are incorporated into all societies. These sequences number eleven, each composed of an 'impulse', an associated physiological 'act', and a satisfaction which results from that act (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

<b>Impulse</b>	<b>Act</b>	<b>Satisfaction</b>
1. Drive to breathe; gasping for air.	Intake of oxygen	Elimination of CO <sub>2</sub> in tissues
2. Hunger	Ingestion of food	Satiation
3. Thirst	Absorption of liquid	Quenching
4. Sex appetite	Conjugation	Detumescence
5. Fatigue	Rest	Restoration of muscular and nervous energy
6. Restlessness	Activity	Satisfaction of fatigue
7. Somnolence	Sleep	Awakening with restored energy
8. Bladder pressure	Micturition	Removal of tension
9. Colon pressure	Defecation	Abdominal relaxation
10. Fright	Escape from danger	Relaxation
11. Pain	Avoidance by effective act	Return to normal state

### **Permanent Vital Sequences Incorporated in All Culture**

For instance, the impulse of somnolence accompanies the act of sleep, resulting in satisfaction by 'awakening with restored energy' (Malinowski 1944: 77; Barnard 2000: 68). Malinowski follows this eleven-fold paradigm with a set of seven biological needs and their respective cultural responses (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

<b>Basic Needs</b>	<b>Cultural Responses</b>
1. Metabolism	Commissariat
2. Reproduction	Kinship
3. Bodily comfort	Shelter
4. Safety	Protection
5. Movement	Activities
6. Growth	Training
7. Health	Hygiene

For example, the first need is of food, and the cultural mechanisms are centered on the processes of food getting, for which Malinowski uses the term 'commissariat', which means the convoy that transports food. Similarly, the second need is of reproduction (biological continuity of society) and the cultural response to which is kinship concerned with regulating sex and marriage. From this, Malinowski goes on to four-fold sequences, which he calls the 'instrumental imperatives', and associates each one of them with their respective cultural responses. The four-fold sequence is of economy, social control, education, and political organisation. From here, he shifts to the symbolic system – of religion, magic, beliefs and values – examining its role in culture.

### 2.1.4 Functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) and Robert K. Merton (1910-2003)

In 1975, in an important article, Parsons labels his student, Robert Merton and himself 'arch-functionalists'. He also explains here why he has abandoned the term 'structural functionalism', which, at one time, he used for his approach. For him, structure refers to 'any set of relations among parts of a living system'. On empirical grounds, he says, it can be assumed or shown that these relations are stable over a time period. By process, which is the correlative concept with structure, one refers to the 'changes' that occur in the state of the system or its relevant parts. With respect to structure, the key concept is of *stability*, and with respect to process, it is of *change*. Thus, by structure, we refer to a pattern of relationships in a social system, and process refers to the changes occurring in that system. A significant characteristic of 'structural functionalism' has been that it has stressed 'structure' more than 'process'.

In the article mentioned above, Parsons states that the concept of function stands at a 'higher level of theoretical generality'. It is far more analytical than the concept of structure, or even process, although function encompasses the latter. It is because the concept of function is concerned with the 'consequences' of the existence and the nature of structures that can be empirically described. And, it is also concerned with the processes that take place in these systems. Parsons thinks that his original formulation under the rubric of 'structural functionalism' tends to analyse society as if it is static, but the new formulation, where stress is laid on the concept of function than structure, in the name of functionalism, takes much more account of change and evolution.

Parsons' functionalism is best known in terms of the 'functional imperatives', the essential conditions required for the enduring existence of a system (Parsons 1951). Also known as the 'AGIL model' (based on the first letters of the four functions that Parsons has devised) or the 'four-function paradigm', it evolved from Parsons' collaborative work with Robert F. Bales in experiments on leadership in small groups (Rocher 1974). These four functions help us to explain how a state of balance (i.e. equilibrium) emerges in a system. Parsons explores the role of these four functions in giving rise to equilibrium in a system.

In the case of society, Parsons submits that the institutions (or structures) maintain (or re-establish) equilibrium by fulfilling the 'needs', which must be satisfied if the system has to persist. Institutions (or structures) also solve the recurring problems in a manner similar to the way in which the units of the organism comparable to the institutions (or structures) of societies do in their natural environment. The system ensures that these institutions (or structures) work appropriately on everyday basis, satisfying the needs. For achieving equilibrium, society requires the processes of socialisation, the internalisation of societal values, and the mechanisms of social control so that deviance is checked.

All 'action systems' – and society is one of them – face four major 'problems' (or have four major 'needs'), namely Adaptation (A), Goal Attainment (G), Integration (I), and Pattern Maintenance, or, as Parsons later renamed it, Latent Pattern Maintenance—Tension Management, or simply, Latency (L). Parsons pictures society (or the social system) as a large square, which he divides into four equal parts. These parts are the four functional problems, represented by the acronym, AGIL (see Diagram 1). The underlying idea is that all systems need to accomplish these four functions in order to survive. The meaning of these four 'functional imperatives' is as follows:

- 1) **Adaptation:** By this is meant the problem of securing sufficient resources from the society's *external* environment and distributing them throughout the system. Each society needs certain institutions that perform the function of adaptation to the environment – which is an *external* function. Adaptation provides the *means* – the *instrumental* aspects – to achieve goals. Biological organism performs the function of adaptation in the general system of action. In the context of society, economic institution performs this function.
- 2) **Goal Attainment:** This function is concerned with the need of the system to mobilise its resources to attain the goals and to establish priorities among them. It mobilises motivations of the actors and organises their efforts. In the general system of action, personality performs this function, while in case of society this task is given to the political institution, because power is essential for implementation and decision-making. Goal attainment is concerned with *ends* – the *consummatory* aspects. Since goals are delineated in relation with the external environment, it is, like adaptation, an *external* function.
- 3) **Integration:** It is regarded as the ‘heart’ of the four-function paradigm (Wallace and Wolf 1980: 36). By integration is meant the need to coordinate, adjust, and regulate relationships among various actors (or, the units of the system, such as the institutions), so that the system is an ‘ongoing entity’. According to the general theory of action, the social system performs this function, whereas in society, legal institutions and courts are entrusted with this task. Integration is concerned with *ends*, and the *internal* aspects of the system.
- 4) **Latency (Pattern Maintenance and Tension Management):** This function pertains to the issues of providing knowledge and information to the system. In the general theory of action, culture – the repository of knowledge and information – accomplishes this function. Culture does not *act* because it does not have energy. It lays hidden, supplying actors (who are high in energy) with knowledge and information they require for carrying out action. Because culture exists ‘behind’ the actions of people, it is called ‘latent’. Integration takes care of two things: first, it motivates actors to play their roles in the system and maintain the value patterns; and second, to provide mechanisms for managing internal tensions between different parts and actors. The problem that every society faces is of keeping its value system intact and ensuring that the members conform to the rules. It will be possible when societal values are properly transmitted and imbibed. The institutions that carry out this function are family, religion, and education. Latency gives *means* to achieve ends; it is *internal* to the system.

**Diagram 1**  
**AGIL Model**

		Means (Instrumental)	Ends (Consummatory)		
External	<b>A</b>	Adaptation	Goal attainment	<b>G</b>	
Internal	<b>L</b>	Latency (pattern maintenance and tension-relieving mechanisms)	Integration	<b>I</b>	

Organism	Personality
Culture	Social System

**AGIL Functions in the Social System**

Economy	Polity
Fiduciary System	Societal Community

For the purpose of analysis, Parsons identifies sub-systems corresponding to the AGIL model in all systems and their sub-systems (see Diagram 1). As we have seen, at the general level of action theory, the biological organism performs the function of adaptation, the personality system, the function of goal attainment, the social system integrates different units, and the cultural system is concerned with pattern maintenance. Then, the social system is broken down into the four AGIL functions. We noted earlier that economy performs the function of adaptation, whereas, polity (or political institution), the function of goal attainment. For the sub-system that carries out the function of integration, Parsons uses the term ‘societal community’, which reminds one of Ferdinand Tönnies’s ideas of *gemeinschaft* (‘community’). ‘Societal community’ produces solidarity, unity, cohesiveness, and loyalty to norms, values, and institutions. The function of pattern maintenance, Parsons says, is the task of what he calls the ‘fiduciary system’, which pertains to the nature of a trust or a trusteeship. This system produces and legitimises moral values, beliefs, and expressive symbols.

Each of the sub-systems of the system can be taken up for analysis by treating it as a ‘system’, and then, breaking it down into four parts looking for its components that respectively perform the functions of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. This way of analysing society is known as the systemic approach.

Parsons’s AGIL model is an ideal type, applicable more to differentiated societies than simple societies. In the latter case, institutions may collapse into one, with the result that the same institution may perform different functions. The example of family may be cited here, which carries out economic, political, and religious functions, in addition to the functions traditionally assigned to it, like socialisation of the young. In communist societies, the party may decide the aspects of economy – the processes of production and distribution – and thus, adaptation and goal attainment may appear indistinguishable.

Parsons’ theory is popularly known as a ‘grand theory’ – an all-encompassing, unified theory – which is believed to have a large explanatory power. However, Parsons’ student, Robert Merton, is skeptical of such a theory, for it is too general to be of much use (Merton, 1957). Instead, he expresses his preference for mid-

level (middle-range) theories, which cover certain delimited aspects of social phenomena (such as groups, social mobility, or role conflict). Partially because of this middle-range strategy, Merton's functionalism is quite different from that of Parsons.

For instance, Merton abandons the search for any functional prerequisites that will be valid in all social systems. He also rejects the idea of the earlier functionalists that recurrent social phenomena should be explained in terms of their benefits to society as a whole. For criticism, Merton identifies the three postulates of earlier functionalists given below:

- 1) Postulate of the functional unity of society. It is an assumption that there is unity in society, which comes about because of the contributions that parts make to the whole.
- 2) Postulate of the universal functionalism. It is an assumption that all social or cultural forms have positive functions, which are for the maintenance and well being of society.
- 3) Postulate of indispensability. It is an assumption that the function that a social or cultural form performs is an indispensable precondition for the survival of society.

Merton notes that none of these postulates are empirically justifiable. For instance, there is no reason to suppose that particular institutions are the only ones to fulfill the functions. Empirical research shows that there may be a wide range of what Merton has termed 'functional alternatives' that may be able to perform the same function.

With a critical look, Merton tries to attempt what he calls a 'codification of functional analysis in sociology', a functional paradigm (or perspective) (which is not a grand theory) that takes into consideration the actual dimensions of social reality, of conformity and deviance, understanding and explaining them. Like other functionalists, he views society as a system of interconnected parts, where the functioning of a part has implications for the functioning of other parts and the entire system. Like his predecessors, he is interested in the concepts of equilibrium and integration, and the contribution of customs and institutions to the persistence of societies. His definition of function is also in terms of the 'positive contribution' of a part to the whole: functions are those contributions or consequences that 'make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system.' For the working of society and its institutions, it is important that all share a set of common values and norms, which is another distinguishing property of functionalism.

While agreeing with other functionalists on certain points stated above, Merton has made a distinct contribution to a set of two typologies, namely, the distinction between 'function' and 'dysfunction', and between 'manifest' and 'latent' functions. Most functionalists think that all contributions are inherently good or 'functional' for society, a proposition Merton finds difficult to accept. He thinks there are acts that have 'consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system'.

The distinction between manifest and latent functions has its roots in the writings of the founders in sociology. In his study of religion, for example, Durkheim (1915) makes a distinction between 'what people do of which they are aware' and 'what emerges from their collective acts which they had not intended and anticipated.' When people assemble for collective totemic rituals, their explicit aim



is to honour their totem, but what these rituals produce is a sense of we-ness, which is an unintended, unrecognised, and unanticipated consequence. Following this, one can say that manifest functions are those consequences people observe or expect, while latent functions are those consequences that are neither recognised nor intended.

Merton was able to advance four types of explanations in terms of the two dichotomies (function and dysfunction; manifest and latent functions). The earlier functionalists put forth only one explanation and that too with respect to latent functions. Merton's conceptual scheme guided empirical research, rather than remaining a theory with several explanatory claims, like the 'grand theory' of Parsons.

### 2.1.5 Critical Evaluation

Without exaggeration, one may say that in the history of social anthropology and sociology, no theory has generated so much of interest, enthusiasm, and response as did functionalism. Known by different names (such as 'functional approach', 'structural-functional approach', 'structural-functionalism', 'Functional School', etc.), functionalism emerged as some kind of a unified methodology and theory in the 1930s. Earlier, right from the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was a body of scattered ideas and propositions. Until the 1960s, its reputation was unassailable, as its adherents were scholars of outstanding merit, who were known (and are still known) for various other contributions besides developing it both in terms of theory and method. For example, Talcott Parsons is well known for his contribution to family sociology, the school as a social system, role analysis in medical institutions, professions and problems of the blacks, evolutionism, etc. Similarly, Robert Merton's contribution to social structure and anomie, deviance and conformity, dysfunctions of bureaucracy, sociology of science, survey methods, role-set, etc, will always be referred.

During this period from the 1930s to the 1960s, when functional approach was virtually unchallenged in the United States of America and the other parts of the world, some of its criticisms were undoubtedly surfacing. For instance, the British social anthropologist, Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard, rejected the idea of social anthropology as a science (held by the protagonist of the structural-functional approach, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown) and viewed it rather as a 'comparative history'. Although Evans-Pritchard began as a functionalist, he transformed into a humanist. Sir Edmund R. Leach also started his career in social anthropology as a functionalist, he then moved to the 'processual analysis', i.e., looking at society as a 'process in time', as it is evident from his 1954 book on political systems. Later, under the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, he became a structuralist, and came to be known as a neostructuralist (Kuper, 1973). His 1961 publication of *Rethinking Anthropology* offered a challenge to structural-functionalism. In spite of these criticisms, functionalism continued to survive with glory.

But by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the criticisms of the functional theory increased manifold. Parsons's attempts to merge theories based on action with those based on structures were unconvincing to many critics. The rehabilitation of Marxian approach in sociology and the successful emergence of the conflict theory was a big blow to functionalism. Several new theories and approaches, each trying to bring in the aspects that functionalism had ignored, became the focal points. It seemed clear to many critics that sociology had entered a post-functional, a post-Parsonian phase in its development.

One of the main criticisms of functionalism is that it does not adequately deal with history. In other words, it is inherently *ahistorical* (but not antihistorical). It does not deal with the questions of past and history, although the advocates of functionalism have considered evolution and diffusion as important processes of change. Functionalism in social anthropology in the 1930s emerged as a reaction to the nineteenth century 'pseudo-historical' and 'speculative' evolutionism and diffusionism. It also tried to overcome the ethnocentric biases of the earlier approaches, which regarded the contemporary pre-literate societies, popularly known as 'primitive societies', and certain customs and practices found among them as remnants of past. Edward Tylor unhesitatingly regarded the 'contemporary primitives' as 'social fossils' and 'survivals' of the past, assuming that their study would guide us to an understanding of the cultural traits of the societies of prehistoric times (Harris 1968: 164-5). This would help us in reconstructing the history of humankind.

Closely related with this is another criticism of functionalism: it does not effectively deal with the contemporary processes of social change. Thus, in essence, because it is neither able to study the pasts of societies nor the contemporary change process, it is more suited to the study of 'contemporary static structures', if there are any. Or, perhaps, it portrays the societies it studies as if they are static, which, in reality, may not be so. The picture of a society that functionalists present is like the picture of a 'frozen river' that tells nothing about its ebb and flow. By analogy, functionalists 'freeze society' in the same manner as a still camera 'freezes' people and locations in its frame.

There are two views on this issue. First, the problem is believed to lie with the theory of functionalism, because when the parts of a society are seen as reinforcing one another as well as the system, when each part fits well with the other parts, then it is difficult to explain how these parts can contribute to change (Cohen 1968). Or, why should the parts change or contribute to change when they are all in a state of harmony? The second opinion is that there is nothing in functionalism which prevents it from dealing with the issues of history and change. For instance, Parsons's book titled *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966) reflects the ability of structural-functionalism to handle the dimensions of change. So does Smelser's work of 1959 on industrial revolution. The problem lies, according to some, not with the theory of functionalism, but its practitioners, who rarely address the issues of change and even when they do, it is in developmental and adaptive terms than in revolutionary (Turner and Maryanski 1979). Whether the problem of functionalism has to do with the theory or its practitioners, 'the fact remains that the main contributions of structural functionalists lie with the study of static, not changing, social structures' (Ritzer 2000: 115).

Another criticism of functionalism is that it is unable to deal effectively with conflict. Functionalists have overemphasised harmonious relationships. They tend to exaggerate consensus, stability, equilibrium, and integration, disregarding the forces of conflict and disorder, and changes emerging from them. For them, conflict is necessarily destructive and occurs outside the framework of society.

In the words of Robert Redfield (1955), the traditional societies were 'past-oriented' in comparison to modern societies which were 'future-oriented'. The 'past-oriented' societies were proud of their tradition, which for them was sacrosanct; they wanted to keep it intact and therefore, any attempt to assail it was strongly dealt with. The 'future-oriented' societies were not satisfied with their lot; they looked forward to changing their lifestyles, technology, and norms and

values. Since the substantiation of anthropological functionalism came from the empirical study of ‘past-oriented’, technologically simpler, pre-literate, and non-civilised societies, it was obvious that the characteristics of these societies would find their conspicuous presence in the theory.

The conservative bias in functionalism is not only because of what it ignores (history, change, conflict, disorder) but also what it emphasises (society ‘here and now’, norms and values, consensus, order). Functionalists are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the normative order of society.

The individual in functionalism is devoid of dynamism and creativity. He is simply a product of society and its forces constrain him at every juncture. The opposite view is that it is the individual who in fact initiates change in society. Individuals as much use the system as the system uses them. Those who subscribe to the interactional approach argue that functionalism has failed to conceptualise adequately the complex nature of actors and the process of interaction. One of the reasons of why functionalism ignored the role of the individual in society was that it was solely interested in explaining the survival of society. It was interested in the ‘collectivity’ and not the ‘individual’.

In addition to these, there were some important methodological and logical criticisms of functionalism. The belief of functionalism that there is a ‘single theory’ that could be used in all situations was an illusion. Many scholars found that it was difficult to apply functionalism to complex societies, which were not only fast changing but were also conflict-ridden. The ideas of relativism – i.e., things are meaningful in their respective cultural contexts — to which functionalists gave support, made a comparative analysis difficult.

One of the important criticisms of functionalism is that it is inherently teleological, i.e., explanations are given in terms of ‘purposes’ or ‘goals’. With respect to this, Turner and Maryanski (1979) submit that teleology *per se* is not a problem. As a matter of fact, social theory should take into account the ‘teleological relationship between society and its component parts’ (Ritzer 2000). The problem comes when teleology is stretched to unacceptable limits, when it is believed that only the given and specific part of society can fulfill the needs. Teleology becomes illegitimate when it fails to take into consideration the idea that a variety of alternative structures can fulfill the same needs.

Functionalism has also been criticised for making explicit what is implicit in the premise; the technical term used for this kind of reasoning is ‘tautology’. For example, if religion exists, it must be functional, otherwise, it will cease to exist, and its function must be to contribute to social solidarity, because without it, society will not be able to survive. Many critics have pointed out that functionalism suffers from ‘globular or circular reasoning’. Needs are postulated on the basis of the existing institutions, that are, in turn, used to explain their existence.

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## 2.2 THE THESIS OF NEO-FUNCTIONALISM

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A revival of interest in Parsons’s work, first in Germany and then, the United States of America, led to the emergence of neo-functionalism. The basic aim has been to merge certain aspects of functionalism, those which have withstood the test of time, with other paradigms that have developed better critical perspectives.

Those associated with neo-functionalism in Germany are Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas, who initially collaborated on a theory of social engineering in

modern society, but later worked separately. Parsons placed emphasis on value consensus, also believing that because the social system penetrates the personality system, the options available to the individual for social relationships and behaviour are limited. But that is, Luhmann thinks, not simply correct. He moves the individual out of the social system into the 'society' — what may be termed the 'societal environment' — which is far more complex and less restrictive. It accords people more freedom, especially freedom for carrying out 'irrational and immoral behaviour' (Abrahamson 2001: 148). Abrahamson says that if Luhmann moved *from* Parsons, and then discovered the problems with the concept of value consensus, Habermas *moved* toward Parsons. Habermas's early writings were strongly critical of Parsons, but later, he accorded a place to cultural, social, and personality systems in his theory. His conceptualisation of the relationship between these systems was quite consistent with Parsons's views. He also gave place to Parsons's concept of 'self-regulating system', which comes into existence when societies become complex as a consequence of which structural systems are separated from 'lifeworld', i.e., the inter-subjective realm for experiencing and communicating about culture, society, and personality (2001: 148).

The main spokespersons of neofunctionalism in America are Jeffrey Alexander and Paul Colomy. In one of their joint publications of 1985, they define neofunctionalism as 'a self-critical strand of functional theory that seeks to broaden functionalism's intellectual scope while retaining its theoretical core' (p. 118). Under the rubric of 'neo-functionalism', they have made an effort to extend structural functionalism by overcoming its difficulties.

Alexander and Colomy think that the deficiencies of structural functionalism are not irreversible. Its synthetic orientation can be recaptured. The concepts of conflict and subjective meaning can be introduced. One can regard the integration of the system and the interpenetration of its various subsystems as a 'tendency', to be investigated rather than as a 'given' or 'assumed' fact.

### **2.2.1 Neo-Functionalism: Problems that Need to be Surmounted**

In neo-functionalism, the problems that need to be surmounted are:

- 1) Anti-individualism — the individual in structural functionalism is passive and lacks creativity, and is simply a product of the social forces, which he neither checks nor controls.
- 2) Antagonism to change — structural functionalism is a theory of social order rather than of change.
- 3) Conservatism — structural functionalism has worked toward offering a justification of the system and its practices, often justifying inequality, exploitation, and oppression.
- 4) Idealism — structural functionalism speaks in terms of an ideal society, where everything is in order and stability.
- 5) Anti-empiricist bias — structural functionalism is more concerned with abstract social systems instead of real societies.

### **2.2.2 Merits and Demerits of Neo-Functionalism**

Although some of the traits of what has come to be called 'neo-functionalism' are

found in the German interest in Parsons's works, this theoretical 'tendency' is principally associated with an American sociologist, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and later, his younger collaborator, Paul Colomy. A restricted use of the term 'neofunctionalism' is also found in ecological studies where it basically means assigning primary importance to techno-environmental forces in an analysis of the processes of cultural adaptation.

Alexander does not seem to be happy with the use of the term 'neofunctionalism'. Alexander (1985) also thinks that notwithstanding the inappropriateness of the term 'functionalism', Parsons's sociology will be known in future by this name. Instead of being a unified theory, neofunctionalism is a 'tendency', characterised by the following propositions (Alexander 1985: 10):

- 1) An open and pluralistic description of society as a whole.
- 2) An even-handed apportionment when it comes to action vs. structure (or action vs. order).
- 3) Integration is viewed as a possibility; deviance and social control are considered realities.
- 4) Discernment between personality, culture, and society.
- 5) Differentiation is viewed as the central driving force producing social change.
- 6) The development of concepts and theory is considered to be independent of all the levels involved in sociologic analysis.

Post-positivism submits that a theory can be discussed, examined, verified, and elaborated with reference to other theories rather than empirical research. In other words, the referent for a theory might be another theory rather than an ensemble of facts. Theories are viewed as if they represent the 'empirical observations'. Alexander is critical of empirically-based inferences in social sciences. One of the fundamental differences between social sciences and natural sciences is that theoretical perspectives always permeate every work that social scientists do. Sociological theory, therefore, can be scientifically significant irrespective of its ability and capacity to explain empirical observations.

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## 2.3 SUMMARY

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The early nineteenth century saw the rise of the functional theory and by the 1960's it was at its pinnacle represented by scholars' of outstanding merit of that time. But the approach was also levied with criticisms as the functional approach was inherently teleological, i.e., explanations are given in terms of 'purposes' or 'goals'. The method emphasised more on society here and now- 'collectivity' and did not call attention to the 'individual'. Neo-functionalism worked on the aspects that were not considered by the followers of the functional approach. The neofunctionalism school also has its share of criticisms as it has been termed as conservative and antagonistic to change, as it emphasis is on social order rather than on change.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) Discuss the premises of Functionalism.
- 2) Compare and contrast the works of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski in relation to the functional theory.
- 3) Discuss the works of Talcott Parsons and Robert k. Merton in functionalism.
- 4) Critically evaluate the functional theory.
- 5) Discuss the problems that needs to be addressed in neo-functionalism.

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# UNIT 3 SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND DYNAMIC THEORIES OF STRUCTURE

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- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Social Organisation and Social Structure
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## Learning Objectives



After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- define Social Organisation and Social Structure;
- describe about the dynamic theories of social structure; and
- indicate the importance underlying these theories from an anthropological perspective.

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## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this lesson we are going to try and understand about 'Social Organisation and Dynamic Theories of Structure.' The term 'structure' (Latin *structura* from *struere*, to construct) has been applied to human societies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before that time, its use was more common in other fields such as construction or biology. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1999) gives three meanings of the



term structure: (i) the way in which something is organised, built, or put together (e.g., the structure of the human body); (ii) a particular system, pattern, procedure, or institution (e.g., class structure, salary structure); and (iii) a thing made up of several parts put together in a particular way (e.g., a single-storey structure).

In Social anthropology a study on structure will encompass all the three meanings. The term structure, will thereby imply an ‘interconnectedness’ of parts, i.e., the parts of a society are not isolated entities, but are brought together in a set of relationships. Spencer developed the organic analogy, believing that this analogy will be greatly valid if we are able to show not only that society is like an organism but also that ‘organism is like society’ (see Barnes, H.E. 1948; Harris 1968). Why organic analogy is used more than other analogies such as of the solar system, and later, of atomic and chemical systems – is because an organism is far more concrete than other systems, and is easy to understand, comprehend, and explain. This analogy was basic to the understanding of the concept of social structure, a term used for the first time by Spencer.

For those who regard structure as an important analytical concept, the world is an organised entity; it comprises interconnected parts, where each part is to be studied in relationship with other parts. Thus, ‘Structure refers to the way in which the parts of an entity are interconnected so that the entity emerges as an integrated whole, which for the purpose of analysis can be broken down into individual parts.’

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### **3.2 SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

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‘Social organisation’ has tended to be used loosely to refer to the sum total of activities performed in a given social context. So we must understand that social organisation which defines the roles individuals play in relation to one another is mainly concerned with social action whereas social structure which defines the statuses of actors performing such roles are more concerned with the formal relations between people. We are all aware of the fact that all human groups of a society are organised and the individual components function through interrelation and interaction. Social organisation implies some degree of unification, a putting together of diverse elements into common relation. To do this, advantage may be taken of existing structural principles or variant procedures may be adopted. This involves the exercise of choice, the making of decisions.

Herbert Spencer who used the term ‘function’ for the analytical study of society perceived close parallels between the human society and biological organism. He believed that just like the interrelated parts of a machine function to keep the machine working in a similar fashion there is functional dependence of different parts of the society for maintaining the integrity of the society. Durkheim tried to explain this concept with social phenomenon. Malinowski used the term social organisation and tried to define it in terms of purposive manner in which people acted upon their environment to satisfy their needs thereby putting forward what is called the theory of functionalism. However Radcliffe-Brown later modified Malinowski’s concept, emphasising upon distinguishing the structural function from the function of Malinowski. Brown has made a clear cut distinction between social structure and social organisation. According to him, social structure refers to arrangement of persons, whereas social organisation refers to arrangement of activities of two or more persons which are adjusted to give a united combined

activity. He perceived social organisation as the arrangement of 'roles' associated with 'statuses', which ultimately constitute social structure. Levi-Strauss, and many other anthropologists, have consistently employed the term 'social structure' for what Radcliffe-Brown called 'structural form'. Lévi-Strauss even uses 'social structure' to refer to a still higher degree of abstraction—the structure of social relations in all societies, as well as that within a particular society.

Parsons' view of the relation between social organisation and social structure (1951) was essentially the same as that of Radcliffe-Brown, but in addition he posited the idea of the social system, which comprises both. Parsons distinguished four levels of this system: social values, institutional patterns, specialised collectivities (groups), and roles performed by individuals in these collectivities or groups. To complicate things further, Murdock's (1949) famous book by the title *Social Structure* seems to suggest a very wide meaning of 'social structure', one which bears little relation to the more precise formulations of other theorists, though it probably comes closer to the usual meaning of 'social organisation'.

'Social structure' has usually been employed for the social context itself, or more precisely for the set of social relations which link individuals in a society. Writers who are mainly concerned with social action tend to concentrate on social organisation which defines the roles individuals play in relation to one another. Those who are concerned more with the formal relations between people tend to concentrate on social structure, which defines the statuses of actors performing such roles. Thus, social organisation is of greater interest to Malinowskian functionalists, and to some extent processualists, notably Raymond Firth (1951). Social structure is of greater interest to those whose approaches are descended from classic structural-functionalist and structuralist traditions.

According to Raymond Firth (1951) the arrangement of parts or elements constitutes social structure how people in the society get things done constitutes social organisation. The concern of structural studies will be to outline the fundamental social constituents that are revealed in the forms of basic social relations. Structural elements give shape to the society just like the anatomical framework give shape to human body. The study of social structure is indispensable to delineate the functions of the society to understand the continuity of social life.

Social Organisation, on the other hand is not limited to the ideal pattern of social relations. It indicates the factors to change i. e, the extent to which the social standard deviate as an influence of different external factors. Therefore if social structure is conceived as a model of action, the social organisation will be the reality. According to Firth, a structural analysis alone can not interpret social change. Analysis of the structural aspect necessitates the analysis of the organisational aspect.

Social organisation can be explained by the examples of social groups, industrial groups, and sport groups. When we think about the organisation of work in factory, we understand that there are managers, foreman and other workers who tend to carry out different activities for the functioning of the factory as a whole. This arrangement of activities reveals the organisational aspect of the factory. In a similar manner, social structure can be explained by the examples of army and tribal groups, which reveal arrangement of persons in institutionalised form. Thus, an organisation is arrangement of relationship within the total activities of an institution. For example, activities of various members of household may be subject to some regular arrangement, and arrangement of these activities is its organisation.

The arrangement of activities of one family may differ from another household, which is structurally of the same order. Radcliffe-Brown makes this distinction clear by stipulating that ‘when we are dealing with structural system, we are concerned with a system of social positions. While in an organisation, we deal with a system of roles.’ In the study of social structure, we deal with total network of social relationships, and not such relationship themselves.

For a clear understanding of the terms social structure and social organisation, let us take into consideration the Garo society which is a matrilineal tribe inhabiting basically in the state of Meghalaya. The Garos follow matriliney in descent and inheritance and their residence is matrilineal. They also have a distinct dialect of their own. All these features give the Garo society a typical structure. An Organisational study on the other hand will encompass the study of the various traditional aspects of Garo social life i.e., family types, clans kinship, marriage, political system, educational system, religious beliefs and practices coupled with the significant changes in traditional Garo society due to their conversion to Christianity and contacts with other contemporary Indian societies. The total study of a society including the structural aspect is what we call an organisational study.

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### **3.3 DYNAMIC THEORIES OF STRUCTURE**

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As we go further into the unit we will as students of anthropology be able to understand how the theory of social structure has attracted the attention of these scholars whose findings, interpretations and analysis of the elements of social structure has revealed the dynamic nature of social structure. This section will deal with examining the contributions of Radcliffe-Brown, G. P. Murdock, Levi-Strauss, S.F. Nadel, Edmund Leach, Raymond Firth, Meyer Fortes, Evans-Pritchard, T.Parsons, Emile Durkheim and Rodney Needham to the understanding of the dynamic theories of social structure.

#### **3.3.1 Social Structure is a Reality: A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s Contribution**

When we speak of social structure, we must remember as said earlier that Spencer who coined the term social structure did not offer a theoretical perspective on it. However his analogy between societies and organisms influenced later scholars in developing the concepts of structure and function. For instance, Émile Durkheim (1938 [1895]), although a staunch critic of Spencer, was inspired by his organic analogy, and used the term ‘social morphology’, by which he meant what we mean by the term ‘social structure’. Durkheim’s sociology exercised an indelible impact on the British social anthropologist, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, the chief pioneer of British School of Structuralism. Besides his contribution to what he called the ‘structural-functional approach’, one of his important contributions was to the understanding of the concept of social structure. He used the concept of social structure for the first time as early as 1914, while delivering his presidential address to Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) who believes that social phenomena are investigated by methods similar to those used in natural and biological sciences makes an important distinction between an ‘individual’ and a ‘person’. As an individual, ‘he is a biological organism’ which keeps on carrying out a multitude of physiological and psychological functions till the time he is alive. As a ‘person’, the human being is a ‘complex of social relationships’. It is the unit of study for sociologists and social

anthropologists. Radcliffe-Brown uses the term 'social personality' for the 'position' a human being occupies in a social structure. It however does not imply that the position remains the same throughout the life of an individual, for it changes over time. We study persons in terms of social structure and we study social structures in terms of persons who are the unit of what it is composed. So we need to understand that society is not a 'haphazard conjunction of persons', rather an organised system where norms and values control the relationships between persons. According to Radcliffe-Brown all social relations of person to person, i.e., interpersonal relations (for example, the kinship structure of any society) and the differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role (for instance, the relation between men and women, employers and employees, etc.) are in fact concerned with relations between persons, which norms and values of that society condition.

Radcliffe-Brown further stated that social structure is that concrete reality that comprises the 'set of actually existing relations at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings.' We can conduct direct observation on social structure – we can see the 'actually existing relations', describe and classify them, and understand the relations of persons with others. Social structure is observable, empirical, and fully amenable to study by methods of natural and biological sciences.

According to Radcliffe-Brown both the social structure and organism are prone to change yet they are stable. Social structure continues over time, a kind of continuity that Radcliffe-Brown calls 'dynamic continuity'. It is like the 'organic structure of a living body'. By change he means that organs of both the structure are liable to development and destruction. As a living body constantly renews itself by replacing its cells and energy level, in the same way, the actual 'social life renews the social structure.' Relations between people change over time. While the social structure changes over time, there remains an underlying continuity and relative constancy, which designates its structural form. This certainly does not imply that the structural form is static — it also changes, sometimes gradually, sometimes with suddenness, as happens in cases of revolution. But even then, some kind of a continuity of structure is maintained. Our job as sociologists and social anthropologists is to discover the structural form of society. It is to move from particular to general, or in the language of Radcliffe-Brown, from 'ideographic' to 'nomothetic'.

#### Reflection and Action

What does Radcliffe-Brown mean by dynamic continuity?

Radcliffe-Brown's attempt was praiseworthy, for it was the first rigorous attempt to define the concept of social structure, rather than just taking its meaning for granted. However, it led to many questions and confusions. If social structure is a collectivity of interpersonal relations, real and observable, then what is society? Do we study society and find its structure?

These questions clearly show that while there is no confusion between the categories of particular and general, confusion prevails with respect to the distinction between 'society' and 'social structure', 'social life' and 'social structure', and the 'structural form' of a social structure and the 'structural form' of social structures. One more observation: what Radcliffe-Brown understands by the term 'structural type' is what many understand by the term 'social structure'. And, what Radcliffe-Brown calls 'social structure' is what many would call 'society'.

### 3.3.2 George Peter Murdock's view on Social Structure

Murdock like the other American anthropologists of his times has been more critical in their acceptance of pure functionalism. i.e., synchronic functionalism.. His book 'Social Structure' was most explicit on the point of functionalism. He tried to form a harmonious synthesis of cross cultural comparisons by combining the historical, functional, psychological and statistical methods.

### 3.3.3 Social Structure is a Model: Contribution of Claude Lévi-Strauss

Perhaps the most provocative and debatable contribution to the concept of social structure was that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French structuralist, who is famous for his ingenious cross-cultural analysis of myths and kinship systems. Levi-Strauss believes that structure of society is but a surface manifestation of fundamental mental processes. If for functionalism, society is a 'kind of living creature', consisting of parts, which can be 'dissected and distinguished', for structuralism, it is the analogy from language that helps us in conceptualising society. From the study of a given piece of language, the linguist tries to arrive at its grammar, the underlying rules which make an expression meaningful, although the speakers of that language may not know about it. Similarly, the structuralist tries to infer its underlying structure from a given piece of social behaviour. In structuralism, the shift is from observable behaviour to structure, from organic analogy to language (Barnard 2000). Further, structuralism submits that the set of relations between different parts can be transformed into 'something' that appears to be different from what it was earlier. It is the idea of transformation — of one into another that lies at the core of structuralism, rather than the quality of relations.

Lévi-Strauss says that social structure is not a field of study; it is not a 'province of enquiry'. We do not study social structure, but it is an explanatory method and can be used in any kind of social studies. Here, Lévi-Strauss distinguishes the concept of social structure from that of social relations. The latter are the 'raw data of social experience' – they are the relations between people, empirical and observable. It is from social relations that models comprising the social structure are built. Although the models are built from raw, empirical reality, they cannot be reduced to it. The ensemble of social relations in a given society can be described, but social structure is an anthropologist's construction, built for the purpose of analysis.

#### Reflection and Action

How does Levi-Strauss distinguish between the concept of social structure and social relations?

Lévi-Strauss claimed that social structure and the social relations that are its constituents are theoretical constructions used to model social life. He believed that a major goal of social anthropology was to identify social structures and formal relationships between them and that qualitative or discrete mathematics would be a necessary tool to do this. He makes three distinctions: first, between observation and experimentation on models; second, the conscious and unconscious character of the models; and third, between mechanical and statistical models. The observation of social relations and the construction of models after these facts need to be distinguished from 'experiments' on models. By experimentation, Lévi-Strauss means the 'controlled comparison' of models of the same or of a different kind, with an intention to identify the model that accounts best for the observed

facts. In a structural analysis, the first step is to observe the facts without any bias, then to describe them in relationship to themselves and in relation to the whole. From this, models are constructed, and in the final analysis, the best model is chosen. This distinction is with reference to the anthropologist who studies society. By comparison, the distinction between conscious and unconscious models is made with reference to the society under study.

Conscious models are the “insider’s models”: according to which the society views itself. Underneath these models are ‘deeper structures’, the unconscious models, which the society does not perceive directly or consciously. Anthropologists principally work with the models that they construct from the deeper lying phenomena, rather than with conscious models. It is because, Lévi-Strauss says, the aim of conscious models is to ‘perpetuate the phenomena’ and not to ‘explain’ it.

Let us now come to the last distinction. The classic formulation of mechanical models is that they are those models which lie on the same scale as the phenomenon is. And, when they — the model and the phenomenon — lie on a different scale, they are called statistical models. Unfortunately, as critics have noted, Lévi-Strauss does not explain the meaning of the ‘same scale’. But from the example he has given, it seems that he is concerned with the quantitative differences between ‘what people say’ and ‘what they do’. To make it clear, Lévi-Strauss gives the example of the laws of marriage. When there is no difference between marriage rules and social groupings — the two are placed on the same scale — the model formed will be mechanical. And when several factors affect the type of marriage and people have no option but to deviate from the rule, the model formed will be statistical; like the difference between the prescriptive and preferential systems of marriage.

### **3.3.4 A Synthesis of Structural Functionalism: Contribution of S.F. Nadel**

Nadel developed the theory of social structure in his posthumously published book entitled *The Theory of Social Structure* (1957). Nadel’s central argument was simply that the structuralist orthodoxy was inadequate by itself – it has to be wedded to a functionalist perspective.

Nadel disagrees with Radcliffe-Brown’s idea that social structure is an observable entity, but an abstraction from it. At the same time, he rejects Lévi-Strauss’s view that social structure has nothing to do with empirical reality. From Radcliffe-Brown, he borrows the idea that each person occupies a position in the social structure, but from an empirical level of inter-personal interaction, he moves to a level of abstraction where the person becomes the actor who plays a role with respect to the others. This abstraction, however, does not imply that it loses touch with reality. Nadel (1957: 150) writes: I consider social structure, of whatever degree of refinement, to be still the social reality itself, or an aspect of it, not the logic behind it...

We must therefore understand that for Nadel, the components of social structure are roles and the pattern (or design) of interconnected roles constitutes the social structure of a society. His definition of social structure is as follows (1957: 12): ‘we arrive at the structure of a society through abstracting from the concrete population and its behaviour the pattern or network (or ‘system’) of relationships obtaining ‘between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one another’.

Nadel feels that when describing structure, we abstract relational features from the totality of the perceived data, ignoring all that is not in order or arrangement in brief, we define the positions relative to one another of the component parts. Structures can be transposed irrespective of the concrete data manifesting it; differently expressed, the parts composing any structure can vary widely in their concrete character without changing the identity of the structure.

Nadel now translates all this into the language appropriate to the analysis of societies. To begin with societies are made up of people; societies have boundaries people either belonging to them or not and people belong to a society in virtue of rules under which they stand and which impose on them regular determinate ways of acting towards and in regard to one another. For determinate ways of acting towards or in regard to one another we usually say relationships and we indicate that they follow from rules by calling them institutionalised or social relationships. We identify the mutual ways of acting of individuals as relationships only when the former exhibit some consistency and uniformity since without these attributes they would merely be single or disjointed acts. Most relationships lack this simple uniformity. Rather the concrete behaviour occurring in them will always be diversified and more or less widely variable intentionally changing with the circumstances it will be constant or consistent only in its general character in its capacity to indicate a certain type of mutuality or linkage.

Nadel concludes that we arrive at the structure of a society through abstracting from the concrete population and its behaviour, the pattern or network of relationships obtaining between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one another.

**Reflection and Action**

What does Nadel imply by a synthesis of structural functionalism?

Nadel has tried to explain in this definition that structure refers to a definable articulation, an ordered arrangement of parts. Nadel therefore says that structure indicates a transportable being, relatively invariants, while the parts themselves are variable. According to him, there are three elements of society: (i) a group of people, (ii) institutionalised rules according to which members of the group interact, (iii) an institutionalised pattern or expression of these interactions. The institutionalised rules or patterns do not change easily and this creates orderliness in society. These rules determine the status and roles of the individuals. There is an order among these rules and status also which provide an ordered arrangement of human beings.

According to Nadel there are three dichotomies to resolve which are aspects of structure: (i) structure as opposed to function, (ii) structure as opposed to qualitative character and (iii) structure as opposed to process. Unless we resolve these dichotomies, we are unable to give a satisfactory account of social structure. Social behaviour which is institutionalised involves relatively determinate ways of action within and between groups over periods of time. The institutionalised behaviour characterised by consistency of the relationships may not always be concrete behaviour. It varies in detail according to occasion and circumstances but its general characters which allows it to be subsumed in an identical category of relationship are clearly bound by the convention of a particular society. What we mean to say is that all these contain an element of abstraction; they are all categories which we infer from a number of observed sequences or actions. Therefore the problem is to find a way of expressing the relationship between individuals acting as individuals and as their acting as part of a social network.

### 3.3.5 Edmund Leach on Social Structure

The British anthropologist, Edmund Leach who disliked synchronic functionalism also made significant contribution to the idea of social structure as a model, although there are many significant differences between the approaches of Lévi-Strauss and Leach to structuralism. Leach has dealt with change without abandoning the useful notions of structure and function. For instance, whereas Lévi-Strauss is interested in unearthing the ‘universal structures’ – structures applicable to all human societies at all point of time — Leach applies the method of structuralism to understand the local (or regional) structures. Because of this, some term Leach’s approach ‘neo-structural’ (Kuper 1996 [1973]). Leach has formulated a conception of social structure that is “essentially the same as Lévi-Strauss’s” (Nutini 1970: 76). Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach divides the ‘social universe’ into different epistemological categories: the raw data of social experience (i.e., social relations) and the models that are built from it. Models are not empirical; they are the ‘logical constructions’ in the mind of the anthropologist. Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach also arrives at the distinction between the mechanical and statistical models, i.e., models built respectively on ‘what people say’ and ‘what people do’, but he calls mechanical models ‘jural rules’ and statistical models ‘statistical norms’. The meaning Leach gives to ‘jural rules’ and ‘statistical norms’ is essentially the same which Lévi-Strauss gives to mechanical and statistical models.

But two important differences stand out. First, for Lévi-Strauss both mechanical and statistical models are of roughly equal analytical value and they complement each other. For Leach, jural rules and statistical norms should be treated as separate frames of reference. In an analysis, the statistical norms should have priority over the jural rules. We should begin our study with the actual behaviour of people, the deviations that occur and the conformity they achieve. Second, Leach points out that mechanical models or jural rules are qualitative rules of behaviour. Sanctions support them and they have the power of coercion. Statistical models or norms are only ‘statistical averages of individual behaviour’. They do not have any coercive power.

In his hands, functionalism became dynamic and diachronic. The best known critic of Radcliffe-Brown’s type of structuralism is E.R Leach. He contends that the aim of social anthropology should be generalisation rather than comparison and challenges Radcliffe-Brown’s conception of social structure and the comparative method.

### 3.3.6 Raymond Firth on Social Structure

Raymond Firth also disliked synchronic functionalism and like Leach dealt with dynamic or diachronic functionalism. Raymond Firth was concerned with the nature of individuals and the choices they make. As mentioned earlier he focuses on observed activities as he sets out his impressions on structural-functionalism. He made distinction between social structure and social organisation. While the arrangement of parts or elements constitutes social structure how people in the society get things done constitutes social organisation.

Firth in his book *Elements of Social Organisation* (1951) emphasises the necessity to distinguish between social structure and social organisation and says that the more one thinks of the structure of a society in abstract terms as of group relations or of ideal patterns the more necessity it is to think separately of social organisation in terms of concrete activity. Firth sums up –the fulfilment of the moral obligations laid down by structural requirements is conditioned by individual interests.



### 3.3.7 Contribution of Meyer Fortes

In his article *The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups* (1953) Fortes has analysed the African kinship groups. His analysis of the lineage organisation has come mainly from Radcliffe Brown's formulation of the structural principles found in all kinship groups. According to Fortes the social structure should be thought of in terms of levels of organisation. He says that we can investigate the total social structure of a given community at the level of local organisation at the level of kinship at the level of corporate group structure of government and at that of ritual institutions. These levels are connected in some sort of hierarchy. It is important to perceive and state the fact that all levels of structure are involved in every social relationship and activity.

Fortes believes that the study of the unilineal descent groups as a part of total social system means studying its functions in the widest framework of social structure and that of the political organisation. He shows that descent is fundamentally a jural concept. He sees its significance in the connecting link between the external political or legal aspect of unilineal descent groups and the internal or domestic aspect. The dynamic character of lineage structure can be seen most easily in the balance that is reached between its external relations and its internal structure. Maintaining the stable condition in the social structure is one of the chief functions of lineage systems.

### 3.3.8 Social Structure Refers to Relations between Groups: The Contribution of E.E. Evans-Pritchard

Evans-Pritchard's description of the elements of *Nuer Society* (1940) and their interrelationship guided him to the concept of social structure. Instead of beginning with the idea of person, as did Radcliffe-Brown, he began with viewing social structure in terms of groups. To quote him (1940: 262): By social structure we mean relations between groups which have a high degree of consistency and constancy. The processes of life and death condition individuals, but the structure of society endures. It is clear that for Evans-Pritchard, social structure deals with units which are largely invariant, i.e., groups. What Radcliffe-Brown means by 'structural form' is what Evans-Pritchard means by 'social structure'. The groups considered for describing social structure may be called 'structural groups' – the examples of which among the Nuer are territorial groups, lineages and age-sets. Evans-Pritchard does not consider the family as a 'structural group' but he does acknowledge the fact that family is essential for the preservation of structure. Reflecting on the example of the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard says that the tribe is not a haphazard congregation of residential units. Thus, structure is a 'relation between groups'.

To sum up: for Evans-Pritchard, the parts of social structure, among which structural relations are to be described, are groups that endure over time. Social structure is not an empirical entity for him. Therefore, social structure is an anthropologist's abstraction from the existing reality. It should be kept in mind here that for Evans-Pritchard (1951), social anthropology is not a branch of natural science, as it is for Radcliffe-Brown, but it is a kind of historiography. Its kinship is with history, and not natural and biological sciences.

### 3.3.9 Talcott Parsons on Social Structure

Talcott Parsons like his British counterparts also emphasised the importance of roles in defining social structure and the problem of how to relate the static

concept of structure to the dynamic aspects of social change. According to Parsons, social structure is a term applied to the particular arrangement of the interrelated institutions, agencies and social patterns as well as the status and roles, which each person assumes in the group. He emphasised that all the units of social structure i.e. institutions, agencies, social patterns, status and roles are invisible and intangible and hence are abstract. Customs, traditions and conventions of society determines the status and role of individuals which finally leads to the formation of different agencies, institutions and patterns. The social structure of a society is built when all these institutions, agencies and patterns are interrelated and organised in a particular manner. Social structure is concerned with the interrelationships between these units which constitute the society. The ordered arrangement between this units is what Parsons calls social structure.

What is being said is that the structure of a social system is defined with respect to the 'institutionalised patterns of normative culture'. All these when interrelated and organised in a particular manner will build the social structure of society.

### 3.3.10 Emile Durkheim on Social Structure

The concept of structure and function also appeared in the writings of French anthropologist, Emile Durkheim in his books *Division of Labour* (1893) and *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895). He has also treated society like an organism. He opines that as an organism makes the body alive through fulfillment of essential needs, the society also tends to exist through fulfillment of essential needs. He uses the term function to refer to the activities by which the essential needs of the society are fulfilled. According to Durkheim, the structural units of a society such as family, religion, kinship, political and economic organisation contribute valuable function for maintaining the order of society.

Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski were influenced by Durkheim's concept of Functionalism. Brown refers to Durkheim's definition of function which states that 'the function of social institution is correspondence between it and the needs of the social organism.' Durkheim thus made a systematic formulation of the analogy between society and organic life, As the life of an organism is considered to be the functioning of its organic structure, therefore social life is conceived by Durkheim to be the functioning of social structure.

### 3.3.11 Rodney Needham on Social Structure

Rodney Needham was one of the leading British social anthropologists of his generation. Together with Sir Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas, he brought structuralism across the Channel and anglicised it in the process. In the early 1950s, the structural-functionalist approach which had made British anthropology a world leader was beginning to languish from its rigorous but over-extended empiricism. By chance, Needham spotted a copy of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté* (1949) in Blackwell's the week before he went on fieldwork to Borneo. Primed by his knowledge of Dutch structural anthropology, he quickly realised its significance and its concern with conceptual structure over social organisation.

Structuralism thus provided him with a radically new interpretation of kinship systems, the bedrock of social structure in small-scale societies. Back in Oxford, he industriously put this approach into practice in a series of brilliant papers in which he emphasised the importance of alliance, through marriage, over that of descent, through lineages. Never scared of fomenting lively debate, his first great

work, *Structure and Sentiment* (1962), demonstrated devastatingly the power of structuralist approaches over psychological ones.

But in 1969 Lévi-Strauss somewhat unfairly attacked Needham's interpretation of his work in the preface to the English edition of his kinship work, which Needham as his leading British disciple had so carefully translated, as *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. From then on, Needham ploughed his own structuralist path producing central work on systems of classification, cognitive universals, indigenous psychologies, and kinship theory. His first theoretical interest was the extremely complex systems of kinship and marriage known as "prescriptive alliance". In these, a man has to marry a relative in a certain category, such as the mother's brother's daughter, and it was as an expert in the very demanding analysis of these systems that he first made his professional mark with a short but devastating monograph, *Structure and Sentiment*. This refuted the claim that the rules of these systems could be explained by the particular feelings that people would have towards different categories of relative.

Needham strongly agreed with Evans-Pritchard that British social anthropology could benefit from the ideas of Durkheim, Mauss, Hertz and others of the *Année Sociologique* school. He took a leading part in translating and introducing this, and also translated some work of German and Dutch scholars into English.

As mentioned earlier *Structure and Sentiment* had been a defense of Lévi-Strauss, and Needham organised the translation of his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*; but in the course of the word-by-word analysis of the text that this involved he became increasingly critical of what he saw as Lévi-Strauss's casual and inaccurate handling of his data. But although he came to regard Lévi-Straussian structuralism itself as banal and empty, certain elements of structuralist thinking, especially the importance of binary opposition, remained crucial to Needham's thinking.

He believed that the global comparisons made by social anthropologists reveal that there are only very limited numbers of ways in which kinship systems and marriage rules can be constituted. So too, underlying all the diversity of myth, ritual, and social organisation there are a fairly limited number of what Needham called "primary factors"; these are found all over the world, if not in every society then regardless of language or historical associations.

Examples are the same three colours of black, white and red, which also tend to have similar associations; sacred numbers, almost always below 10; the association of the right hand with men, the sun, odd numbers, and hardness, and the left hand with female, the moon, even numbers, and softness; the use of percussive sounds to mark a transition between two states, such as a new moon or a wedding; a distinction between sacred and secular authority, and so on.

These symbolic elements occur in a limited number of relations, in particular: opposition, exchange, alternation, reversal, inversion, and transition across a boundary. So archetypal figures such as the witch, and the half-man (with one eye, one arm, and one leg, all on the same side), are complexes made up of these primary factors, which are also the basic building blocks of a great deal of myth and ritual, and of important aspects of social organisation. In Needham's view, these are not "beliefs" that have been consciously formulated, nor are they the expressions of any discernible inner states, but are direct expressions of the working of the human brain, which is why they are independent of language and culture.

### 3.4 SUMMARY

The concept of social structure has been a 'pleasant puzzle', to remember the words of A.L. Kroeber (1948), to which, at one time, almost every anthropologist and sociologist tried to make a contribution, either by drawing attention to the part (or parts) of society that seemed important to the author, or by lending support to an already existing idea or theory of social structure. As noted in the beginning, the debate concerning social structure has centered around two issues: (i) among whom parts of society are there structural relations? and (ii) is social structure 'real' or a 'model' which the investigator constructs? Of the two major opinions on social structure, Lévi-Strauss's is closely connected to his method of structuralism – social structure is a 'model' devised for undertaking the study of social behaviour (relations and experiences). Thus Levi-Strauss's structuralism has become concerned with understanding cultural and social patterns in terms of the universal mental processes that are rooted in the biochemistry of the human brain. For Radcliffe-Brown, social structure is an 'empirical' entity, constituting the subject matter of social anthropology and sociology. Murdock like the other American anthropologists of his times has been more critical in their acceptance of pure functionalism. i.e. synchronic functionalism. S.F.Nadel however proposes to combine the views of both Radcliffe-Brown and Levi-Strauss. Nadel has tried to explain in this definition that structure refers to a definable articulation, an ordered arrangement of parts. He has emphasised that social structure refers to the network of social relations which is created among human beings when they interact with each other, according to their status in accordance with the patterns of society. E.R.Leach who disliked synchronic functionalism dealt with change without abandoning the useful notions of structure and function is considered as the best known critic of Radcliffe-Brown's type of structuralism. Leach applies the method of structuralism to understand the local (or regional) structures. Because of this, some term Leach's approach 'neo-structural' (Kuper 1996 [1973]). Raymond Firth also disliked synchronic functionalism and like Leach dealt with dynamic or diachronic functionalism. He equally proposed that variations of actual behaviour should be observed and recorded in order to discover the process of change. Meyer Fortes regarded social structure as not only an aspect of culture but the entire culture of a given people handled in a special frame of theory. Evans-Pritchard's description of the elements of Nuer society and their interrelationship guided him to the concept of social structure. Instead of beginning with the idea of person, as did Radcliffe-Brown, he began with viewing social structure in terms of groups. What Radcliffe-Brown means by 'structural form' is what Evans-Pritchard means by 'social structure'. Durkhiem, who made a systematic formulation of the analogy between society and organic life thinks that just like the life of an organism is considered to be the functioning of its organic structure, social life is conceived by him to be the functioning of social structure. Rodney Needham who was initially fascinated by structuralism and inspired by linguistics, attempted to explain the diversities of human culture by a few basic and universal structures of the brain.

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### **Suggested Reading**

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) Define Social Organisation and Social structure.
- 2) Critically examine the contributions of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, G.P. Murdock, Levis-Strauss, Leach, Firth, Meyer Fortes, T. Parsons, Nadel, Needham, Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard to the dynamic theories of social structure.