
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.

2.1 FUNCTIONALISM

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

Impulse	Act	Satisfaction
1. Drive to breathe; gasping for air.	Intake of oxygen	Elimination of CO ₂ 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

Basic Needs	Cultural Responses
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	A	Adaptation	Goal attainment	G	
Internal	L	Latency (pattern maintenance and tension-relieving mechanisms)	Integration	I	

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.

2.2 THE THESIS OF NEO-FUNCTIONALISM

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.

2.3 SUMMARY

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.