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Functionalism (Including Structural Functionalism)

J. E. Castro, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

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Glossary

Dysfunction The opposite of function: mechanisms, roles, effects, utilities, and conditions that do not contribute to or may even negatively affect structural stability.

Function Mechanisms, roles, effects, utilities, and conditions that contribute to the maintenance of a given structure.

Functional Differentiation Process of specialization of the parts or mechanisms of a given structure to perform different functions.

Functional Equivalence When the same function can be performed by different parts or mechanisms of a given structure.

Functional Requisites The critical conditions needed for the existence of a given structure.

Holistic Functionalism Functionalist approaches that place the emphasis on the explanation of macro-structural social processes.

Individualistic Functionalism Functionalist approaches departing from the assumption that social structures exist for the benefit of the individual.

Social Darwinism The application of Darwinian concepts and principles for the explanation of social processes.

Teleofunction A function that is goal oriented, intentional, and consciously performed.

Introduction

Functionalism is one of the major traditions in scientific analysis and explanation. It has its main origins in biology and has been very influential in the development of the social sciences, including human geography. Functionalist approaches have also been very important in a wide range of other disciplinary fields, including psychology, engineering, architecture and planning, and archeology. This article places emphasis on functionalism in the social sciences, looking at the development of its main strands: functionalism and structural functionalism. It also provides a brief discussion on the concept of function, as well as a reference to the reemergence of functionalism in system theories, and more recently in neofunctionalism.

The main tenet of functionalism is that scientific analysis and explanation must focus on the functional

integration of the differentiated component parts of a given structure or whole. It places the emphasis on the role played by functions or consequences of substructures and processes in fulfilling the needs of the system of which they are part. The earliest forms of functionalist explanation were developed in biology and focused on the functions played by the different organs in the maintenance of vital equilibrium in living beings. Biological or organismic functionalism became the model that inspired the development of functionalism in other scientific areas, most particularly in sociology and anthropology. However, although functionalism is often understood to be a unified school or approach, in fact, the functionalist field is home to divergent and even mutually contradictory positions, which has fueled protracted and still unresolved controversies. The divergence concerns in particular the balance in the emphasis that different strands of functionalism place either on functions or structures. Thus, when the focus is mainly on the former, the analysis seeks to explain the role that a certain component plays in the maintenance of the totality of which it forms part; while in the case of the latter, the aim is to explain the persistence of the structure under consideration by focusing on the functions played by one or more component parts. Moreover, the concept of function itself is the object of continued controversy, as it has often been applied with very different and even contradictory meanings. Functionalism, and its reformulation as structural functionalism, provided the prevailing paradigm for the social sciences during the 1950s and 1960s, but became the object of sustained criticism since the 1970s in a context of theoretical and methodological diversification. Although functionalism lost its dominant position, functionalist principles continue to inspire the development of a rich diversity of theoretical frameworks, including systems theory, some strands of Marxist analysis, and neofunctionalist approaches in the social sciences.

The Development of Functionalism in the Social Sciences

Although the genealogy of functionalist theorizing can be traced back to Greek philosophy, the development of systematic functionalism in modern scientific thought is associated with the work of the French paleontologist Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) who eventually became the father of functionalist biology. In his study of animal fossils, Cuvier developed the notion that animal organs

can be explained by their functions as parts of the animal's integrated whole. He rejected the evolutionary theories of the time, such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's, because he believed that any transformation of an animal's component parts would adversely affect the functional integration of its organism and hamper its very survival. Cuvier argued that there exist certain functional conditions ('conditions of existence') that restrict the form that animals can take given that the form and function of each animal part is integral to the organism as a whole. A different conceptual source of functional analysis in social science can be traced back to the Romanticist and historicist traditions, and particularly to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel's concept of the uniqueness of the absolute spirit inspired an idealistic notion of structure, with component parts, interrelations, and functions derived not from organismic analogies but from a philosophical conceptualization of human history. Along these lines, the sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) developed an influential body of work where the concepts of structure and function played a central role.

Nevertheless, functionalism in the social sciences has been mainly shaped by biological thinking. Thus, it would be another Frenchman, August Comte (1798–1857) who would get inspiration from biological functionalism to develop a functionalist science of society, which he called initially 'social physics' and later 'sociology'. Comte's main preoccupation was to understand the principles underlying social order in the context of rapid social transformation characterizing nineteenth-century Europe. He proposed that the study of society should distinguish between social dynamics (social change) and social statics (social structure), and he adopted the language of biological functionalism mainly for the latter. He assumed that there is a correspondence between social and biological matter in analytical terms, and comparing society with a biological organism he argued that social structures can be explained by focusing on how their component parts (i.e., individuals, families, religions, and social classes) contribute to the maintenance of the body social.

The systematic application of biological functionalist principles to explain social order was further advanced by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), a leading exponent of social Darwinism. Spencer also established an analogy between social and animal organisms as systems that evolve through a process of increasing structural complexity and functional differentiation. According to him, social institutions mirror animal organs and would have the function to meet the survival needs of the social system. However, though Spencer shared Comte's concern with identifying the functional requisites that make social order possible, he departed from different assumptions and produced a very different response. He

accepted that in the case of organic matter the parts have the function to preserve the systemic whole, but he counter argued that in the case of society the whole exists for the benefit of the individual members. Spencer's social Darwinism was a combination of evolutionary theory, functional analysis, and individualistic liberalism.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) rejected Spencer's social Darwinism but relied both on Spencer and Comte for developing a theory of society modeled on the main principles of organismic functionalism. Durkheim's main concern was centered on identifying the mechanisms of social integration that are needed for the preservation of social systems, which he believed could be classified as the cultural, structural, interpersonal, and cognitive functions of integrated social structures. For him, the explanation of social facts, which are the objects of study in sociology, requires identifying both their causes and their functions in relation to their relevant social structures. Durkheim applied this approach to a wide range of 'social facts', such as the incest taboo or crime punishment, seeking to identify existing correspondences between these facts and the needs of the social organism. Thus, for instance, according to Durkheim the punishment of crimes is caused by the intensity of the collective sentiments offended by such acts, but in turn punishment is a social fact that has the function of maintaining the level of intensity of such sentiments in the body social, which might otherwise be weakened and affect the integrity of the social system. For Durkheim, the main focus of sociological analysis should be on the mechanisms of solidarity and cohesion that help to explain the persistence of harmonious social systems.

A central principle derived from biological functionalism for the study of society is the notion that social systems tend to maintain a state of internal equilibrium (homeostasis), which underlies the works of Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim. One of the key social theorists that developed this principle further was Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), who built on Léon Walras' (1834–1910) economic theory of general equilibrium. Pareto argued that equilibrium was the normal state of social systems, and focused on the functions or 'utilities' of particular social phenomena in the achievement of overall systemic stability. He emphasized the importance of (a) social elements, (b) their distribution, (c) their change over time, and (d) their combination and interdependence with other elements in the process leading the social system toward its normal state of equilibrium. The heteronomous interaction between different elements of the system would lead to unintended, incidental effects that may have utility for the equilibrium of the system but are independent from the interests, intentions, sentiments, or desires of social actors. An additional contribution of Pareto to functionalist analysis was the further specification of the notion of functional

alternatives or equivalents, that is, that the same systemic function can be fulfilled by different social mechanisms. He applied this concept in his theory of political elitism, where he argued that the maintenance of political equilibrium by the ruling elite takes place through a number of mechanisms, including co-optation, diplomacy, fraud, corruption, and force (complex forms of coercion). Through these alternative but nonexclusive mechanisms the ruling elite enforces its monopoly of power, which is the natural state of the system, although this equilibrium is not enduring and is subject to periodic revolutionary changes leading to the replacement of the ruling elite (elite circulation).

The development of a systematic functionalist analysis in anthropology was mainly due to Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), who both drew on and introduced significant modifications to Durkheim's framework. In particular, Malinowski went beyond establishing an analogy between organic matter and society to actually ground his analysis on the biological needs of human beings. For him, social institutions and cultural traits are functions developed by society to fulfill primary biological needs, such as nutrition or reproduction, thus reversing Durkheim's efforts to base the explanation of social facts exclusively on other social facts. Moreover, Malinowski also rejected Durkheim's derivation of functions from their role in maintaining social structures and adopted a utilitarian and psychologistic approach to the definition of social functions. Thus, Malinowski's functionalism postulated that traditions, social activities, and collective processes were in fact developments oriented at the satisfaction of individual needs, which to some extent restated the principles of Spencer's individualistic functionalism.

Functionalism and Structural Functionalism

Although the interrelation between the notions of function and structure is part and parcel of functionalist thought, the relative weight given to them in the analysis has led to the distinction between functionalism and structural functionalism, where the latter places greater emphasis on structural aspects such as systemic integration. The foundations for the emergence of structural functionalism can be traced back to Durkheim, and especially to the work that he carried out in collaboration with his disciple and nephew Marcel Mauss (1872–1950). In particular, in their work on human forms of classification and symbolic thought they developed the argument that the human mind derives its systems of mental classification from existing social structures. In their perspective, the existing groupings and divisions in the social structures determine the modes in which the

human mind develops its own system of classification. For instance, the notion of time in this perspective is shaped by the particular social structures characteristic of a given social group, and therefore it will differ between different societies. Thus, for Durkheim a calendar reflects the actual rhythm of social activities in a given social system, while in turn it has the function of ensuring the regularity of such activities. This work would exercise a powerful influence on the development of the structural-functionalist approach, which is primarily associated with English anthropologist Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). He claimed that there is no functionalism as such but only structural functionalism, and argued that the concept of function necessarily implies that of structure, namely a system of interrelated components that is maintained by the activities of the different parts. Radcliffe-Brown also held that social structures are natural systems of their own, composed of the mutual interrelations between individual members. In addition to Radcliffe-Brown, the British school of structural-functionalist anthropology was also populated by other key figures such as Meyer Fortes (1906–83), Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–73), and Max Gluckman (1911–75).

However, structural functionalism reached its height with the work of American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–79), who had become acquainted with the work of Durkheim during the 1920s as a student of Malinowski. Parsons went on to elaborate a complex synthesis of the work of Durkheim, Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, and Alfred Marshall, aimed at providing an integrated and holistic theory of society. Parsons' holistic functionalism brings together elements of a voluntaristic theory of human action, derived mainly from Weber, Pareto, Marshall, and a particular reading of Freud, with Durkheim's concern with the integration of social systems. Thus, Parsons recognized the importance of individual agency and will in the pursuit of goal-oriented behavior, with individual human beings having the capacity of making choices to achieve their objectives, but he maintained that the choices available to individual agents are circumscribed by the physical, cultural, and social environment, and shaped by social values and norms. Parsons defined functions as those mechanisms that allow the adjustment of the system to the external environment, and postulated that all social systems have four functional requirements, namely (1) adaptation, (2) goal attainment, (3) integration, and (4) latency (systemic equilibrium). According to him, complex societies are structured as a hierarchy of systems and subsystems, where each specific system must meet the four functional requirements in order to (1) adapt to the physical environment by securing the resources needed to achieve its goals, (2) appropriately manage such resources, (3) provide for the effective coordination of the

system's components and interrelationships to secure integration, and (4) maintain the system's overall equilibrium. Complex social systems develop specialized, highly differentiated means to respond to these four functional requirements, where the key mechanism is the adaptation of individual members of society to the system's social values and norms through socialization. Parsons normative functionalism and his emphasis on system stability informed much urban planning and design since the 1950s, heavily influencing the physical shaping and social organization of urban landscapes.

Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) reviewed Parsons' theory in a number of areas. First, he provided a counterbalance to what was perceived to be an overemphasis on structure in Parsons' approach, and placed more weight on the concepts of 'manifest' and 'latent' functions that give individual agency a higher profile in the overall configuration. Merton further specified these concepts: manifest functions are those mechanisms that contribute to the adjustment and adaptation of the system and are the result of intentional, conscious human actions, while latent functions are those that are neither intentional nor consciously carried out by the actors. Second, Merton also reviewed a number of implicit assumptions in classical functional analysis, such as that all components in a social structure fulfill certain functions needed for the stability and survival of the system. He argued that there exist certain components that do not fulfill any functions, while other elements that he called 'dysfunctions' may actually have a negative effect on the system (also termed malfunctions). Conversely, he also reasserted the principle of functional equivalence, namely that the same function can be performed by a number of different components of the structure.

Through the work of Parsons and Merton, structural functionalism became the dominant sociological orientation in the US during the 1950s and 1960s. It came to include a significant number of prominent sociologists, such as Kingsley Davis (1908–97), Wilbert Moore (1914–87), David Aberle (1918–2004), Lewis Coser (1913–2003), and Marion Levy (1918–2002) among others. The structural-functionalist school also became very influential in the development of the social sciences in developing countries during the post World War II period. For instance, the Italian sociologist Gino Germani (1911–79), who spent a period at Harvard University working with Parsons after escaping from Fascist Italy in the 1940s, significantly contributed to the establishment and development of sociology in Latin America since the late 1950s from his base at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. During the same period in Brazil, Florestán Fernández (1920–95) developed a highly respected school at the University of Sao Paulo, blending classical Marxist and Weberian sociology with functionalist analysis.

The influence of the functionalist and structural-functionalist traditions in human geography has been less conspicuous in terms of prominent figures or the development of schools of geographical thought. It is perhaps in the field of political geography, and particularly in the study of territorial boundaries and international relations, where an explicitly functionalist geography can be found. Thus, keynote geographers, such as Russian-born French geographer Jean Iona Gottman (1915–94), developed functionalist explanations in the fields of urban and political geography, and particularly in his studies on the roles (functions) played by geographical (topography, hydrographic networks, etc.) and social (economic, cultural, and political) forces on international political stability. Gottman argued that the political partitioning of the world can be explained as the balance resulting from the interaction of two main forces, circulation (communication and movement) and iconography (the shared system of symbols of a given population). Along similar lines, the American geographer Richard Hartshorne (1899–1992) put forward his theory of territorial integration where he postulated that the main role of states would be to maintain stability by counteracting destabilizing centrifugal forces, such as disruptive physical features (e.g., mountains, forests) or social characteristics (e.g., low population, language barriers), that provoke the fragmentation of political units and foster intranational conflicts. Building on both Gottman and Hartshorne, American geographer Stephen Barr Jones (1903–84) proposed a unified field theory aimed at bridging the gap between morphology and function in political geography.

Functionalism has also been influential in the fields of urban geography and planning, where an explicitly functionalist conceptualization has been applied to a range of issues, including the study of neighborhoods, communities, and urban areas, housing policies, and territorial governance. Despite the fact that there are few other references in the literature to an explicitly 'functionalist' or 'structural-functionalist geography', and that an in-depth debate about the impact or implications of functionalism and structural functionalism for human geography is largely missing, many principles and concepts associated with the approach have been integrated in different ways in the work of human geographers. In particular, functionalist concepts have informed much urban-geographical work on the spatial dimensions and scales of social order and disorder, organization, and conflict.

Criticism, Demise, and Revival of Functionalism

Since the 1970s functionalism, and in particular structural functionalism, became the subject of strong

criticism on a number of fronts. First, because of its organismic analogies in the conceptualization of social systems and its emphasis on structural equilibrium and social order functionalist analysis was charged with been unable to account for social change. Second, for similar reasons functionalism was criticized as being an intrinsically conservative approach because of its emphasis on system integration, stability, and social consensus that would render unobservable the internal contradictions of social systems. Third, according to the critics functionalists would be unable to account for the causes driving the process of structural and functional differentiation that is at the center of functionalist analysis and they would have conflated the concepts of cause and function. Moreover, most functionalist explanations would be either tautological (the existence of a given function is explained as a response to structural needs, while the maintenance of the structure is explained as being the result of the functions) or teleological (the emergence of structures is explained as a response to the ends or needs existing in a given system). These and other criticisms of functionalism became increasingly louder during the 1970s, at the same time that the social sciences were experiencing a rapid diversification and fragmentation of theoretical and methodological approaches. According to some commentators this process would have led to the demise of functionalism to the point that it would have almost disappeared from the social sciences by the 1980s.

However, despite its critics functionalism has survived in several areas of scientific analysis and explanation. For instance, the work of functionalist political geographers like Hartshorne has been influential in the development of research on comparative border studies and regional integration (and geopolitical studies at large), a very dynamic interdisciplinary field, particularly in continental Europe. More generally, the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927–98) developed a radical reformulation of Talcott Parsons' approach aimed at providing a comprehensive theory of society by bringing together elements from cybernetics, neurobiology, and German idealist philosophy that has also influenced developments in human geography. Luhmann proposed a theory of social systems whereby human beings are conceptualized not as part of society but as part of its environment. For this reason Luhmann's theory has been labeled posthumanist, as its main thrust is to de-link the social from the human, breaking away from classical anthropocentrism. In turn, society is defined as a closed communication system, self-referential and reflexive, and the function of the (economic, legal, political, and other) subsystems is that of reducing the increasing complexity of information flows to ensure system stability and survival. He also stressed the centrality of functional equivalence in the maintenance of systemic equilibrium.

Luhmann's theory has informed new work in human geography, particularly in Europe and especially in Germany, aimed at developing new theoretical approaches to sociospatial analysis, although these authors do not draw as much inspiration from Luhmann's functionalism as they do from his sophisticated intertwining of systems theory and neurobiology.

While Luhmann's functionalism has clear conservative overtones, Oxford philosopher Gerry Cohen has argued for the application of functionalist analysis within the framework of Marxist theory. For Cohen, although functional analysis could not help to explain the original cause of a certain social structure (i.e., an institution or cultural trait that contributes to the reproduction of the capitalist social order), it helps to explain the permanence of such structure over time. An ongoing debate prompted by Cohen's work focuses on the compatibility of functionalist principles with the Marxist analytical framework. In this connection, some commentators have pointed out the influence of functionalist concepts in the work of Marxist geographer David Harvey, for instance in his explanation of suburbanization processes and their role in contributing toward the stability of the capitalist system by fostering consumption, commodity fetishism, and preempting revolutionary change. However, perhaps the most explicit and comprehensive attempt to revitalize and reformulate functionalist analysis has been carried out by sociologists Jeffrey Alexander and Paul Colomy, who have actually termed their approach 'neofunctionalism'. These authors aim at reinvigorating Talcott Parsons' ambitions of producing an integrated and multidimensional theory of society by relating it to other theoretical frameworks, preserving and at the same taking critical distance from Parsons' functionalism. These efforts have encountered significant resistance and prompted an ongoing and open debate about the usefulness and soundness of functionalism for contemporary social science.

The Concept of Function

One of the main criticisms to functionalism is the fact that the very concept of function is ambiguous, a carrier of multiple meanings, and is often applied in an unrigorous fashion without properly defining its specific content. Already in the 1940s Robert Merton warned about the terminological confusion affecting functionalist approaches, which often used 'function' as synonymous for a range of terms, including use, utility, purpose, motive, intention, aim, effect, and consequences. However, it is worth noting that this confusing application of 'function' has not been a preserve of the social sciences, and has also been identified in other areas, including biology and techno-scientific disciplines. As discussed

above, in the particular case of the social sciences one the main precisions introduced to specify the concept of function is that of manifest (conscious or intentional, also called teleofunctions) and latent (unintended and incidental) functions. While the former places emphasis on agency and goal-oriented social action, the latter is concerned with structural, unplanned effects, on social systems. In a recent methodological debate Mahner and Bunge have identified several distinct but logically interconnected meanings of 'function' used in biology, the social sciences, and techno-scientific disciplines. An important specification of the concept proposed by these authors is that 'function' can refer either to the mechanisms that are responsible for a given fact or process or to the roles and effects of a given social element in relation to the social system. The distinction is that while the former would allow to develop proper scientific explanations, as it identifies a mechanism that explains how and why a given fact or result has occurred, the latter would at most offer descriptive accounts or exemplifications of known patterns of phenomena, but not scientific explanations because they lack a reference to the mechanism responsible for the fact or process under analysis.

See also: Darwinism (and Social Darwinism); Determinism/Environmental Determinism; Gottmann, J.; Hartshorne, R.; Harvey, D.; Lamarck(ian)ism; Posthumanism/Posthumanistic Geographies; Structuration Theory; Structurationist Geography; Systems; Systems Theory.

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