

SO: 563 Units: IV Criticism

John Holmwood's 'Functionalism and Its Critics' in Austin Harrington (ed.) Modern Social Theory: 87-109.

a) Conservative Man (T. B. Bottomore: Sociology as Social Criticism: 11-29)

The year 1968 marks a watershed in the history of democratic mass politics the quiet year of integration and domestication were finally, the over new wages of mobilization and counter-mobilization brought a number of western democracies out of equilibrium, a new generation challenged the assumption and the rhetoric of the old.

The year 1968 also marks a watershed in the history of the international discipline of political sociology; the violent eruption of new forces did not only challenge the models and the theories of the 50th and 60th, but also forced a reevaluation of data gathering technologies and analysis strategies.

This is not criticism but self-criticism, formulated in a preface by S. M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan to a collection of conference papers on political sociology, published in 1968. It provokes a number of interesting questions. What kinds of science is it, one may ask, that can be so easily overthrown, in the space of few months by a student's revolt? And if it has been overthrown, if the events of 1968 do really oblige us to revise fundamentally the theories, models and methods of research in political sociology, what new ideas and approaches are to be discovered in the work of Lipset himself, who was in the 1950s and the early 1960s, one of the chief exponents of those notorious doctrines, proclaiming the end of ideology and the achievement of stable democracy in the western industrial countries, which are now to be abandoned? More widely, what alternative theories have emerged in the social sciences to take the place of the discredited views which Lipset once propounded?

The growing dissatisfaction with the state of sociological and political theory as the present time a unmistakable. Lipset alludes to it in most recent papers the introduction to *Politics and the Social Sciences (1968)* where he writes *some now see in system theory only* another variant of a conceptual scheme whose basic utility is as an intellectual organizing framework, but which in fact does not submit itself to the cardinal test of science empirical verification. But, although system theory especially in its sociological version functionalism may in this way provide mainly a set of categories for classifying social phenomena, rather than a body of explanatory propositions, it does nonetheless convey a particular interpretation of the nature of human society. The essential idea upon which it rests is that every society should be conceived as a system in equilibrium, and that any disturbance of this equilibrium, if it occurs at all should be seen as provoking a responsive adaptation, so that equilibrium is restored and the society is maintained in its original or a slightly modified.

this idea found its strongest expression in that version of functionalism (expounded principally by Talcott Parsons) in which the force that brings about equilibrium, adaptation, and integration is defined as a central value system that a set of fundamental values, presumed to be accepted by all or most members of a society, which determine the form of each particular social system.

It is easy to see how the ideas of 'stable democracy' and the 'end of ideology' fit into this functionalist scheme. A stable democracy can be represented as a well-nigh perfect example of a society in equilibrium, while the cessation of ideological conflict notably in the specific form of the conflict between classes can be interpreted as the culmination of a process of adaptation and integration, which is accomplished through the working of central, democratic values in Lipset's words the workers have

achieved industrial and political citizenship, class conflict is minimized and the history of changes in political ideologies in democratic countries from the point of view, can be written in terms of the emergence of new strata and their eventual integration in society and polity. In *The First New Nation* Lipset formulates his method explicitly in terms of equilibrium and values: For the purpose of this book. I have tried to think in terms of a dynamic, equilibrium model which points that a complex society in under constant pressure to adjust its institutions to its central value system.

The importance of functionalist ideas for a conservative interpretation of society can be seen clearly in another study which appeared just at the time when Lipset was temporarily voicing the dissatisfaction of political sociologists with the explanatory powers of their science. Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* is based firmly upon the concept of political stability and extends its use in order to make a sharp distinction between the industrial societies and the developing countries.

According to Samuel P. Huntington: 'The most important political distinction among countries concerns not their forms of government but their degree of government, Communist totalitarian states and Western liberal states both belong generally in the category of effective rather than debile political systems they differ significantly from the governments which exist in many if not most of the modernizing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Austin Harrington: Modern Social Theory. Pp.100-109)

Criticisms of functionalism: objections and alternatives

Parson's theory is suitable and complex, but it is certainly not without problems. In some cases, criticism of his work has rested on simple misunderstandings. In other cases, they have pointed to some genuine deficiencies. Here we must bear in mind that Parson's critics did not always represent a unified position. Frequently they crises-crossed different and mutually exclusive criticisms as their own positions unfolded. We now look at four main bodies of criticism from the late 1960s onwards. These are: 1.conflict theory 2. Marxist theory 3. Rational actor or rational choice approaches and 4. Neo-functional approaches.

i) Criticism of Functionalism by Conflict Theory

C. W. Mills, James Lockwood, Ralf Dahrendorf, John Rex and Randall Collins the problems with Parson's theory were straightforward: it was too one sided. Parson's language of systems gave far too much weight to interdependence and integration, neglecting interdependence and contradiction. It also seemed to give greater emphasis to values and norms than to power. These conflict theories as they came to be called drew inspiration from Marx and Weber to whom Parsons had indeed failed to give proper attention in *The Structure of Social Action* especially Marx. It was true that Parsons had not merely excluded Marx from the founding sociological generation of 1890-1920 for reason of chronology. More especially he had believed that Marx's writing were tied to a moment in capitalism that had been superseded and that the German thinker's ideas had been to influenced by the ideological formations of early capitalism to be relevant to the mid 19th century (Parsons, 1949). Conflict theory did not greatly disagree with Parson's judgment on Marx and the separately of Weber in this regard. Dahrendorf Rex, and Wright Mills certainly tended to draw more inspiration from Weber than from Marx. But they felt that Weber owed more Marx than Parsons had allowed for and that Parson's attempt to synthesize Durkheim and Weber had meant that the more conflict-oriented aspects of Weber's writings had been

lost. It was Durkheim's approach with his emphasis on order and social solidarity, that dominated Parson's interpretation of the classics.

In his essay *Out of Utopia* (1958) Dahrendorf disagreed with Merton's implied judgment that the problem with Parsons's scheme was that it was too generalized. The problem was rather that Parsons was insufficiently explicit about the values that informed his approach. For Dahrendorf, the consensus model with its emphasis on synchronic analysis and on processes tending toward integration was part of a long-standing conservative tradition in social thought reaching back to 'Plato' it was utopian in the sense that it rested on a model of society in which change and conflict are wholly absent. As Dahrendorf suggested, it may well be that society, in a philosophical sense, has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony, order and consensus and one of change, conflict and constraint. Strictly speaking it does not matter whether we select for investigation problems that can be understood only in terms of the equilibrium model or problem for which the conflict model is required.

There is no intrinsic criterion for preferring one to the other. The problem then was that Parsons had placed consensus above conflict for no good reason. A similar argument was put forward by Rex, who argued that while 'perfect cooperation and perfect conflict'. Like Dahrendorf, Rex argued that Durkheim and Parsons have unduly restricted the scope of sociology to the study of forms of perfect cooperation. Dahrendorf, Rex and Mills all recommended that sociological attention should be redirected toward conflict.

The criticisms of the conflict theories struck a chord. Yet their own position was unstable for a number of reasons. Parsons had in fact sought to account for both power and consensus in his method. Therefore it was difficult to agree that the two models could be kept entirely apart and used separately for different purposes. In Parson's actual thinking, the issues of conflict and power and legitimation, were very much intertwined. This was Parson's argument when he set out to synthesize positivism and idealism in *The Structure of Social Action*. He repeated this in his response to the conflict theorists and especially in his opposition to C. W. Mills's book *The Power Elite* (1956) which he saw as resting on an inadequate 'zero-sum' view of power, where a gain in power for one group is wrongly automatically equated with a loss in power for another group (Parsons, 1967).

ii) **Marxism Criticism of Functionalism**

To a large degree, the fate of conflict theory was overtaken by more radical approaches. By the late 1960s, the USA was embroiled in the Vietnam War and opposition to it was growing. Along with the anti-war movement, there was an increasingly radical movement of civil rights for blacks Americans, while the women's movement and feminism waited in the wings to emerge in the 1970s as a powerful force for change. The growth of universities and favorable employment opportunities for sociologists was conditions that encouraged disciplinary transformation (compare Turner and Turner, 1990). A younger generation of sociologists influenced by the new social movements promoted radical sociologies in opposition to the functionalism of their seniors. They were on the side of dissent and change, not the side of the system and order (compare Becker, 1969).

While their own sympathies lay with Weber rather Marx, the conflict theorists had contributed to a re-evaluation of the relation between Marxian and academic sociology. In the change social and political circumstances of the 1960s, many sociologists were now open to a more explicit appropriation of Marxism. By the early 1970s, conflict theory appeared insufficiently radical and its theoretical arguments less sophisticated than those of Marx. It was not just that the Durkheim- Parsons axis of theorizing was called into questions but that the whole generation of 1890-1920, including Weber, was seen to represent a bourgeois reaction to Marxism (Thereborn, 1976).

For North American sociologist Alvin Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis Western Sociology* (1970) was the definitive statement of this criticism. Gouldner was a one-time functionalist turned its sternest critic. The book was part of a wider critique of conservative social theory, which like Dahrendorf, he traced back to Plato. But Gouldner also sought to extend the analysis to the relationship between academic sociology and other agents of advanced welfare capitalism. At best professional sociology seemed irrelevant to the pressing social and political issues of the times. At worst professional sociology was partisan not only for implicitly supporting the status quo but also for being part of what Gouldner described as the modern military industrial welfare complex. In Gouldner's view this complex was in collusion with government agencies including the military, on an increasingly large scale. Sociology had become absorbed into the management of the advanced state as part of the apparatus of social control. Parson's theory which seemed so abstracted from the world was an expression of the dominant interests of welfare capitalism.

In the place of professional claims to objectivity, Gouldner proposed that sociology should organize its activities in new theoretical communities connected to the new social movements that were emerging to challenge welfare capitalism. In this way he directly subverted the professional ambitions of Parsons and Merton and set an agenda for radical sociology. These were the kinds of attitudes that would evolve into postmodern criticisms of general theory in the 1980s.

iii) Criticism of Functionalism by Rational Actor Approaches

For the other critics the problems with functionalism was its concentration on system at the expense of individual actors. This problem was also seen as linked to functionalism's concern with elaborating a general conceptual framework, rather than specific testable propositions. One major criticism came from those who held that the social sciences could be unified only if sociologists based their research on the testable 'individualistic concepts of economics or psychology. Representatives of this line of argument defended a conception of the individual as 'rational actors rational egoist', capable of rational choices'. This school of approach provided the foundation for what is commonly called 'rational choice theory' which has been especially prominent in economics. Here we look at the work of two among several champions of rational actor thinking. There are George Homans and James Coleman.

Homans maintained that functionalism was unscientific because it deviated from the proper hypothesis deductive from the scientific explanation, functionalism had fashioned a conceptual scheme and however necessary a conceptual scheme may be it is not the same as a theory. A theory involves testable propositions about the world and according to Homans these are conspicuously lacking in the functionalism of Parsons. Homans's idea of theory was avowedly positivist and firmly methodological individualist.

For Homans functionalists analyse social systems in terms of roles and their normative expectations but nowhere explain why and how norms exist. The answer, he suggested is to be found only in direct examination of social interaction in terms of the attributes of real individuals, their dispositions, motives, and calculations. These attributes are derived from the studies of psychologists and economists and can be given a general form as the basis of sociological explanation. Homans (1961) proposed that the units from which sociological explanations should be fashioned were the real, concrete acts of individuals. Explanations of micro phenomena had to be based on micro foundations. Where Parsons had argued that they definition of an organic whole is one within which the relations determine the properties of its parts. Homans called his approach 'social behaviourism' adapting the terminology of behavioural psychology.

Other critics of functionalism including notably Peter Blau (1964), took inspiration from the 'utilitarian axioms of economics, arguing in a similar fashion to Homans that theory needed to be built from propositions about actors. Similarly from a conflict theory perspective, Randall Collins (1975) accepted Homan's critique of functionalism and set out to produce a compilation of causal principles that would constitute 'conflict sociology' as an explanatory science.

One of the most ambitious of such enterprises was undertaken by James Coleman. Coleman had been a student of Merton and was an early critic of Parson. He continued to be influential in social theory. Towards the ends of his career, he produced a major treatise in rational actor theory that sought to develop the explanatory theory proposed by Homans and to present it in a mathematical form (Coleman, 1991). Coleman presented a further argument for the individualist approach. This is that the data collected by social scientists comprise evidence about individual behavior, about individuals and their opinions. The social systems as a whole cannot be observed. Social theory, Coleman wrote continued to be about the functioning of social systems of behavior, but empirical research is often concerned with explaining individual behavior. For this reason while he accepted that concrete social systems are what sociologists want to explain, Coleman argued that it is rational actor thinking that offers the best building blocks with which to construct an explanatory theory that is directly supported by empirical evidence. For example, while trust may be important in maintaining stable social relationships, it is vulnerable to actors defaulting on it. Coleman therefore argued that rather than constructing an analytical theory that makes trust a central presupposition of social order, it would be better to examine the different empirical circumstances that serve to sustain or undermine trust. This will be facilitated by the use of models describing dilemmas faced by rational actors in behaving altruistically when confronted with the possibility that other actors may 'free-ride' that is fail to live up to an expectation or take self-interested advantage of the altruism of others.

Over the years, the debate between functionalists and rational choice theory has been continuous. Although there are strong advocates of rational actor approaches, many sociologists find these approaches compromised by reductionism and by an excessively behaviouristic form of objectivism. Rational choice theory tends to lack a sense of the expressive, creative and self-interpretive character of action. It typically lacks a sufficiently strong or thick concept of the reflexivity of actors who monitor their own preferences. It has difficulties in accounting for meaningful social norms that are presupposed in action, in historically specific contexts of ethical belief and that are not merely the products of intended action. There are arguments that have been developed in interpretive hermeneutical traditions of social thought and they have particularly been defined recently by writers such as Charles Taylor (1989), Hans Joas (1992), and others. Here it is important to note that Parson's emphasis on the subjective meaning of action was itself an attempt to draw on the insights of the interpretive tradition and to develop them as part of a systematic theory. In this regard at least, it can be argued that Parsons provided the definitive critique of the utilitarian concept of action, on which a large part of rational choice theory.

iv) Criticism of Functionalism by Neo-functionalism

Two the strands of criticism directed at Parsons lead back to his starting place. Conflict theory set out a dualistic approach to sociological problems, where Parsons had sought to synthesize the dualism, mediating between positivism and idealism and between power and consensus. For its parts rational actor theory promoted the utilitarian scheme of action as the micrological foundation for a scientific sociology, which Parsons's had already criticized in *The Structure of Social Action*. Yet many critics did not recognize this as Parson's own starting point. They usually viewed sociological functionalism as a positivistic systems approach that neglected action. Anthony Giddens's criticism is typical there is no action in Parson's "action frame of reference" only behavior which is propelled by need dispositions or role expectations. Men do not appear in (Parson's writing) as skilled and knowledgeable agents as at least to some extent masters of their own fate.

A similar view of functionalism was taken by Jurgen Habermas whose work is discussed in his book *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1981) argued that social inquiry had been unhelpfully divided between two conceptual strategies, one taking the standpoint of systems, which 'ties the social scientific analysis to the external perspective of the observer'. the other taking the standpoint of the 'lifeworld' which begins with members intuitive knowledge. According to Habermas, the fundamental problem of social theory is how to connect in a satisfactory way the two conceptual strategies indicated

by the respective notions of system and lifeworld (1981). Habermas offers his own theory as just such a generalized integration of categories.

Several contemporary theorists have proposed general theories as alternatives to Parsons arguing that their schemes avoid his problems because they incorporate action from that start. However, it can be argued that what they purpose is very similar in conceptual structure and intention to Parsons. This can be illustrated briefly with reference to the work of Giddens, whose contributions are discussed in greater detail in chapter 10 and 13 of this book. Although Giddens argues vigorously that his own theory of 'structuration' has no functionalist overtones at all and has declared that it would be helpful to 'ban' the term altogether, he proposes certain universal 'structural features' that are remarkably similar to those of Parsons. Giddens identifies four basic structural principles with similar points reference to Parson's four functional imperatives, Giddens calls them; "signification, legitimation, authorization and allocation". He argues further that two aspects of these principles can be identified as follows one is how far a society contains distinct spheres of 'specialism' in respect of institutional orders; differentiated forms of symbols order (religion, sciences etc.) a differentiated 'polity' economy' and legal/ repressive apparatus'. The second is how modes of institutional articulation are organized in terms of overall properties of social reproduction that is to say 'structural principles'. This view is very similar to Parson's AGIL scheme.

A common pattern in contemporary discussion is that each critic of functionalism is careful to distance his or her position from that of Parsons, but has little difficulty in accusing others of converging with his scheme. Thus, Giddens (1982) accuses Habermas of converging with Parsons, while Archer (1998) offers the same criticism of Giddens Jeffrey Alexander (1988) takes these convergences as indications of a 'new theoretical movement' back to functionalism, which he calls '*neo-functionalism*'. In the 1980s Alexander set himself the self-conscious task of reviving functionalism through the project of a four volume rewriting of Parson's *The Structure of Social Action* each volume devoted respectively to 19th century positivism, Marx and Durkheim, Weber and Parsons. According to Alexander Parson's approach was deficient in its detail but correct in its fundamentals. Current social theory is converging on a reinvigorated functionalist paradigm that recognizes action alongside function. Alexander argues that Merton's middle range approach is sufficiently ambitious. What is required is a revised exercise in unified general theory.

Yet one may reasonably question whether neo-functionalism is anything more than a restatement of the standard approach which retains its problems. From Parson's perspective, if empirical circumstances are less than fully integrated, this implies that there must be relevant factors that operate in addition to those represented within the general theoretical statement. For Habermas, Giddens, Alexander and Margaret Archer, such factors are assigned to actors, thought of as acting concretely, while the structural system point of view is bracketed or taken as given. This is what is promoted by Alexander when he defends neo-functionalist analysis against the older functionalist paradigm's overextension of the concept of system. Alexander writes that functional system analysis is concerned with integration as a possibility and with deviance and processes of social control as facts. Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functional system analysis, though not for participants in actual social system as such (1985). Yet despite Alexander's claim for a fully integrated theoretical statement, it can be argued that his project rests on an unsatisfactory unreconciled dualism between grand theories constructions on the one hand and empirical data input on the other hand.

T.U. Questions

1. Discuss how the concept '*Conservative Man*' is used for criticizing structural functional perspective.
(T.U:2016: 10 Marks)
2. Write Marxist criticism of structural functionalism. (T.U:2014: 5 Marks)