

Structural functionalism

Structural functionalism, or in many contexts simply **functionalism**, is a broad perspective in sociology and anthropology which sets out to interpret society as a structure with interrelated parts. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions and institutions. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer, presents these parts of society as "organs" that work toward the proper functioning of the "body" as a whole.^[1] In the most basic terms, it simply emphasises "the effort to impute, as rigorously as possible, to each feature, custom, or practice, its effect on the functioning of a supposedly stable, cohesive system."^[2] For Talcott Parsons, "functionalism" came to describe a particular stage in the methodological development of social science, rather than a specific school of thought.^[3]

Theory

The functionalist approach was implicit in the thought of the original sociological positivist, Auguste Comte, who stressed the need for cohesion after the social malaise of the French Revolution. It was later presented in the work of Émile Durkheim, who developed a full theory of organic solidarity, again informed by positivism, or the quest for "social facts". Functionalism shares a history and theoretical affinity with the empirical method. Latter sociological functionalists such as Niklas Luhmann and Talcott Parsons, however, can be viewed as at least partially antipositivist.^[2] Whilst one may regard functionalism as a logical extension of the organic analogies for society presented by political philosophers such as Rousseau, sociology draws firmer attention to those institutions unique to industrialised capitalist society (or *modernity*). Functionalism also has an anthropological basis in the work of theorists such as Marcel Mauss, Bronisław Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. It is in Radcliffe-Brown's specific usage that the prefix 'structural' emerged.^[4]

Classical functionalist theories are defined by a tendency towards biological analogy and notions of social evolutionism:

Functionalist thought, from Comte onwards, has looked particularly towards biology as the science providing the closest and most compatible model for social science. Biology has been taken to provide a guide to conceptualizing the structure and the function of social systems and to analysing processes of evolution via mechanisms of adaptation ... functionalism strongly emphasises the pre-eminence of the social world over its individual parts (i.e. its constituent actors, human subjects).

– Anthony Giddens *The Constitution of Society* 1984, ^[5]

Durkheim proposed that most stateless, "primitive" societies, lacking strong centralised institutions, are based on an association of corporate-descent groups. Structural functionalism also took on Malinowski's argument that the basic building block of society is the nuclear family, and that the clan is an outgrowth, not *vice versa*. Durkheim was concerned with the question of how certain societies maintain internal stability and survive over time. He proposed that such societies tend to be segmented, with equivalent parts held together by shared values, common symbols or, as his nephew Marcel Mauss held, systems of exchanges. In modern, complicated societies, members perform very different tasks, resulting in a strong interdependence. Based on the metaphor above of an organism in which many parts function together to sustain the whole, Durkheim argued that complicated societies are held together by organic solidarity.



Émile Durkheim

These views were upheld by Radcliffe-Brown, who, following Comte, believed that society constitutes a separate "level" of reality, distinct from both biological and inorganic matter. Explanations of social phenomena had therefore to be constructed

within this level, individuals being merely transient occupants of comparatively stable social roles. The central concern of structural functionalism is a continuation of the Durkheimian task of explaining the apparent stability and internal cohesion needed by societies to endure over time. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs that function like organisms, with their various parts (or social institutions) working together in an unconscious, quasi-automatic fashion toward achieving an overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as functional in the sense of working together, and are effectively deemed to have "lives" of their own. They are primarily analyzed in terms of this function. The individual is significant not in and of himself but rather in terms of his status, his position in patterns of social relations, and the behaviours associated with his status. The social structure, then, is the network of statuses connected by associated roles.

It is simplistic to equate the perspective directly with political conservatism.^[6] The tendency to emphasise "cohesive systems", however, leads functionalist theories to be contrasted with "conflict theories" which instead emphasise social problems and inequalities.

Decline of functionalism

Structural functionalism reached its crescendo in the 1940s and 1950s, and by the 1960s was in rapid decline.^[7] By 1980s, its place was taken in Europe by more conflict-oriented approaches^[8], and more recently by 'structuralism'.^[9] While some of the critical approaches also gained popularity in the United States, the mainstream of the discipline has instead shifted to a myriad of empirically-oriented middle-range theories with no overarching theoretical orientation. To most sociologists, functionalism is now "as dead as a dodo".^[10]

As the influence of both functionalism and Marxism in the 1960s began to wane, the linguistic and cultural turns led to myriad new movements in the social sciences: "According to Giddens, the orthodox consensus terminated in the late 1960s and 1970s as the middle ground shared by otherwise competing perspectives gave way and was replaced by a baffling variety of competing perspectives. This third 'generation' of social theory includes phenomenologically inspired approaches, critical theory, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, structuralism, post-structuralism, and theories written in the tradition of hermeneutics and ordinary language philosophy."^[11]

While absent from empirical sociology, functionalist themes remained detectable in sociological theory, most notably in the works of Luhmann and Giddens. There are, however, signs of an incipient revival, as functionalist claims have recently been bolstered by developments in multilevel selection theory and in empirical research on how groups solve social dilemmas. Recent developments in evolutionary theory—especially by biologist David Sloan Wilson and anthropologists Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson—have provided strong support for structural functionalism in the form of multilevel selection theory. In this theory, culture and social structure are seen as a Darwinian (biological or cultural) adaptation at the group level.

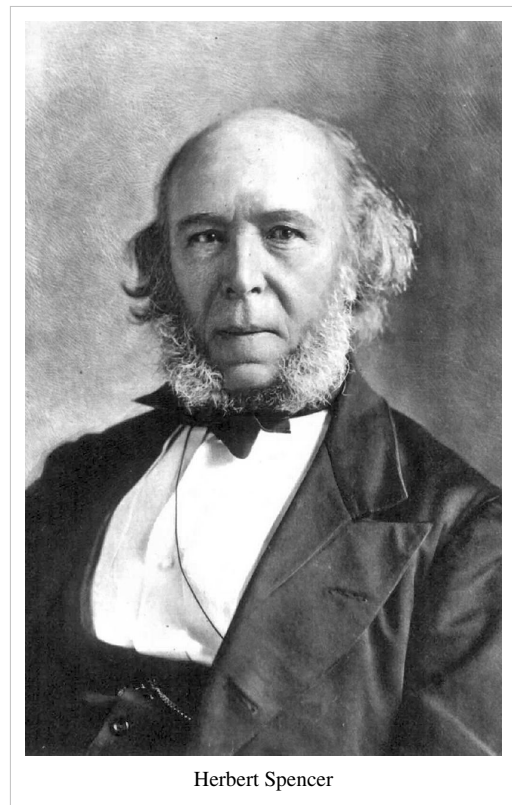
Prominent Theorists

Herbert Spencer

Herbert Spencer, a British philosopher famous for applying the theory of natural selection to society, was in many ways the first true sociological functionalist;^[12] in fact, while Durkheim is widely considered the most important functionalist among positivist theorists, it is well known that much of his analysis was culled from reading Spencer's work, especially his *Principles of Sociology* (1874-96).

While most avoid the tedious task of reading Spencer's massive volumes (filled as they are with long passages explicating the organic analogy, with reference to cells, simple organisms, animals, humans and society), there are some important insights that have quietly influenced many contemporary theorists, including Talcott Parsons, in his early work "The Structure of Social Action" (1937), Cultural anthropology, too, uses functionalism consistently.

This evolutionary model, unlike most Nineteenth-Century evolutionary theories, is cyclical, beginning with the differentiation and increasing complication of an organic or "super-organic" (Spencer's term for a social system) body, followed by a fluctuating state of equilibrium and disequilibrium (or a state of adjustment and adaptation), and, finally, a stage of disintegration or dissolution. Following Thomas Malthus' population principles, Spencer concluded that society is constantly facing selection pressures (internal and external) that force it to adapt its internal structure through differentiation.



Herbert Spencer

Every solution, however, causes a new set of selection pressures that threaten society's viability. It should be noted that Spencer was not a determinist in the sense that he never said that

1. selection pressures will be felt in time to change them;
2. they will be felt and reacted to; or
3. the solutions will always work.

In fact, he was in many ways a political sociologist,^[13] and recognised that the degree of centralised and consolidated authority in a given polity could make or break its ability to adapt. In other words, he saw a general trend towards the centralisation of power as leading to stagnation and, ultimately, pressure to decentralise.

More specifically, Spencer recognised three functional needs or prerequisites that produce selection pressures: they are regulatory, operative (production) and distributive. He argued that all societies need to solve problems of control and coordination, production of goods, services and ideas, and, finally, to find ways of distributing these resources.

Initially, in tribal societies, these three needs are inseparable, and the kinship system is the dominant structure that satisfies them. As many scholars have noted, all institutions are subsumed under kinship organisation,^[14] but, with increasing population (both in terms of sheer numbers and density), problems emerge with regards to feeding individuals, creating new forms of organisation — consider the emergent division of labour —, coordinating and controlling various differentiated social units, and developing systems of resource distribution.

The solution, as Spencer sees it, is to differentiate structures to fulfil more specialised functions; thus a chief or "big man" emerges, soon followed by a group of lieutenants, and later kings and administrators.

Perhaps Spencer's greatest obstacle to being widely discussed in modern sociology is the fact that much of his social philosophy is rooted in the social and historical context of Victorian England. He coined the term "survival of the fittest" in discussing the simple fact that small tribes or societies tend to be defeated or conquered by larger ones. Of course, many sociologists still use him (knowingly or otherwise) in their analyses, as is especially the case in the recent re-emergence of evolutionary theory.

Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons was heavily influenced by Durkheim and Max Weber, synthesising much of their work into his action theory, which he based on the system-theoretical concept and the methodological principle of voluntary action. He held that "the social system is made up of the actions of individuals."^[15] His starting point, accordingly, is the interaction between two individuals faced with a variety of choices about how they might act,^[16] choices that are influenced and constrained by a number of physical and social factors.^[17]

Parsons determined that each individual has expectations of the other's action and reaction to his own behaviour, and that these expectations would (if successful) be "derived" from the accepted norms and values of the society they inhabit.^[16] As Parsons himself emphasised, however, in a general context there would never exist any perfect "fit" between behaviours and norms, so such a relation is never complete or "perfect."

Social norms were always problematic for Parsons, who never claimed (as has often been alleged) that social norms were generally accepted and agreed upon, should this prevent some kind of universal law. Whether social norms were accepted or not was for Parsons simply a historical question.

As behaviours are repeated in more interactions, and these expectations are entrenched or institutionalised, a role is created. Parsons defines a "role" as the normatively-regulated participation "of a person in a concrete process of social interaction with specific, concrete role-partners."^[18] Although any individual, theoretically, can fulfil any role, the individual is expected to conform to the norms governing the nature of the role they fulfil.^[19]

Furthermore, one person can and does fulfil many different roles at the same time. In one sense, an individual can be seen to be a "composition"^[15] of the roles he inhabits. Certainly, today, when asked to describe themselves, most people would answer with reference to their societal roles.

Parsons later developed the idea of roles into collectivities of roles that complement each other in fulfilling functions for society.^[16] Some roles are bound up in institutions and social structures (economic, educational, legal and even gender-based). These are functional in the sense that they assist society in operating^[20] and fulfil its functional needs so that society runs smoothly.

A society where there is no conflict, where everyone knows what is expected of him, and where these expectations are consistently met, is in a perfect state of equilibrium. The key processes for Parsons in attaining this equilibrium are socialisation and social control. Socialisation is important because it is the mechanism for transferring the accepted norms and values of society to the individuals within the system. Perfect socialisation occurs when these norms and values are completely internalised, when they become part of the individual's personality.^[21]

Parson states that "this point [...] is independent of the sense in which [the] individual is concretely autonomous or creative rather than 'passive' or 'conforming', for individuality and creativity, are to a considerable extent, phenomena of the institutionalization of expectations";^[22] they are culturally constructed.

Socialisation is supported by the positive and negative sanctioning of role behaviours that do or do not meet these expectations.^[23] A punishment could be informal, like a snigger or gossip, or more formalised, through institutions such as prisons and mental homes. If these two processes were perfect, society would become static and unchanging, and in reality this is unlikely to occur for long.

Parsons recognises this, stating that he treats "the structure of the system as problematic and subject to change,"^[24] and that his concept of the tendency towards equilibrium "does not imply the empirical dominance of stability over change."^[25] He does, however, believe that these changes occur in a relatively smooth way.

Individuals in interaction with changing situations adapt through a process of "role bargaining."^[26] Once the roles are established, they create norms that guide further action and are thus institutionalised, creating stability across social interactions. Where the adaptation process cannot adjust, due to sharp shocks or immediate radical change, structural dissolution occurs and either new structures (and therefore a new system) are formed, or society dies.

This model of social change has been described as a "moving equilibrium,"^[27] and emphasises a desire for social order.

Robert Merton

Robert K. Merton was a functionalist and he fundamentally agreed with Parsons' theory. However, he acknowledged that it was problematic, believing that it was too generalised [Holmwood, 2005:100]. Merton tended to emphasise middle range theory rather than a grand theory, meaning that he was able to deal specifically with some of the limitations in Parsons' theory. He identified 3 main limitations: functional unity, universal functionalism and indispensability [Ritzer in Gingrich, 1999]. He also developed the concept of deviance and made the distinction between manifest and latent functions.

Merton criticised functional unity, saying that not all parts of a modern, complex society work for the functional unity of society. Some institutions and structures may have other functions, and some may even be generally dysfunctional, or be functional for some while being dysfunctional for others. This is because not all structures are functional for society as a whole. Some practices are only functional for a dominant individual or a group [Holmwood, 2005:91]. Here Merton introduces the concepts of power and coercion into functionalism and identifies the sites of tension which may lead to struggle or conflict. Merton states that by recognizing and examining the dysfunctional aspects of society we can explain the development and persistence of alternatives. Thus, as Holmwood states, "Merton explicitly made power and conflict central issues for research within a functionalist paradigm" [2005:91].

Merton also noted that there may be functional alternatives to the institutions and structures currently fulfilling the functions of society. This means that the institutions that currently exist are not indispensable to society. Merton states that "just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items" [cited in Holmwood, 2005:91]. This notion of functional alternatives is important because it reduces the tendency of functionalism to imply approval of the status quo.

Merton's theory of deviance is derived from Durkheim's idea of anomie. It is central in explaining how internal changes can occur in a system. For Merton, anomie means a discontinuity between cultural goals and the accepted methods available for reaching them.

Merton believes that there are 5 situations facing an actor.

- **Conformity** occurs when an individual has the means and desire to achieve the cultural goals socialised into him.
- **Innovation** occurs when an individual strives to attain the accepted cultural goals but chooses to do so in novel or unaccepted method.
- **Ritualism** occurs when an individual continues to do things as proscribed by society but forfeits the achievement of the goals.
- **Retreatism** is the rejection of both the means and the goals of society.

- **Rebellion** is a combination of the rejection of societal goals and means and a substitution of other goals and means.

Thus it can be seen that change can occur internally in society through either innovation or rebellion. It is true that society will attempt to control these individuals and negate the changes, but as the innovation or rebellion builds momentum, society will eventually adapt or face dissolution.

The last of Merton's important contributions to functionalism was his distinction between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions refer to the conscious intentions of actors; latent functions are the objective consequences of their actions, which are often unintended [Holmwood, 2005:90]. Merton used the example of the Hopi rain dance to show that sometimes an individual's understanding of their motive for an action may not fully explain why that action continues to be performed. Sometimes actions fulfill a function of which the actor is unaware, and this is the latent function of an action. 2.14.08

Almond and Powell

In the 1970s, political scientists Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell introduced a structural-functionalist approach to comparing political systems. They argued that, in order to understand a political system, it is necessary to understand not only its institutions (or structures) but also their respective functions. They also insisted that these institutions, to be properly understood, must be placed in a meaningful and dynamic historical context.

This idea stood in marked contrast to prevalent approaches in the field of comparative politics — the state-society theory and the dependency theory. These were the descendants of David Easton's system theory in international relations, a mechanistic view that saw all political systems as essentially the same, subject to the same laws of "stimulus and response" — or inputs and outputs — while paying little attention to unique characteristics. The structural-functional approach is based on the view that a political system is made up of several key components, including interest groups, political parties and branches of government.

In addition to structures, Almond and Powell showed that a political system consists of various functions, chief among them political socialisation, recruitment and communication: socialisation refers to the way in which societies pass along their values and beliefs to succeeding generations, and in political terms describes the process by which a society inculcates civic virtues, or the habits of effective citizenship; recruitment denotes the process by which a political system generates interest, engagement and participation from citizens; and communication refers to the way that a system promulgates its values and information.

Structural functionalism and unilineal descent

In their attempt to explain the social stability of African "primitive" stateless societies where they undertook their fieldwork, Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Meyer Fortes (1945) argued that the Tallensi and the Nuer were primarily organised around unilineal descent groups. Such groups are characterised by common purposes, such as administering property or defending against attacks; they form a permanent social structure that persists well beyond the lifespan of their members. In the case of the Tallensi and the Nuer, these corporate groups were based on kinship which in turn fitted into the larger structures of unilineal descent; consequently Evans-Pritchard's and Fortes' model is called "descent theory". Moreover, in this African context territorial divisions were aligned with lineages; descent theory therefore synthesised both blood and soil as two sides of one coin (cf. Kuper, 1988:195). Affinal ties with the parent through whom descent is not reckoned, however, are considered to be merely complementary or secondary (Fortes created the concept of "complementary filiation"), with the reckoning of kinship through descent being considered the primary organising force of social systems. Because of its strong emphasis on unilineal descent, this new kinship theory came to be called "descent theory".

Before long, descent theory had found its critics. Many African tribal societies seemed to fit this neat model rather well, although Africanists, such as Richards, also argued that Fortes and Evans-Pritchard had deliberately

downplayed internal contradictions and overemphasised the stability of the local lineage systems and their significance for the organisation of society.^[28] However, in many Asian settings the problems were even more obvious. In Papua New Guinea, the local patrilineal descent groups were fragmented and contained large amounts of non-agnates. Status distinctions did not depend on descent, and genealogies were too short to account for social solidarity through identification with a common ancestor. In particular, the phenomenon of cognatic (or bilateral) kinship posed a serious problem to the proposition that descent groups are the primary element behind the social structures of "primitive" societies.

Leach's (1966) critique came in the form of the classical Malinowskian argument, pointing out that "in Evans-Pritchard's studies of the Nuer and also in Fortes's studies of the Tallensi unilineal descent turns out to be largely an ideal concept to which the empirical facts are only adapted by means of fictions." (1966:8). People's self-interest, manoeuvring, manipulation and competition had been ignored. Moreover, descent theory neglected the significance of marriage and affinal ties, which were emphasised by Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology, at the expense of overemphasising the role of descent. To quote Leach: "The evident importance attached to matrilineal and affinal kinship connections is not so much explained as explained away."^[29]

Criticisms

In the 1960s, functionalism was criticized for being unable to account for social change, or for structural contradictions and conflict (and thus was often called "consensus theory"). The refutation of the second criticism of functionalism, that it is static and has no concept of change, has already been articulated above, concluding that while Parsons' theory allows for change, it is an orderly process of change [Parsons, 1961:38], a moving equilibrium. Therefore referring to Parsons' theory of society as static is inaccurate. It is true that it does place emphasis on equilibrium and the maintenance or quick return to social order, but this is a product of the time in which Parsons was writing (post-World War II, and the start of the cold war). Society was in upheaval and fear abounded. At the time social order was crucial, and this is reflected in Parsons' tendency to promote equilibrium and social order rather than social change.

Furthermore, Durkheim favored a radical form of guild socialism along with functionalist explanations. Also, Marxism, while acknowledging social contradictions, still uses functionalist explanations. Parsons' evolutionary theory describes the differentiation and reintegration systems and subsystems and thus at least temporary conflict before reintegration (ibid). "The fact that functional analysis can be seen by some as inherently conservative and by others as inherently radical suggests that it may be *inherently* neither one nor the other." (Merton 1957: 39)

Stronger criticisms include the epistemological argument that functionalism is teleological, that is it attempts to account for the development of social institutions solely through recourse to the effects that are attributed to them and thereby explains the two circularly. However, Parsons drew directly on many of Durkheim's concepts in creating his theory. Certainly Durkheim was one of the first theorists to explain a phenomenon with reference to the function it served for society. He said, "the determination of function is...necessary for the complete explanation of the phenomena" [cited in Coser, 1977:140]. However Durkheim made a clear distinction between historical and functional analysis, saying, "when...the explanation of a social phenomenon is undertaken, we must seek separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills" [cited in Coser, 1977:140]. If Durkheim made this distinction, then it is unlikely that Parsons did not. However Merton does explicitly state that functional analysis does not seek to explain why the action happened in the first instance, but why it continues or is reproduced. He says that "latent functions ...go far towards explaining the continuance of the pattern" [cited in Elster, 1990:130, emphasis added]. Therefore it can be argued that functionalism does not explain the original cause of a phenomenon with reference to its effect, and is therefore, not teleological.

Another criticism describes the ontological argument that society can not have "needs" as a human being does, and even if society does have needs they need not be met. Anthony Giddens argues that functionalist explanations may all be rewritten as historical accounts of individual human actions and consequences (see Structuration theory).

A further criticism directed at functionalism is that it contains no sense of agency, that individuals are seen as puppets, acting as their role requires. Yet Holmwood states that the most sophisticated forms of functionalism are based on "a highly developed concept of action" [2005:107], and as was explained above, Parsons took as his starting point the individual and their actions. His theory did not however articulate how these actors exercise their agency in opposition to the socialisation and inculcation of accepted norms. As has been shown above, Merton addressed this limitation through his concept of deviance, and so it can be seen that functionalism allows for agency. It cannot, however, explain why individuals choose to accept or reject the accepted norms, why and in what circumstances they choose to exercise their agency, and this does remain a considerable limitation of the theory.

Further criticisms have been levelled at functionalism by proponents of other social theories, particularly conflict theorists, Marxists, feminists and postmodernists. Conflict theorists criticised functionalism's concept of systems as giving far too much weight to integration and consensus, and neglecting independence and conflict [Holmwood, 2005:100]. Lockwood [in Holmwood, 2005:101], in line with conflict theory, suggested that Parsons' theory missed the concept of system contradiction. He did not account for those parts of the system that might have tendencies to mal-integration. According to Lockwood, it was these tendencies that come to the surface as opposition and conflict among actors. However Parsons' thought that the issues of conflict and cooperation were very much intertwined and sought to account for both in his model [Holmwood, 2005:103]. In this however he was limited by his analysis of an 'ideal type' of society which was characterised by consensus. Merton, through his critique of functional unity, introduced into functionalism an explicit analysis of tension and conflict.

Marxism which was revived soon after the emergence of conflict theory, criticised professional sociology (functionalism and conflict theory alike) for being partisan to advanced welfare capitalism [Holmwood, 2005:103]. Gouldner [in Holmwood, 2005:103] thought that Parsons' theory specifically was an expression of the dominant interests of welfare capitalism, that it justified institutions with reference to the function they fulfill for society. It may be that Parsons' work implied or articulated that certain institutions were necessary to fulfill the functional prerequisites of society, but whether or not this is the case, Merton explicitly states that institutions are not indispensable and that there are functional alternatives. That he does not identify any alternatives to the current institutions does reflect a conservative bias, which as has been stated before is a product of the specific time that he was writing in.

As functionalism's prominence was ending, feminism was on the rise, and it attempted a radical criticism of functionalism. It believed that functionalism neglected the suppression of women within the family structure. Holmwood [2005:103] shows, however, that Parsons did in fact describe the situations where tensions and conflict existed or were about to take place, even if he didn't articulate those conflicts. Some feminists agree, suggesting that Parsons' provided accurate descriptions of these situations. [Johnson in Holmwood, 2005:103]. On the other hand, Parsons recognised that he had oversimplified his functional analysis of women in relation to work and the family, and focused on the positive functions of the family for society and not on its dysfunctions for women. Merton, too, although addressing situations where function and dysfunction occurred simultaneously, lacked a "feminist sensibility" [Holmwood, 2005:103], although I repeat this was likely a product of the desire for social order.

Postmodernism, as theory, is critical of claims of objectivity. Therefore the idea of grand theory that can explain society in all its forms is treated with skepticism at the very least. This critique is important because it exposes the danger that grand theory can pose, when not seen as a limited perspective, as one way of understanding society.

Jeffrey Alexander (1985) sees functionalism as a broad school rather than a specific method or system, such as Parson's, which is capable of taking equilibrium (stability) as a reference-point rather than assumption and treats structural differentiation as a major form of social change. "The name 'functionalism' implies a difference of method or interpretation that does not exist." (Davis 1967: 401) This removes the determinism criticized above. Cohen argues that rather than needs a society has dispositional facts: features of the social environment that support the existence of particular social institutions but do not cause them. (ibid)

Influential theorists

- Herbert Spencer
- Émile Durkheim
- Talcott Parsons
- Robert K. Merton
- Bronisław Malinowski
- Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown
- Niklas Luhmann
- George Murdock
- Fei Xiaotong
- David Keen

See also

- Functional structuralism
- Sociotechnical systems theory
- Symbolic interactionism
- Structural anthropology
- Vacancy chain
- Neofunctionalism (sociology)
- Systems theory
- Cultural anthropology
- Structuralism
- Poststructuralism

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