

Subsequent Development of Sociological Theory: Structural Functionalism
Lecture 56
Classical Sociology Theory

Welcome back to the class and we are in the last week of this course. I think only two or three sessions are left. In the previous class we had a recap and looked back at most of the theories and the themes that we discussed and we tried to understand the kind of a connection between classical sociological theory and the concept of modernity.

I emphasized again and again that this framework of modernity is something very important because it is a conceptual category and a historical episode that you cannot wish away with a as a conceptual category, as well as an a kind of a historic moment or historic phase, which have been so significant in the development of world societies over the last three-four centuries.

A particular time frame, a particular category particular kind of orientations, values and mechanisms which completely redefined the way in which world was functioning. So, we discussed that there are the kind of discussions and debates and controversies around the question of modernity is unending, even now there are, the discussions, the debates are raging about the meaning, its scope and how the kind of a Eurocentric nature of characterizing modernity is very problematic.

Questions such as how that really prevented alternative forms of knowledge making to emerge from a non-western region and the connection between colonialism and modernity and how far and is it possible for the post-colonial societies which were once under the colonial rule to reclaim their lost tradition and is it possible for them to look back into their own culture, their own tradition and then to retrieve categories and frameworks and theories that would be more sensitive to their own lived realities.

There were more questions like whether can you develop social science categories without being influenced by dominant understanding of modernity. There are very different arguments and counter arguments for as well as against this particular position. One group of scholars would say that we don't want to do anything with the western understanding of society, we just want to completely abandon that on the other hand, scholars would argue that, because of the fact that they emerged in the west does not make them useless or does not make it worthless.

But rather you need to critically adopt that and develop a theoretical formulations and other original ideas rooted in your own cultural specificity and then very actively engage in the process of a creation of social theory from the south, usually that is what it is says from the south. So, the current academic scenario is quite reverberating with the kind of discussions and debates.

Since we are in the final week of the class I thought I will spend three sessions just to point at subsequent developments of sociological theory, because usually in conventional sense we understand three important schools of sociological theory that developed following the classical sociological period. So, if you identify the period of classical sociological theory till 1930s and what we are going to discuss.

The subsequent development it follows after that from 1930s, and the later decades, it took a completely different turn with the emergence of post structuralism and postmodern theories and a host of new theories, completely changing the kind of theorization within sociology and the host of other disciplines.

But from 1930s to 70s, we can be very clear that these were the three major theoretical orientations that kind of shaped the emergence and subsequent development as well as institutionalization of sociology. You must be knowing that a discipline that as young as sociology became a well-established discipline across the globe in a short periode.

Sociology departments begun to be opened in most of the prestigious universities and sociology was begun to be seen as an established science, as an established discipline of society. So development of these theoretical traditions, these theoretical frameworks really played a very important role in the establishment as well as institutionalization of the discipline. And again by the term institutionalization I hope you understand that there are different parameters for that.

You need to have a substantial section of scholars who work in that particular field of sociology and it must be an accepted program in different universities, you must be having a syllabusmasters as well as PhD program, you must be having your professional body, you must be having your own publication, your own journals, so that is how a discipline assumes the character of a professional discipline, a well-established discipline.

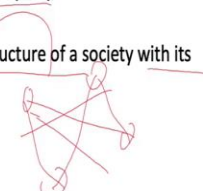
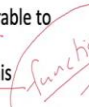
Sociology was undergoing that particular process from 1920s, 30s, 40s and by 60s sociology was kind of well-established in the major universities across the globe. So, we are going to discuss these three major theoretical traditions. The first one is structural functionalism and you must be knowing that we have come across this term several times.

We are not going into the details, but I would try to give a rather broad overview of this particular theoretical framework what does it stand for, what is its primary focus and who were the people who really contributed for the establishment of structural functionalism and people from different countries, and what were the kind of major problems against structural functionalism.

We will see that structural functionalism as a theoretical school, more or less lost its esteem by 1960s because it could not really confront or it could not really address the kind of criticisms that were levelled against this. So, by 1960s it almost died out, it almost kind of become a non-dominant theoretical perspective, but after 1980s there is a couple of scholars who have emerged claiming to be kind of neo functionalist.

Here you see this kind of various digressions and diverse trajectories of a theoretical discipline within the broader discipline of sociology itself, but structural functionalism has been one of the earliest as well as one of the most influential theoretical framework.

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- The most influential and long-standing theoretical perspective
 - Tries to analyse the relationship between the structure of a society with its functions
 - Structure as 'ordered arrangement of parts'
- Major concerns
- The general interrelatedness of the system's parts
 - The existence of a 'normal' state of being or equilibrium comparable to that of a 'healthy' individual
 - The way that all parts try to contribute to the maintenance of this equilibrium
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The most influential and long-standing theoretical perspective because especially for a country like India, you will realize that the most significant and influential sociological theoretical tradition in India has been undoubtedly structural functionalism, it is not interactionism, it is not a conflict theory though we had few sociologists who had used Marxian perspective or a conflict perspective.

But vast majority of the sociologists in India consciously or unconsciously followed a structural functionalist perspective and so is the case with the UK, France and majority of the European societies as well as that of the US. So basically, structural functionalism, tries to analyse the relationship between the structures of a society with its function. So, these two terms we have come across several times.

I do not think that we need to elaborate that point further. From the very period of its inception, the founding fathers of sociology, especially people like Comte, Durkheim and Weber, and Spencer they wanted, they compared, especially Spencer, compared a human society with that of a living organism.

Just like an organism has different parts these scholars also argue that human society also has different parts or different components and these different components are not simply put

together but they are arranged in very-very specific manner just like a living organism is structured and each part is committed to fulfil certain important function.

And when every part comes together, when each and every part comes together and follow the functions properly, meticulously, then that particular system or that particular animal actually behaves or it lives, it sustains properly or it is a state of being healthy. So now you understand structure as an ordered arrangement of parts and this is an extremely important definition.

A structure is not a mere agglomeration of parts and that holds true for any particular entity, even for a cycle or a motorcycle or a car or a house, you cannot simply put all the parts together and then that only will become a heap of its parts, it will not become a structure. So there has to be an ordered arrangement of parts and these scholars try to understand what were the specific parts and how that each part is arranged in specific relationship with other.

How does they contribute to the overall functioning of a society? So this was a vvery influential, extremely foundational line of thinking, right from the beginning of among the founders of sociological theorizing. So what were their major concerns? The general interrelatedness of the systems where you see this two terms many times interchangeably structure and system.

But usually system is understood as a step lower to that of a structure and you understand structure as having different systems in place and that is how when we understand anatomy. You have physiology for that matter, you have different systems, you have reproductive system, digestive system, central nervous system and all these system put together you get the complete morphology of human beings.

Similarly, they focused on the general interrelatedness of the system part, for example, in a primitive society how that production takes place and how this production takes place along with the kind of political governance or socialization or maintenance of family and marriage and kinship system. What is the relationship between kinship system and the system of governance?

A sociologist who studies a tribal society who try to make sense of the inter-relationship between these different kind of systems and then try to understand that how they come together and how they act together and then take the society forward, the existence of a normal state of being or equilibrium comparable to that of a healthy individual.

The assumption was that in a society when all these parts come together and function properly, the society reaches a kind of an equilibrium, there is no major chaos, there is no major change, and there is no major violence. The society is in order as it reaches a kind of an equilibrium, there is a kind of a status quo on which most of the scholars were heavily preoccupied.

They were really preoccupied with the question of seeing the kind of stability and what brings equilibrium to a society, how can you maintain the status quo of a society, so they argued that, just like a human society, when do we call a human body a healthy body, we call a human body a healthy body when you are able to live in a proper way without any kind of disturbances, without any kind of sickness or deformities and other things.

When you are able to fulfil your day-to-day activities in the most appropriate manner, you call it as a healthy state of being. So, remember the term used by Durkheim, he uses the pathological and this term pathological is used against the concept of healthy, when a pathogen attacks a healthy being and succeeds in attacking, in its attack then this this organism loses its state of being in a healthy situation and it becomes pathological.

Similarly, these biological imageries were very powerful especially in the initial period of a functional analysis, so essence of a normal state of being or equilibrium comparable to that of a healthy individual, the way that all party tries to contribute to the maintenance of its equilibrium. So again it was taken for granted that every part is supposed to contribute for the maintenance of the security.

That was seen as the concept of function. Function is, structural functionalism is understood not as what something does, so for example, what is the function of a switch, the function of a switch is to switch on a lamp or an electrical equipment or something, that is what it does, but here in structural functionalism, the term function was understood as a very specific contribution, it has a positive contribution.

A positive contribution for the maintenance of its equilibrium, so these scholars were heavily preoccupied with the question of understanding how that each and every part of these societies, how each of these part is contributing for the maintenance of its overall equilibrium.

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- Though formulated from the writings of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, developed through the works of British Anthropologists Radcliff Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski

- Became a dominant theory in the US through the works of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton

- Parson's theory of system levels: cultural or symbolic system, Social system, personality system and the individual organism as a system



Though formulated from the writings of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, structural functionalism developed more clearly through the works of British Anthropologists Radcliff Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. So, we have seen that, we have not discussed this anthropologist Radcliff Brown and Malinowski, we have not done that, because they are not strictly sociologists. They were anthropologists, though the relation between these two are very close.

If you look at the emergence of structural functionalism as a school of thought, it definitely understands its beginning with Comte and then especially with the Spencer because of his argument about this organismic analogy. Durkheim has very important functionalist orientation as he talks about the needs which is a very problematic term. He focused on the needs that every subsystem or every structure needs to fulfil.

That really created quite a lot of discussions and debates later, when you say that something is fulfilling in need, it assumes that these needs are something so original from the beginning and then you develop a social part in order to fulfil that. It leads to lot of questions about the teleology and also to tautology for some example. So this became very powerful in the early sociological writings of Durkheim, and Spencer and Comte.

Later it was heavily influenced by the anthropologists Radcliff Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski and they used it in the studies of the tribal societies. Because they believed that these tribal societies are the most elementary and basic so it is much easier for them to understand that.

For example, they would try to see how sexual taboos function in a society and the connection between sexual taboos and then kinship system, governing system and so on. So, that was the kind of major influence of structural functionalism during 1940s and 50s especially with this working of anthropologists Radcliff brown and Bronislow Malinowski.

Later it went to US and it became extremely dominant theory in US through the works of Talcott Parsons and Robert K Merton. Talcott Parsons was understood as the most important scholar belonging to structural functionalism. And I am not going into the details because Parson's theory is very complicated, but let me reiterate that he became extremely popular and influential sociologist in the US by putting forward his structural functionalist school.

Parsons has a theory of different system levels such as cultural or symbolic systems, social system, personality system and the individual organism as a system. So, he has multiple layers of system level starting with cultural or symbolic system and then social system, then personality system and the individual organism as a system.

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- His theory of social action and Pattern Variables
- Explaining how different societies acquire social equilibrium by certain permutations between these system levels and associated Pattern Variables.
- Criticised for not addressing social change sufficiently
- Criticised for accusing the third world nations for their 'lack' by being oblivious to the process of colonialism and slavery



So, in these three or four major systems he tries to understand a number of other concepts about his ideas about social action, his idea about pattern variables. He talks about how social action takes place at the realm of individual on the basis of various value orientations and various forms of rationality and how that can get escalated into a social system and his ideas about pattern variables that certain different kind of goal orientations.

He talks about different types of pattern variables, different kind of requirements for different types of societies. I am not going into the details but the point why that he resorts into such a complicated analysis was to explain how different societies acquire social equilibrium by certain permutations between these systems levels and associated pattern variables. So, let me just summarize it like that.

Going in detail into the Parsonian theory is extremely complicated and it is not required for us now, but the ultimate aim of parsons was that he wanted to explain how different societies acquire social equilibrium by certain permutations between these systems levels and associated pattern variables. Therefore he has this elaborate schema in which he would categorize societies into traditional societies and modern societies.

He then argued that traditional societies have such and such system levels and it has a corresponding kind of pattern variables, whereas modern societies have different types of social

systems with corresponding kind of pattern variables. So, you essentially argue that traditional societies are like that and modern societies are like that. So, it provides a very interesting influential sociological explanation to explain why that certain societies have become developed so fast while other societies stagnated.

This is a very problematic explanation when you try to look at society's internal dynamics and say that by nature a traditional society or a society in Africa are like that because, their value orientation, their system levels, their personality social and cultural systems are like that which do not allow them or which do not encourage them to develop whereas on the contrary societies like Europe are more different.

Their cultural, social and personal systems are different, their pattern variables are different and they are more inclined originally, naturally they are more inclined to become developed is quite natural, so this is what he explains. So this becomes a very important justification for the modernization theory. This becomes a very important justification for modernization theory as well as development theory.

Because modernization theory explains why that certain societies have become modern while others are lagging behind, so at the same time Parsons was heavily criticized for not addressing the question of social change sufficiently. Now, like every structural functionalist Parsons also is preoccupied with the question of analysing the phenomenon of social equilibrium or social stability or the order.

Once you have a theory that preoccupied with explaining why that order is constructed and maintained, then it becomes very difficult for you to explain how social change happens. So, there were serious criticism against Parsons and towards the end of his life Parsons also brought out a structural functionalist theory to explain social change. But that was not very effective and moreover he was criticized for accusing the third world nations for their lack by being oblivious to the process of colonialism and slavery.

This is something extremely important. As I told you that this structural functionalism as propounded by Parsons, it became a sociologically sophisticated theoretical justification to modernization theory as modernization theory argues that there is only one path towards

development and that path is being shown by countries of western Europe, all others are supposed to follow.

It also explained why that certain countries are continue to be lagging behind, why that certain countries continue to be underdeveloped, while certain countries have become developed. If you use Parsons' argument you can provide a sociological explanation arguing that these traditional societies have value systems, they have social systems, they have personality systems which are resistant to change.

They are more traditional, inward-looking, whereas modern societies, European societies in essence are more flexible, dynamic, open-minded, and more rational whereas traditional cities are irrational. He brings in quite a lot of these binaries. Now the point is this argument was very powerful in the US as well as in the development circles at least till 1960s.

And later very interesting theoretical arguments came from world system theory by Immanuel Wallerstine and dependency theory up by a series of Latin American scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank and others, who very vehemently criticize this position saying that the supporters of structural functionalism are not really bringing in history to explain and to understand why that certain countries have become poorer and why that certain countries have become rich.

Where is the place for colonialism and slavery in your theory of social change? How do you account for that? That was a devastating criticism. They could not answer that because if you are not able to bring in a very specific concrete historical episodes into your sociological theory and then try to explain why that we developed and you did not develop, then it is a very baseless argument and a useless exercise. It only becomes a kind of intellectual exercise in vain so that was the kind of criticisms that were raised by this scholars like Wallerstine and A G Frank were very important

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- Robert K Merton's contribution in terms of the theories of 'dysfunctions; manifest and latent functions/dysfunctions', functional alternatives and so on that saved functionalism from the problems of teleology.
- Mounting criticism against Functionalism by 1960s
- Emergence of neofunctionalism by Geoffrey C Alexander and Niklas Luhmann in the 1980s



Another important scholar belong to this school was Robert K Merton, who was a very important sociologist who made this theories of middle range. His arguments about science and society are very important because he did not believe in making very grand theorizations like Parsons, but he emphasized on doing more empirically based theories of the middle range.

Merton arguments about dysfunctions and manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions became important, because every part was seen as supposed to be giving only positive contributions for the existence of a society, nothing was seen as negative. So, that had led to quite a lot of teleological explanation. It looks as if every part understood what the kind of a need it is supposed to perform and then developed for that, that is a kind of a teleological technological explanation.

Merton brings in the whole question of dysfunction. Dysfunction is the kind of a contribution by the part of a society which you know disturb this kind of an equilibrium and that he argued, it could be both manifest and latent. Manifest is something that is obvious and something that is intended, whereas latent is something that is not seen and also unintended.

Many of the social parts or many of the social structure, it generates a lot of very obvious whatever we wanted and it also creates lot of unwanted unintended consequences which will disturb the equilibrium of society. So that was a very influential idea and this whole idea of latent

and manifest function is something very central even to the modern theorization because a host of our own inventions and ideas.

We wanted certain positive outcomes, those were the intended outcomes that we wanted, but while we created that we also created lot of unintended, negative consequences which we do not know how to deal with it. And so by mounting criticism against functionalism by 1960s as I mentioned and by 1960s it more or less, it failed as a theoretical tradition. It could not really withstand the kind of criticisms levelled against that by other scholars.

A host of alternative theoretical paradigms were emerging in US as well as in the UK interactionism, exchange theory, then social or conflict theory, a feminist theory, a host of other things were emerged and now from 1980s onwards you see a group of scholars who call themselves as a neo-functionalist such as Geoffrey Alexander and Niklas Luhmann. Geoffrey Alexander is from US and then Niklas Luhmann is from Germany.

They try to recreate the functions to school and calling it as a neo-functionalism and arguing that there is much possibility still left in the kind of a functional theorization and they do not want to look at it as a very conservative theoretical tradition, but they argue that this whole idea of different differentiation and how the whole question of different social structure, it is something very important.

I am again not going into the details. But these people they something like a neo-Marxism that emerged during the same time Luhmann and Geoffrey Alexander, they represent the rise of neo-functionalism in the academics that we related to structural functions. This is a very broad overview of structural functionalism as I mentioned to tell you to give you an indication about what were the kinds of trajectories of sociological theorization after the period of classical sociological theory. So, we will stop here and then we will meet for the next class and we will discuss conflict theory as well as symbolic interactions, thank you.