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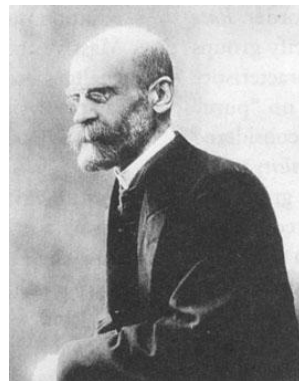
Sociological Theory: An Introduction to Functionalism

By Damian E M Milton

One of the earliest sociological 'perspectives' (or theories) was developed from the work of Emile Durkheim. His theories are considered to be the first major works in now what is considered Functionalism, a term made popular by an American theorist called Talcott Parsons in the early-mid 20th century. Durkheim was influenced by the Enlightenment philosophers such as Auguste Comte. The 'Enlightenment' is a term used to describe a period in time in Western thought where science was taking power away from religion as a means of explaining life. This spurred on theorists to talk of human rights and democracy amongst other ideas. Comte as a philosopher decided to apply the logic and methods of science to the study of human societies (an approach known as 'Positivism' – meaning that the methods of science can be positively applied to the social sciences and facts about human life can be ascertained). He called this study of human life 'Sociology' and so was the first to use the term (in this sense anyway!). Durkheim, following on in Comte's footsteps also believed that a positivist / scientific approach could be applied to studying human societies and attempted (successfully) to establish Sociology as an academic discipline across Europe. Although his theories did become highly criticised from other sociological perspectives, they remain very influential in the field of 'consensus' theories (explained below) in general, particularly Functionalism.



Auguste Comte



Emile Durkheim

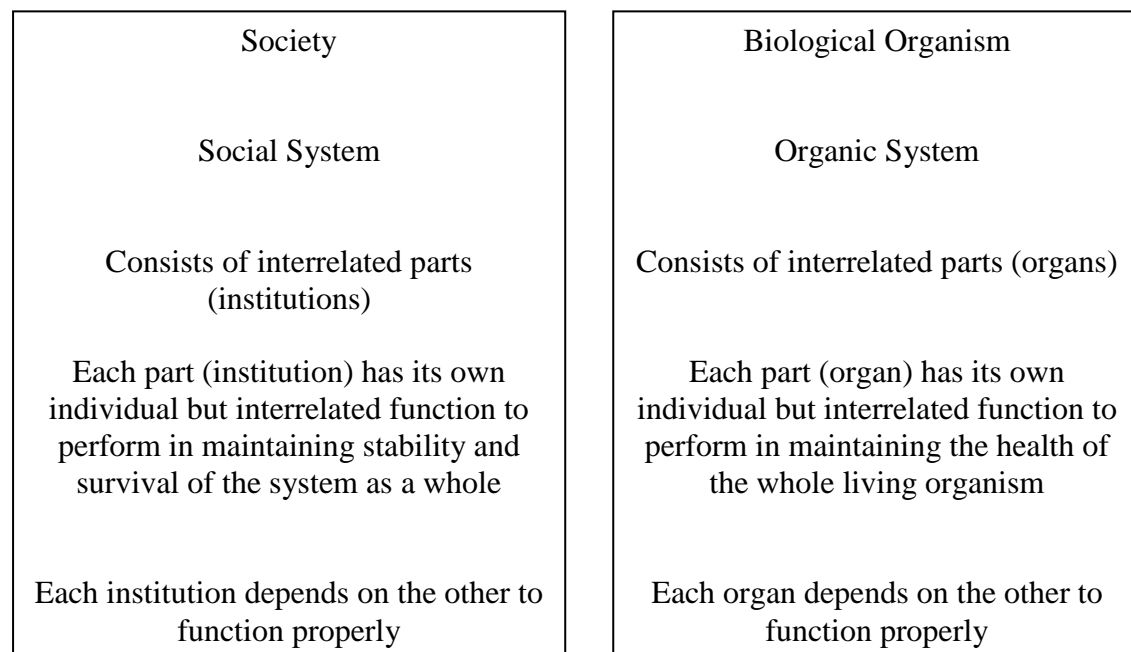


Talcott Parsons

Functionalism takes a structural (or systems) approach to the study of human societies. This means that they see society as an organised system of interrelated parts or 'structures' such as institutions (e.g. Education, the nuclear family), this system of institutions (or structures) work together to form the society as a whole. Durkheim argued that all these parts must work efficiently and effectively so that society remains stable. Durkheim believed that he could apply positivist scientific methods to study how these parts work together as a system,

in order to figure out how society as a whole 'functions', and the 'function' or role that each of the parts played in maintaining and regulating a 'functional' society. Hence, this is why Durkheim is often considered the founding father of 'Functionalism'.

Durkheim borrowed an idea from Comte in his perception of how society worked, in comparing society to a living organism (such as the human body). In this theory he argued that the institutions of society depend upon each other to maintain the stability of the whole society, in much the same way the organs of an organism depend on each other to maintain the stability of the whole body. This is known as the 'Organic Analogy'.



The 'function' of an institution refers to the positive contribution made by that institution to the smooth running of society as a whole. One of these contributions being towards 'social order', without which society (according to functionalists) would collapse. For functionalists social order is maintained by co-operation and unity amongst a society's individual members. Durkheim called this the 'collective consciousness', meaning a collective way of thinking and acting. Parsons' coined the phrase: the 'value consensus' to describe the need for societies to have a common set of beliefs and principles to work with and towards, a consensus meaning a general agreement or sharing of ideas. This is why Functionalism (along with the later theories of 'Pluralism' and the 'New Right') is considered a 'consensus theory'. A consensus theory is based on the idea that society is dependent upon the mutual co-operation of its members.

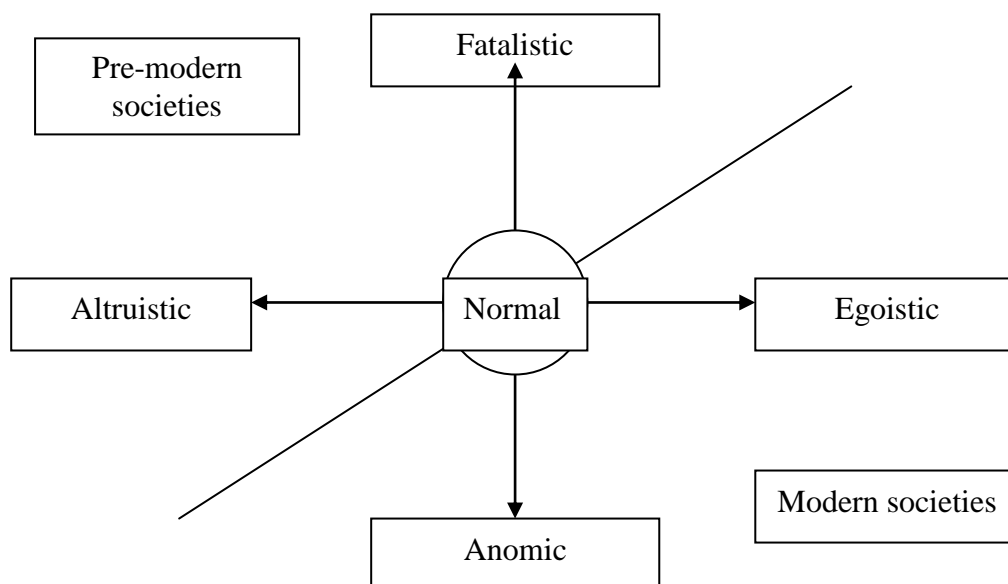
Functionalists argue that this consensus of values is possible due to 'socialisation'. Socialisation means the process by which individuals learn the norms and values of their given culture. Thus, the Family as an institution is seen by functionalists as vital for providing this function for individual family members and for society as a whole.

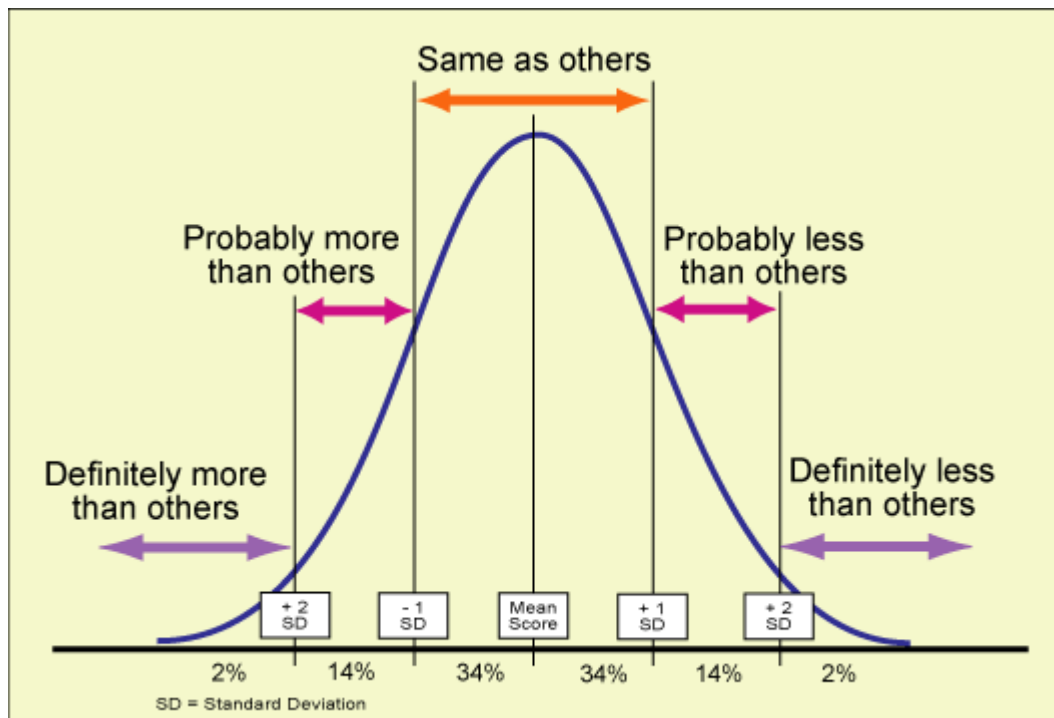
According to Durkheim, human behaviour is constrained by the system of structures and 'social facts'. A 'social fact' is referring to something in society that has an existence outside of any one individual, that exerts power over an individual and impels them to act in accordance with the social expectations of society. Social facts include institutions, belief structures, customs, conventions, morals, rules, norms and values of any given society. Although they have an existence outside of any one individual, they become internalised by individuals in the socialisation process and become part of their consciousness – hence the phrase the collective consciousness being used by Durkheim to explain how a functional society is possible. Constraint, control and regulation of peoples individual desires by the collective value system is seen as necessary to ensure the survival of that society. Otherwise people would pull in different directions and pursue their own interests, resulting in social conflict and disorder, rather than harmony and unity (this idea is reminiscent of the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and that how human beings without the stability of civil society would fall into a violent 'state of nature' – this philosophy is also shown in the story 'Lord of the Flies'). In other words, people are controlled and regulated by institutions for their own good and for the good of society as a whole. A good example, that could be used to support Durkheim (potentially?), of a society where the institutional control has broken down and led to 'chaos', would be contemporary Iraqi society.

Durkheim attempted to establish Sociology as an academic discipline in Europe in the late 19th Century and so decided to apply his theories and scientific methods to an aspect of social behaviour largely considered to be a very individualistic act: Suicide. Durkheim (1897) tried to show how suicide could be considered a social fact, dependant on other social facts. Durkheim studied suicide rates and coroner reports across Europe over a lengthy period of time and then looked at the statistical differences in suicide rates between different social groupings. He did not ask anyone their opinions (i.e. people who had attempted suicide), instead he attempted to scientifically (and objectively) interpret the statistical differences between groups using explanations of 'social facts'. In his research he found many consistent trends, for example: married people were less likely to commit suicide than divorced or single people, Jewish people were less likely than Christians, who were less likely than Atheists, etc. He found that in times of War the suicide rate went down, whilst in times of economic recession and boom the suicide rate went up. Durkheim interpreted these findings using two aspects of social life that could affect the behaviour of an individual to the extent that they would take their own life. Firstly, the amount of integration an individual had into society and the collective consciousness, and secondly, the related idea of the amount of moral regulation the individual has to abide by social rules and norms (*interesting if one relates this theory to the field of autism...*). Early or primitive societies could lead to excessive integration, to the point where an individual will willingly give their life to the will of the collective (e.g. Kamikaze pilots) known as 'altruistic suicide' or potentially excessive regulation to the point where an individual has no control over their fate leading to a 'fatalistic suicide' (e.g. the high suicide rate amongst slaves and prisoners). More likely in a complex modern society however were the opposite ends of these spectrums: too little integration (leading to 'egoistic suicide') or too little moral regulation (leading to an 'anomic suicide'). These last two types come from the individual not being a part of the collective consciousness. The second type coming from a lack of regulation and thus socialisation into

the norms and values of society, leading to inevitable 'deviant' behaviour (deviating away from the social norm) and a sense of 'normlessness'. This condition Durkheim termed 'Anomie'.

According to Durkheim, too much or too little of something seems to be like a 'sickness' in the 'social body' and that society is more functional when in balance (or as Parsons' called it: 'equilibrium'). This led some critics (namely Conflict theorists – see later lessons) to argue that Durkheim and later Functionalists were not being scientific and objective, as they were biased towards a conservative political view of 'everything in moderation' and for playing into the hands of those who were already powerful in society, as they were the ones who defined what was and was not 'functional' and therefore could use functionalist ideas to support unequal power relationships in society. Other theorists (Interpretivists – also see later lessons) argued that people were not the puppets of the social system, but the creators of it, and so opposing functionalist views on how structures teach people to conform to collective values.





Later Developments of Functionalist Theory:

Although Functionalism originated with the work of Comte and Durkheim, who were French theorists working in Europe in the 19th century, it became popular in America during the 20th century due to the work of Talcott Parsons, who coined the phrases: 'the value consensus', 'equilibrium in society' and 'structural functionalism', all of which have been used by functionalists to describe society ever since. Parsons applied the ideas of Functionalism to a wide range of topics including the family, inequality in society and the role of the sick person within society. He also added concepts to those of Durkheim's. For instance, he argued that before a functional society was possible, certain basic requirements needed to be met, these he called 'functional prerequisites' (pre meaning beforehand). Parsons argued that there were four main prerequisites: Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration and Pattern Maintenance. Adaptation refers to the need for society to adapt to its environment. For example, if the 'global' society today does not adapt to global warming, there may be disastrous consequences for all societies. Goal attainment refers to the need for society to set cultural goals and to have a common purpose. Integration refers to the need for individual members of society to be integrated into the value consensus. Parsons' argues however, that people will not always abide by the rules, so therefore law and order is needed to keep integration possible, by punishing deviance and by reintegrating people back into the norms and values of society. Pattern maintenance refers to the need in society to keep norms and values into a functional 'equilibrium' or balance. Parsons argues that there are temporary frictions and conflicts in society, yet a functional society will quickly redress this balance to go back into a state of equilibrium (or 'Normalisation'...?). Parsons argues that institutions such as the Family and Education are essential in maintaining consistent patterns of norms and values from one generation to the next (*and social institutions more*

generally – including the role of a Doctor as ‘gatekeeper’ in ‘access to the passive patient sick role’).

The functionalist ideas of Durkheim and Parsons came under much criticism (as mentioned earlier), this led one prominent functionalist to develop the theory further to try and answer some of the theory’s critics, namely Robert K. Merton.



Robert K. Merton

Merton disagreed with some of the points made by Durkheim and Parsons. He argued that institutions not only provided functions for society, yet also dysfunctions (like a virus in the social body) or even non-functions (no positive or negative effect). This meant that within a functional society, not all institutions could be seen as ‘indispensable’. Instead, some institutions may be more dysfunctional than functional and thus potentially disposed of and replaced by more functional institutions. An example of this logic being applied can be seen when looking at prisons as a social institution. Durkheim and Parsons would analyse prisons by looking at the positive contribution (function) provided by them for society, e.g. making citizens feel safer and rehabilitating offenders back to the ‘value consensus’. Merton on the other hand would analyse there positive and negative aspects and look to see if prisons could be replaced by a more functional institution that could perform the same functions more efficiently. The earlier functionalists were often accused of seeing society through ‘rose-tinted spectacles’, yet this criticism could not be so easily made of Merton.

Merton’s ideas became very influential on two newer perspectives within sociology, namely Pluralism (which in turn was influential on ‘New Left’ political and sociological theorists) and the ‘New Right’. Pluralism accepted the criticism that not everyone abides by the same norms and values in society as a whole. They argued that there were many differing groups within society (or subcultures) which had there own set of norms and values. Having said this, they argued that there were overriding essential moral frameworks and boundaries like an umbrella encompassing all the groups within society (e.g. The American dream, swearing allegiance to the president etc.). This way of thinking became very popular with Democrat politicians in America (such as Bill Clinton) and recently British politicians (such as Tony Blair), e.g. Native-Americans, Afro-Americans, Italian-Americans; still all being ‘American’.

Pluralists therefore are very similar to functionalists in seeing a positive functioning and consensual society, yet reduce the importance of seeing society as having a single value consensus concerning all aspects of life. The 'New Right' on the other hand rejected the rigorous attachment to scientific method and became openly political. Rather than concentrating on the positive functions of institutions, they often concentrate on the negative dysfunctions of institutions. Although they believe in individual responsibility, they believe like functionalists that a strong consensual community can help build a functional society and continue to use many functionalist concepts within their theories. Functionalism, Pluralism and The New Right are thus known within Sociology as the 'Consensus theories', as all agree on some basic need for a value consensus within society for it to function adequately.

(Possible activity:)

I would like you to apply the theories of the above functionalists to the social institution of 'Night Clubs'. Make a list of the functions and dysfunctions that these institutions have on individuals and wider society. Are these institutions functional or dysfunctional as a whole?

Revision questions: What is meant by the following terms?

1. The Enlightenment
2. A Structural Theory
3. The Organic Analogy
4. The Collective Consciousness
5. Social Facts
6. Anomie
7. The Value Consensus
8. Equilibrium
9. Functional Prerequisites
10. Dysfunction

Who originated the following terms and concepts?

1. Sociology
2. Fatalistic Suicide
3. Structural Functionalism

Can you think of any examples of how these theories can be applied?

What criticisms can be made of Functionalism and 'Consensus' theories?