

SOCI 302/322

PRESPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THOERY

Session 3 –STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM AND ITS
HISTORICAL ROOTS

Lecturer: Dr. Dan-Bright S. Dzorgbo, UG
Contact Information: ddzorgbo@ug.edu.gh



UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education

School of Continuing and Distance Education

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Session Overview

Introduction

This session deals with the first sociological perspective but focuses mainly on its historical roots. The ideas of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Pareto and some anthropologists provide the historical roots for the development of Structural functionalism in the twentieth century by Talcott Parsons and his students. In this session, however, we shall be concerned with the contributions of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim.

Goals and Objectives

At the end of the session, the student will be able to:

- Define structural functionalism and explain its main concern
- Trace its roots to the works of earlier sociologists such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One: Definition of Structural Functionalism
- Topic Two : The Contributions of Auguste Comte
- Topic Three: The Contributions of Herbert Spencer
- Topic Four: The Contributions of Vilfredo Pareto
- Topic Five: The Contributions of Emile Durkheim

Reading List

- Calhoun, Craig, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Seven Pfaff, and Idermohan Virk (2002). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
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- Cuff E. C., W. W. Sharrock & D. W. Francis (1990), *Perspectives in Sociology*. 3rd Edition. London: Unwin Hyman
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- Edles, Laura Desfor and Scott Appelrouth (2010). *Sociological Theory in the contemporary era: Text and readings*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Sage
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- Farganis, James. (2011). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*. 6th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
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- Turner, Jonathan H. (1998). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 6th Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
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- Ritzer, George (2008). *Sociological Theory*. 8th Edition or any newer or earlier editions. New York: McGraw Hill.
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- Wallace, Ruth A. and Alison Wolf (1995) *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition*. 4th Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Structural Functionalism: Definition

- The **A Modern Dictionary of Sociology (1969:167)**, defines functionalism as:
- **The analysis of social and cultural phenomena in terms of the functions they perform in a sociocultural system. In functionalism, society is conceived of as a system of interrelated parts in which no part can be understood in isolation from the whole. A change in any part is seen as leading to a certain degree of imbalance, which in turn results in changes in other parts of the system and to some extent to a reorganization of the system as a whole. The development of functionalism was based on the model of the organic system found in biological sciences.**
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- Although often applied to the nature and functioning of society, functionalist analysis can also be applied to any entity that exhibits features of a social system. One good way of illustrating the essence of the definition offered above is to think of a university as a social system with interrelated and interdependent parts all functioning for the survival of the university. The University has interrelated parts such as the administrative staff, lecturers and researchers, students, caterers and restaurant workers, security, staff of the various halls of residence, cleaners and gardeners, etc. All these parts are interrelated and interdependent so that a disturbance in one part—for example an industrial strike by the university lecturers for higher salaries or better conditions of work— will affect other parts leading to system imbalance and if the situation is not arrested, there will be a breakdown of the system.
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Structural Functionalism (cont'd)

Functionalists emphasize three core elements:

1. The general interrelatedness and interdependence of the system's parts
2. The existence of a normal state of affairs or what is referred to in functionalism as a **state of equilibrium** considered as normal or a healthy state of an organism or social system
3. The tendency of the parts of the system to re-organize to bring things back to normal or a new state of equilibrium, thus functionalists recognize **moving states of equilibriums** in the social system.

Structural Functionalism (cont'd)

- From these assumptions of functionalism, and continuing with our university example, an imbalanced university system's authorities or government would react and give higher salaries and better conditions of work to the lecturers and they would resume their duties and thus restoring system balance or equilibrium.
- Functionalism is concerned with society as a whole, its structure, its processes and the means by which social order and stability are maintained. It is thus a macro-sociological perspective because it focuses on the broader structures, institutions and processes of society.

Intellectual Roots of Functionalism

Intellectual Roots of Functionalism

- We associate functionalism with modern sociologists, in particular Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton but functionalist conceptual framework is also found amongst early social anthropologists particularly in the work of Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) and Malinowski (1884-1942) and early sociologists as indicated above. For example, Radcliffe-Brown (1948:397) in one of his works noted that: **The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system. Such a view implies that a social system (the total social structure of a society together with the totality of usages, in which that structure appears and on which it depends for its continued existence) has a certain kind of unity, which we may speak of as a functional unity.**
- **We may define it as a condition in which all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency, i.e., without producing persistent conflicts which can neither be resolved nor regulated.** This statement above indicates that functionalist analysis emphasizes function or the contribution items make to the broader structure or system of which they are part. Functionalism lays emphasis on harmony, consensus, integration, order and stability.

Intellectual Roots (cont'd)

- As far as sociology is concerned, the earliest intellectual roots of functionalism were laid by the French sociologists, Comte (1789-1857) and particularly, Durkheim (1858-1917), the British sociologist, Spencer (1820-1903), and the Italian sociologist, Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923).
- **Auguste Comte (1789-1857)** whom you remember as commonly credited as the founder of sociology, urged that the study of society should be concerned with “social static” (social order) and “social dynamics” (change/progress).
- Comte stated functionalism’s basic assumption of the social system’s interdependence when he said “The static study of sociology consists in the investigation of the laws of action and reaction of the different parts of the system”. The functionalist concept of equilibrium is also discernible when Comte declared that a lack of harmony between the whole and parts of the social system was “pathological”
- The concepts of **societal system** having **parts** that are **interrelated** and **interdependence** are borrowed from biology. equilibrium. Thus from the idea that there is **biological system**, we now have the thinking that society is also a **social system** with interrelated and

Intellectual Roots (cont'd)

Herbert Spencer's (1820-1903),

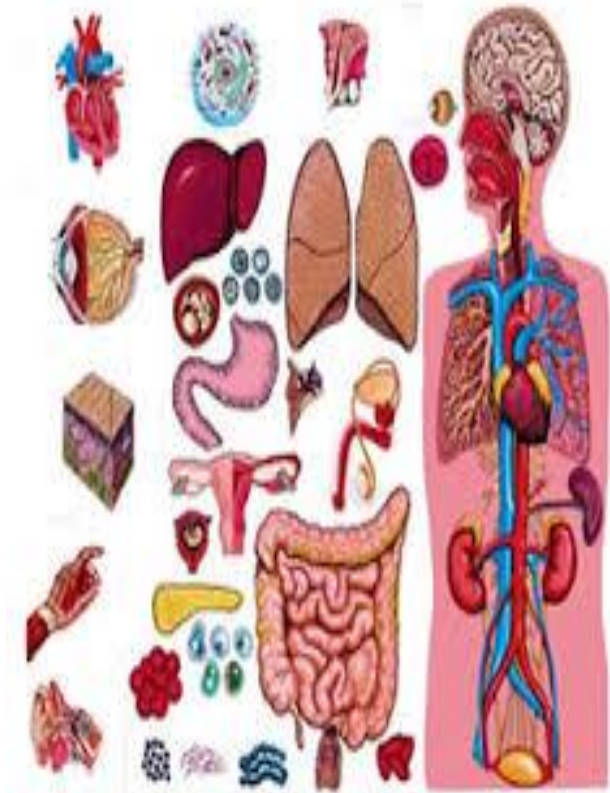
He proposed the organismic model for viewing society system differentiation or structural differentiation.

Society is like a living organism grows and develops, so is the evolution of society. To Spencer society evolves from a small relatively simple and homogenous state in which division of labour is little to more a complex and heterogeneous state in which the division of labour is advanced.

Society has parts (e.g. religion, the family, education, the state, and the economy) that are interrelated and interdependent and all function to maintain the society as an ongoing entity. This image of society having interrelated parts is in line with the tenets of modern functionalism as indicated above. The key analogy we have been stressing so far as far as the contributions of classical sociologists to modern functionalism are concerned is **society is like as a living organism.**

Intellectual Roots: Spencer

- He conceived society as a living organism. For example, the human organism has parts such as the heart, lung, mouth, stomach, legs, etc. that are interdependent and all play their roles to ensure the survival of the human being.
- Like the above, society also has parts (the social institutions) that are interdependent and function to ensure survival of society—
- If the human being is a biological system, then society is a social system



Intellectual Roots :Emile Durkheim

- Modern functionalists, that is, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton have abundantly acknowledged the intellectual influence Durkheim exerted on their functionalist theory
- Durkheim's contribution begins with his view that society as an interdependent whole, a social system and moral entity as well as his interest in **social facts**—those things in society that are **external to** and **coercive** of the individual.
- Social facts have a reality above and beyond the individuals who make up society and were to be explained by the patterns of interdependence that exist among these individuals.
- The interdependence that exists among members of society creates human associations and society which give rise to expectations of patterns of conduct. As individuals associate or interact, that is, develop relationships with others, they tend to develop common ways of perceiving, evaluating, feeling and acting. These new patterns of perceptions, values, feelings and actions give rise to expectations of what is right, and they become social facts exerting constraints on how individuals should or ought to behave in given situations. Durkheim himself gave examples of social facts as laws, beliefs, morals, collective values, customs and fashions.
- Thus as people interact and associate with each other, there emerges a **collective conscience** which in turn constraints them and obliges them to behave in particular ways. Society is moral in the sense that the human interactions generate sets of moral obligations, rights and duties among individuals. **Social order** emerges from these obligations, rights and duties since they carry with them consensus.

Emile Durkheim (cont'd)

Social systems maintain social order and stability as well as restore equilibrium, functionalists tend to emphasize **fundamental societal values**—also **the collective conscience** that are shared and generally accepted by members of society. Equally for Durkheim it is values that hold groups and societies together.

Durkheim disagrees with the **contractual thesis** proposed by Hobbes and on what hold men together in society mainly because social life work quite differently. The logic of utilitarian view is that people are selfish, struggling over scarce resources and only pursuing their own agenda regardless of the consequences for the group or collectivity of which they are part. But a critical observation of social life rather shows co-operation and mutual accommodation among members.

This fundamental consensus or agreement on basic values becomes the bedrock of society.

Emile Durkheim (cont'd)

- Another important contribution from Durkheim as far as functionalism is concerned is his discussion of the concept of **social integration**.
- **Social integration** refers to the incorporation or connectedness of the individual to the group, community or society, that is, the social order. Social integration is important for the maintenance of social harmony, stability and social equilibrium.
- The main function of the religious institution is to integrate the individual into society. Here we see a clear statement that religion performs functions for society—a central argument that modern functionalists make that the institutions of society, namely, the family, religion, politics, education, health, and the economy function for the survival of society.

Intellectual Roots: Vifredo Pareto

- The Italian sociologist, **Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923)** also laid an intellectual foundation for modern functionalism when he patterned his system of society on a physiochemical system characterized by interdependence of parts and adjustive changes, rather than on the biological organism. With the conception that society is a physiological and chemical system, Pareto regards the “molecules” of the system as individuals with interests, drives and sentiments.
- Pareto was the first sociologist to precisely describe a social system in terms of the interrelatedness and mutual dependence among its parts and assert that Parson later borrowed Pareto’s idea of a dynamic or **moving equilibrium** that produces harmony for the system to discuss how systems adapt and change while maintaining equilibrium.

Session Summary

In this session you have learnt to:

- Define Structural Functionalism
- The contributions of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto as the historical roots of Functionalism