

## **Why has the functionalist perspective been so severely criticised?**

Structural functionalism developed out of the European philosophical traditions of the C19th. It was in some respects, a response to the massive social upheavals of industrialisation and political unrest of the times as it offered a way of accounting for social unrest by looking at the power of society over the thoughts and actions of men.

The nature of humanity was seen as selfish but rational. Man needed the power of society to restrain and control him. Society was seen as a compelling force and early structuralists such as Hobbes and Durkheim emphasised the power of society and the relative lack of power of mankind to control it. The emphasis of the earliest writers in the tradition, Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, shows a concern with the need for order and harmonious integration in social life. It is their work which has formed the basis of the work by Parsons and others in the USA. This writing forms the basis of the functionalist perspective and has been very influential in the thought and research of Sociology in that country though functionalism has been less influential in modern European thought.

One of the underlying tenets of functionalism is the organic analogy. This is essentially a descriptive technique which suggests that society is similar to an organism in Biology. This theory has been put forward by many writers and is strongly associated with the work of the anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown. It originated at the turn of the century with new discoveries in the natural sciences and is a holistic view of society which suggests that just as organs serve different functions for the biological organism, so the individual institutions of our society serve the needs and purposes of the whole of our culture.

The contrast with the social theory of Marxism could not be more strongly marked. Marxism stresses that the motive force for society and social change is conflict. He stresses that the links which bind sectors of society are economic and linked to the modes of production. Social conflict is created by the differing interests of competing social groupings, known as classes. A writer in the Marxist tradition would emphasise that the links between groupings within society are very tenuous and marked by very diverse interests indeed and this does seem a more satisfactory explanation for the existence of disparate groups such as are found in mainstream modern American culture than any offered by writers in the functionalist tradition.

Structural functionalism offers an explanation of social behaviour which is based upon the needs of the social system. The motives of the individual are subordinated to

the needs of the social system. Parsons offers a view of the family, for instance, which relies on women acting as emotional supports for their men folk. This type of thinking is anathema to feminists who would be concerned with the oppressive nature of the patriarchal system as a far more convincing analysis of the low status of females within the western cultural tradition. Writers such as Spender and Oakley in the UK and Dworkin in the USA emphasise the subordinate position of women as being reliant on a dominant male hegemony.

The inherent conservatism of functionalism suggests that things are as they currently are because society gains from the present arrangement. This type of argument is used to justify some extraordinary injustices such as the work of those writers who account for a dysfunctional child within a family as serving the purpose of channelling aggression from adults. Crime is seen as existing because in some ways it serves the functions of society by uniting society in condemnation of criminals. Merton is associated with this type of viewpoint. This type of analysis is bound to lead to criticism from two viewpoints. The first is that it shows a shocking complacency in the face of current injustices, and the other is that crime itself may arise out of the force of social pressures. It does not simply exist because it must.

In Britain, the existence of certain criminal behaviours as a reaction to existing repressive social factors such as the creation of 'folk devils' has been pointed to by writers such as Stanley Cohen. Jock Young in his study of drug taking pointed to policing and legal factors as a cause of criminality.

To conclude, functionalism is an attractive theoretical viewpoint and offers methodological and descriptive analysis to Sociology. It is however lacking in depth because of its basis in the needs and philosophy of another era. Its concentration on harmony and the need for social order leads to a conservatism which is out of step with the needs of a modern Sociology. It has left itself open to criticisms of irrelevance and complacency. As both Alvin Gouldner and Michael Young have pointed out, Sociology is a more incisive and important science when it raises problems and concentrates on a more questioning and analytical approach to its subject matter of society.