

To Julia

Social Theory in the Twentieth Century

Patrick Baert



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2 The Biological Metaphor Functionalism and Neo-functionalism

This chapter deals with the origins, rise and fall of functionalist theory. The functionalist label is used in many disciplines: for example, in linguistics, psychology and architecture. Although they share the same name, the frameworks which are used do not necessarily have much in common. I will in the following merely focus on functionalist theories of society.

'Functionalism' in sociology covers a wide variety of authors and schools which nevertheless tend to share a number of central tenets. First, they explain the persistence of social practices by referring to those (often unintended) effects which are beneficial for the equilibrium or integration of the social system in which these practices are embedded. Second, functionalism reconstructs the notion of rationality: it is assumed that certain practices which appear irrational can be made intelligible once their social functions are spelled out. Beneath the surface lies a deeper social rationality, which it is the task of the sociologist to uncover. Third, functionalism draws upon the notion of functional prerequisites. The argument is often that these prerequisites need to be fulfilled for a given society to survive, or alternatively that society operates such that these needs tend to be fulfilled.

During its emergence and rise in the 1940s and 1950s, functionalism fitted in well with the intellectual climate. First, it soon emerged that functionalist reasoning was not incompatible with some aspects of neo-positivist epistemology, the latter being one of the dominant strands in the philosophy of science at the time (see chapter 8). By paying attention to consequences of actions (instead of purposes or motives behind practices), functionalism fits, for instance, the positivist inclination to avoid reference to entities that are not immediately accessible to observation. Some philosophers of science attempted to merge the two doctrines by demonstrating that functionalist formats of explanation can be moulded within the straitjacket of the deductive-nomological method. Second, functionalism was even more compatible with the core features of structuralism – another important theoretical strand at the time (see chapter 1). Both support a holistic picture of society in which the

interrelationship of sub-systems and practices is central. Both assume that the task of the social scientist is to unravel a deeper reality behind the conscious level of purposive action – for structuralists that hidden realm refers to unacknowledged structures, whereas functionalists search for latent functions. Both functionalism and structuralism minimize the role of agency, attributing importance to the broader social forces which transcend the individual. Finally, functionalist and structuralist frameworks strongly object to the interpretative claims of hermeneutics and phenomenology.

Although structuralism and functionalism have a different pedigree and are distinct from each other, they did coalesce on several occasions. The alliance is exemplified by both Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown's and Talcott Parsons's structural-functionalism; I will pay special attention to the latter later in this chapter. Parsons's writings had a decisive impact on American sociology for several decades. Parsons was heavily influenced by German, French and Italian authors, but on the whole European sociology has been more resistant to the Parsomian challenge. For the American audience, however, the structuralist-functionalist paradigm was considered the ultimate successful attempt to bring together the sociological classics within one consistent theoretical frame of reference. The term 'paradigm' is not misplaced here. For a while it looked as if the new creed was so persuasive that a consensus might arise within the sociological community *vis-à-vis* its main assumptions. Although some expressed doubts at a remarkably early stage with respect to the validity of some of these structural-functional presuppositions, it was only in the late 1960s that a more coherent assault against structural-functionalism developed.

Early functionalism

Functionalism as a label and as a separate school only emerged in the course of the twentieth century, but functionalist reasoning in itself is much older. Many of the so-called founding fathers of sociology attempted to explain social phenomena by drawing upon analogies with the biological realm. Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim are especially important in this regard. First, these functionalists *avant la lettre* saw society as an organic whole, with the different sub-systems or practices functionally directed towards the persistence of the larger entity in which they are embedded. This notion of society as an organic entity became central to the functionalist argument in the twentieth century (see chapter 1). Second, many sociologists in the nineteenth century were fascinated with the application of evolutionary epistemology to the social sphere. Central to their analysis was the notion that, for social systems to survive, they needed somehow to adjust to their environment. Increasing complexity and system differentiation leads to forms of superior adjustment.

Likewise, twentieth-century functionalist theories reconstruct history in terms of intensifying complexity, compartmentalization and system differentiation. Third, these predecessors of the functionalist movement introduced the notion of societal needs. For social systems to be healthy or at least to survive, certain needs have to be fulfilled. The task of the sociologist is to identify these needs, and to help steer society such that its needs are fulfilled. The modern notion of 'functional prerequisites' denotes the same idea.

Given that Durkheim has inspired numerous sociologists and anthropologists in the twentieth century, I will briefly sketch the main functionalist tenets in his work. Durkheim himself does not need introduction, and has already been mentioned in chapter 1. The functionalist features are to be found in his *Rules of Sociological Method* and *Division of Labour*. In *Rules* Durkheim insisted that any adequate explanation combines both causal and functional analysis. Causal analysis explains the succession of social phenomena, whereas functional analysis accounts for the persistence of social practices in terms of the 'general needs of the social organism' in which these practices are embedded.¹ At several places Durkheim insisted that one should distinguish analytically between functions and intentions. After all, the functions of practices might be different from people's purposes in carrying out these practices.² Functional analysis is central to Durkheim's distinction between normal and pathological phenomena. Certain forms are normal in a given society, if they regularly occur in similar types of society, and if they fulfil essential functions in society. Phenomena are pathological if they do not fulfil these conditions. The distinction between normal and pathological forms is in its turn essential to Durkheim's attempts to prescribe what needs to be done. Normal forms are to be promoted, pathological forms to be eradicated. Social policy thus rests upon functional analysis.³

In *Division of Labour* Durkheim noticed that through time societies become more complex and differentiated. There is hardly any division of labour in earlier forms of society. Society is then kept together through what Durkheim called 'mechanical solidarity'; that is, a form of cohesion based on similarity of beliefs and sentiments.⁴ Modern societies are characterized by an increasing division of labour. They can only be kept together through 'organic solidarity'; that is, cohesion based on interdependence and co-operation of its component parts.⁵ The increasing division of labour needs to be explained by the increase in 'dynamic or moral density' which is itself to be explained by increasing population growth. The argument is basically Darwinian. Population growth amongst animals leads to functional specialization such that they can coexist. An analogous mechanism operates in the social realm where division of labour resolves the increased competition amongst human beings.⁶

But the transition towards a differentiated society has not run very smoothly. Durkheim diagnosed 'anomie' as one of the major social problems of his time. Anomie means literally 'normlessness'. In Durkheim's sociology, anomie

refers to a significant lack of normative regulation in society. Durkheim believed that a healthy society is dependent on the institutionalization of central values and normative guidelines. Without these binding value patterns and norms, social and political life would be in disarray. The moral malaise of the Third Republic was indicative of the state of anomie in a differentiated society. But anomie is only a transitional phase. Sociology can contribute to the implementation of values and normative rules which fit modern society.⁷

The above summary suffices as an illustration of the functionalist tenets in Durkheim's reasoning. First, it shows that his sociological outlook relied upon the notion of societal needs: societies need solidarity and shared values. Second, it reveals the organicist tenets of Durkheim's thinking: social health depends on the extent to which different parts are functionally related to the whole. Third, it discloses Durkheim's preoccupation with analogies between social and biological evolution, and the central role of the notion of differentiation in his theory of evolution. It is thus not surprising that Durkheim had and still has an enormous impact on modern-day functionalists.

But functionalism as a separate school became dominant only after the First World War. It was first introduced by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). Both used the label 'functionalism' to refer to the theoretical frame of reference which they employed, although Radcliffe-Brown occasionally used 'structural functionalism' to distinguish his argument from Malinowski's.

Functionalists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown rebelled against nineteenth-century anthropologists. There were basically two problems with the latter: they sometimes relied upon some kind of diffusionism, and they lacked direct empirical experience. According to diffusionism, social items or practices gradually spread themselves across societies due to migration and trade, so similar cultural artefacts or practices are explained by a common source. The problems with diffusionism are manifold. First, diffusionists ignored the extent to which the meaning of items or practices depends on the cultural context in which they are used. Second, even assuming that it is possible to conceive of two items or practices as identical, it is difficult to substantiate empirically that they have a single source. If some nineteenth-century anthropologists did not accept diffusionism, almost all lacked systematic exposure to non-western societies. Some had travelled abroad, but few had carried out extensive fieldwork, and of those who had even fewer used their findings to substantiate their theories. They tended to construct theories by relying upon secondary source material.

Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and other early functionalists developed their views partly in opposition to diffusionism and the 'armchair' anthropology of the nineteenth century. Functionalists became hostile towards diffusionist reasoning for two reasons. First, they realized that they were dealing with

societies with extremely unreliable and incomplete historical records. Hence, any attempt to comprehend these societies within an all-embracing historical narrative would lead to 'pseudo-causal' explanations. Second, they thought that it was important to conceive of societies as wholes. The meaning of a social item depends on its relationship to other items currently in use in that society, and on its contribution to the society as a whole. Cultural artefacts, which are transmitted to a new society, become reappropriated and readjusted to the requirements of the new context. To trace back the origins of social items is not only an impossible task, it is to disregard the functional rationality of the items today. The unravelling of this synchronic-cum-holistic logic can only be made possible through a thorough understanding of the whole culture as it is in operation now. And this can only be accomplished through extensive fieldwork and rigorous research methods. It is ironic that the functionalist school, which subsequently developed into the highly abstract work of Talcott Parsons, Jeffrey Alexander and Niklas Luhmann, emerged out of concerns with the necessity of detailed ethnographic research.

There is a danger of regarding functionalist anthropologists as too homogeneous a group; there is indeed significant variation within early functionalism, notably between Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. I will deal with Malinowski first, as his influence predated Radcliffe-Brown's. Originally from Poland, Malinowski began to study natural sciences at the universities of Cracow and Leipzig, and then anthropology at the London School of Economics. This initial training in the natural sciences might account for the strong biological bias in his work. But even before he went to England he had developed a keen interest in the social sciences. At Cracow his attention was drawn to J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and at Leipzig he became a regular attender of Karl Bücher's and Wilhelm Wundt's lectures. In Malinowski's rejection of diffusionism, for instance, one finds the resonance of Wundt's insistence that social items cannot be studied in isolation from each other. At the LSE, Malinowski became acquainted with the art of ethnography, and he subsequently carried out fieldwork in New Guinea. This research led to several articles and monographs, amongst which *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is especially well known. Malinowski taught mainly at the LSE, where he held the first chair in anthropology. With his overpowering personality he had a decisive impact on British anthropology between the wars. He taught briefly at Yale University until his death in 1942. His posthumous *Scientific Theory of Culture* summarizes very well his views on anthropological theory.⁸

I have already mentioned that functionalist anthropologists rebelled against some nineteenth-century frameworks. This is very much the case for Malinowski. First, he reacted strongly against Edward Burnett Tylor's and Frazer's notion that 'primitive man' does not possess the same rational faculties as 'modern man'. Malinowski tried to demonstrate that certain practices or

thought processes, which are *prima facie* irrational, are reasonable after all, in that it can be shown that they serve certain needs, whether social or psychological.⁹ Take the phenomena of magic and religion. Previous accounts failed to capture the 'pragmatic utilitarian performance' of religious practices and rituals. Malinowski suggested taking up the view 'that magic is as magic does'.¹⁰ He noted that people try to know and control their environment in order to satisfy their biological needs. But the external environment is not entirely predictable, nor is it entirely controllable. This uncertainty leads to an accumulation of anxiety, which people have a need to relieve; magic and religion fulfil that function. Malinowski also stressed that people are sometimes faced with disruptions which undermine the unconscious flow of daily life. For example, when confronted with unexpected death, they resort to magic or religion to deal with these crises, as a result of which their anxiety and emotional unrest are reduced.

Second, nineteenth-century thinkers tended to believe that several contemporary cultural artefacts or practices are mere 'survivals' or 'borrowed traits' of the past. That is, current beliefs or practices might have fulfilled some purpose in the past, but as they become transmitted across generations they eventually lose their initial usefulness. They are like cultural fossils in that they are reminiscences of a distant past. Malinowski insisted that a closer look shows that many of these so-called 'survivals' are not mere 'dead-weights' at all.¹¹ They might well have been transmitted from the past, but they are shown to fulfil vital functions in contemporary society. It is a mistake to conceive of cultural transmission as merely duplication. This would be the case only if people did not have the ability to learn from past experience and think ahead. But people do have that ability and often put it into practice. Hence, cultural items are, whenever necessary, readjusted to new contexts.

Third, many nineteenth-century social scientists attempted to establish laws or law-like generalizations which transcend the ability of individuals to interfere in the course of events. On the same theme, Comte, Durkheim and many others insisted that society is an entity *sui generis*. Of course, society consists of individuals with psychological and biological features. But it would be mistaken to attempt to explain society by attributing primal causality to either psychological or biological mechanisms. Malinowski's picture cannot be more different.¹² First and foremost, knowingly or unwittingly, people act in a self-interested fashion in that they ensure the satisfaction of their basic needs. These basic needs are biological. Cultural products are secondary in that they help people to satisfy the 'primary biological needs'. Furthermore, people are not mere passive recipients of external forces. Ever since the beginning of civilization human beings have developed technologies, aimed at controlling their future performance through systematic use of past experience.¹³

Fourth, as already mentioned, nineteenth-century anthropological theories lacked a solid empirical basis. It should now be clear why Malinowski felt so strongly about the need for detailed ethnographic research. Only through meticulous empirical research can the anthropologist learn about the rationale behind foreign practices, about the current functions of these practices, and about how the people involved constantly manipulate their environment. Many previous anthropological works conflated customs, actions and accounts. They assumed that people's reports about their customs provided reliable information about their actions. During his fieldwork, Malinowski became very much aware of the extent to which the natives said one thing and did another, and of the extent to which they were willing to break rules or conventions whenever it was in their interest to do so. And this finding in its turn suggested the necessity of extensive fieldwork.

Malinowski's theory of needs is essential to his functionalist framework, and it is thus worth developing here. His concept of need and his notion of function are very much interrelated: social practices fulfil a function if and only if they lead to the satisfaction of needs.¹⁴ Malinowski basically distinguished between three types of needs. The first level refers to the 'primary biological needs' of individuals, such as the need for food or the need for sexual satisfaction, which are essential to their survival. The second refers to social needs, like the need for co-operation and solidarity. These social needs have to be fulfilled in order for primary needs to be satisfied. The third level refers to the integrative needs of society. These comprise institutions or traditions which allow for the transmission across generations of those behavioural patterns which make for the satisfaction of the societal needs.¹⁵

Malinowski observes some simple, but important, contrasts between humans and animals.¹⁶ Animals lack culture, and they therefore cannot rely upon the satisfaction of the secondary needs in order to satisfy their primary needs. Neither do they have to do so, because their anatomical and physiological features allow them to satisfy primary needs anyway. Human beings have culture, and they can thus rely upon the fulfilment of the secondary needs in order to satisfy primary needs. But they are also dependent on culture for their survival because their anatomical and physiological characteristics do not allow them to satisfy primary needs without cultural assistance. For instance, human beings can (and must) rely upon social norms and conventions for the fulfilment of their needs for security. Given that these cultural artefacts are a *sine qua non* for the survival of the human species, it follows that humans are dependent on the continuation of culture across generations. If people had to reinvent culture with every generation, their survival capacity would indeed have been severely limited. Malinowski coined the term 'integrative imperatives' to refer to the necessity of the transmission of these norms and conventions across generations. Notice the contrast with animals again. Given that the latter are not dependent on culture, their survival is

a fortiori independent of cultural transmission. But whereas animals might develop individual habit formations through instruction or trial and error, they are generally unable to transmit these skills to their offspring. In contrast, human beings have been rather ingenious in compensating for their in-built weakness: first, by invoking practices which make for the satisfaction of the secondary needs, and then, by preserving and transmitting these practices across time.

Radcliffe-Brown first studied psychology and philosophy at Cambridge, and then anthropology under W. H. R. Rivers. At Cambridge, he showed an interest in the theoretical aspects of the discipline, already developing some of his core ideas concerning anthropological theory. He had become acquainted with Durkheim's writings, which were to have a lasting influence on his thinking.

Compared to Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown is not remembered for his fieldwork. Whilst holding a fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, he did carry out some empirical research, notably on the Andamans and the Australian aborigines. But he lacked Malinowski's meticulous research methods and language skills; nor did he share Malinowski's perseverance, or his genuine empathy with and passion for the people whom he studied. Instead, he became directly involved in the academic institutionalization of anthropology, contributing to the setting-up of departments in various parts of the world. He held posts and established departments at the universities of Cape Town, Sydney and Alexandria. After a short spell at the University of Chicago, he took up the first Chair of Anthropology at Oxford in 1937. After retiring from Oxford in 1946, he continued teaching at various places until he was too ill to continue. His influence on anthropology was strongest in the 1940s.

Radcliffe-Brown's contribution to anthropological theory differs from Malinowski's. Remember that Malinowski's theory rests upon the causal primacy of biological drives. Culture and the transmission of culture derive from the need to satisfy these biological drives, upon which depends the survival of the species. Radcliffe-Brown's functionalism is very different. Paraphrasing Durkheim, he argued that society has its own irreducible complexity; it cannot be explained by referring to mechanisms which operate at a lower level.¹⁷ Society needs to be explained by social mechanisms, not psychological, and certainly not biological ones. Hence, he strongly distanced himself from Malinowski's functionalism.¹⁸ Radcliffe-Brown's anthropology is deeply sociological, although he carefully avoided that label. The reason he provided for his reluctance to refer to his work as 'sociology' was that he did not wish to be associated with what he regarded as the impressionist and shallow work often carried out in the English-speaking world under that heading.¹⁹

Like Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown was especially suspicious of diffusionist theories. Diffusionist explanations around the turn of the century often

combined psychological theory and historical guesswork. The work of Rivers, Radcliffe-Brown's teacher at Cambridge, was an example *par excellence* of the supremacy of these psychologico-historical explanations. Radcliffe-Brown's approach differed substantially. First, against Rivers's heavy reliance upon psychology, Radcliffe-Brown denied that society can be understood as an aggregate of psychological phenomena.²⁰ Second, he thought it necessary to abandon the diffusionist search for origins; any such enterprise lacks the necessary empirical support.²¹ Third, instead of Rivers's attempts at making historical conjectures, Radcliffe-Brown heralded comparative sociology, which allows the anthropologist to find universal laws about synchronic relations.²² Fourth, whereas diffusionists relied upon secondary sources, Radcliffe-Brown regarded extensive fieldwork as essential to the scientific study of non-western cultures. After all, the meaning of cultural items depends on the social context, and only systematic observation will allow the anthropologist to uncover the local meanings.²³

Radcliffe-Brown's lifelong involvement in the academic institutionalization of anthropology was interwoven with his commitment to the subject as a scientific discipline. He thought that hitherto anthropology had been too often in the hands of well-meaning dilettantes, who developed highly speculative theories based on unreliable source material. Anthropology had to become a science, aimed at developing general laws of society. This meant that anthropologists needed to draw systematically upon what he called the inductive and comparative method. But Radcliffe-Brown's position also implied that anthropology was in need of professionalization. The emphasis on scientific method called for a rigorous training in fieldwork methods,²⁴ and this instruction was to be provided at universities. Once anthropology was established as a science, it would be able to inform and guide colonial administration, educators and policy-makers.²⁵ Radcliffe-Brown's own prescriptions very much resemble Durkheim's. Society should aim at a state of *eunomia* as opposed to *dysnomia*. *Eunomia*, or social health, occurs when the different parts are in harmonious relation to each other. The thoroughly trained anthropologist helps colonial and local administration in the accomplishment of *eunomia*.²⁶

Radcliffe-Brown introduced a number of concepts, central to his line of argument, which include social structure, structural form and social function. Commentators have often misunderstood Radcliffe-Brown because they failed to capture the exact meaning which he attributed to these key concepts of his framework. 'Structure', especially, was used rather distinctly from its ordinary use in sociology and anthropology (see chapter I). Radcliffe-Brown insisted that his notion of structure is not as an abstraction or model used in order to approach reality. Instead, he regarded structure (and hence *social* structure) as an observable reality. The general concept of structure refers to an arrangement of interrelated parts, and structures can be observed in different realms. For example, the structure of a piece of music refers to an arrangement of

sounds, and the structure of a molecule is an arrangement of atoms. Likewise, social structure is the entire set of actually existent relations which connect certain individuals at a given time. So the ultimate components of social structure are human beings. Their relations involve well-defined rights and duties for the individuals involved. The institutionalization of incentives and sanctions ensure people's compliance with these prescriptions.²⁷

Some structures, such as that of a building, are relatively invariant. But many change. Like the structure of the human body, social structure is in constant flux; like the changing molecules of the human body, people come and go, or take up different positions and roles. Now, in the midst of any structural change, there is continuity. Radcliffe-Brown coined the term 'structural form' to refer to this observable structural continuity. For example, a human organism retains its structural form in spite of the changing molecules. Likewise, social structure exhibits an observable structural form: the usages or norms shared by the individuals are relatively invariant.²⁸ The relative stability of the forms is due to what Radcliffe-Brown coined 'functions' fulfilled by the different parts of the system. By a function, he meant the sum total of all relations that a component has to the entire system in which it is embedded. The notion of function is again applicable to many realms of reality: in the same way different parts of the human body fulfil vital functions, so do various components of social life.²⁹ The stability of structural form is dependent on the 'functional unity' of the whole; that is, the mutual adjustment of the different parts. Particularly central to the persistence of social forms is 'coaptation', referring to the standardization and mutual adjustment of the attitudes and behaviour of the members of that society.³⁰

Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown had an enormous impact on social anthropology. The reception of early functionalism by social theorists was not as unequivocally positive. This ambiguous response is to be explained partly by the subsequent rise of rival functionalist theories. By the end of the 1940s, Talcott Parsons had established himself as the main exponent of functionalist theory, and very soon after that Robert Merton made his reputation. But the mild reception of early functionalist theories was also a consequence of their own shortcomings.

For illustration, two pivotal weaknesses in the argument of early functionalists can be cited. The first is their tendency to describe *all* cultural items as functional. Malinowski, for instance, postulated this 'universal functionalism' when he described culture as 'a system of objects, activities, and attitudes in which *every* part exists as a means to an end'³¹. For him, '*every* cultural achievement that implies the use of artifacts and symbolism is an instrumental enhancement of human anatomy, and refers directly or indirectly to the satisfaction of a bodily need'.³² Now, the assumption of universal functionalism can be understood in two ways; there is a strong and a weak version. On the one hand, it can be understood to mean literally that every social item fulfils a

central function. This strong version would be an untenable position to hold. Evolutionary theory might imply that highly dysfunctional items are selected out. But from this it does not follow that the items which do persist fulfil central functions. On the other, a more charitable interpretation is that universal functionalism means that only those items which fulfil central functions count as socially relevant items. For methodological purposes, every item should be treated as if it fulfils a vital function; the empirical researcher needs to be sensitive to the fact that every observed item *might* serve central needs of society. Although more plausible, this weak version of universal functionalism is not without problems either. It is unclear which criteria ought to be employed in order to decide whether or not an item *is* functional, and if it is, which function it fulfils.

The second weakness of early functionalism is its tendency to assume that a certain amount of cohesion and cohesiveness is necessary for society to survive. Radcliffe-Brown, for instance, held to this assumption of functional unity when he wrote that 'all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency'.³³ The problems with this position are twofold. One, the notion of 'survival' might have a clear meaning in the biological realm, but it does not to the same extent in the social realm. It is unclear whether the survival of a society or culture refers to continuity at a political or cultural level, or to the absence of biological extinction of its members. Also, if social survival refers to political or cultural constancy, then it remains unclear how much of that continuity constitutes survival. Two, to say that a certain degree of cohesiveness or internal consistency is necessary is a vacuous claim to make. The question is not whether or not cohesiveness is essential, but *how much* is needed. None of the early functionalists even began to answer that question. In practice, they often portrayed societies as if they were in need of high levels of standardization of sentiments and beliefs. This is not surprising given that the societies which they investigated already exhibited such high levels. But some awareness of their own culture would have taught them that although modern western societies do not quite conform to that picture, they nevertheless manage quite well.

To avoid being too harsh on Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, one should not forget that they were, first and foremost, empirical anthropologists, not social theorists. Their merit lies in demonstrating that many nineteenth-century speculative theories lacked an empirical basis. They carried out detailed ethnographies, and showed their theoretical relevance. They established a tradition of rigorous empirical research. Given these achievements, it would be unfair to claim that the onus of developing a convincing and coherent functionalist framework was on them. It is ironic that this task was to be taken up by a man for whom Malinowski's lectures were one of his first exposures to the social sciences. That young American graduate student

attending Malinowski's lectures in 1925 was Talcott Parsons. He was to change the face of social theory for ever.

Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons (1902–79) first studied philosophy and biology at Amherst College, and then social science in England and Germany. He studied under L. T. Hobhouse, Ginsberg and Malinowski at the LSE, and then embarked upon a doctoral dissertation at Heidelberg. During his stay in Europe Parsons became heavily influenced by European social theory. His doctoral dissertation dealt with the notion of capitalism in the work of Weber, Marx and Werner Sombart. Further lasting influences on Parsons's thought include Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto. Throughout his life he would attempt to incorporate these various European thinkers into a unified theoretical framework. On his return to the United States, he soon took up a position at the University of Harvard where he would stay until his retirement in 1973. Besides being a prolific writer, Parsons also held many offices: for instance, he was founding editor of *The American Sociological Review*, and President of the Eastern Sociological Society, the American Sociological Association and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Parsons was the first ever sociologist to occupy this last position.

Parsons's abstract theorizing was initially at odds with the highly atheoretical climate of American sociology at the time. When his first book, *The Structure of Social Action*, came out in 1937, it only attracted interest amongst specialists in social theory.³⁴ But his writings gradually had more impact, and by the time *The Social System* was published in 1951, he had become one of the most influential social theorists of his time.³⁵ The impact was not limited to social theory; his work was now also regarded as useful for empirical purposes. However, even in Parsons's heyday in the 1950s, his work never ceased to be controversial, regarded as pure genius by some and disguised conservative ideology by others. His influence declined in the late 1960s and 1970s, and only recently has there been a revival of interest in his work; for instance, in the writings of Jeffrey Alexander and Richard Münch.

Parsons's functionalist theory differs substantially from the early functionalism of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Whereas most early functionalists were sympathetic towards a positivist conception of social science, Parsons was not. He insisted that positivist social science is erroneous because it fails to recognize the essentially purposeful nature of human action (see chapter 8). It is intrinsic to agency that it cannot be reduced to external conditions. What is needed is a theory which takes into account the fact that people are both goal-orientated and constrained. Neither the purposiveness of action nor its external constraints can be ignored; neither can be reduced to the other.

This attempt to transcend both extreme forms of positivism and idealism runs throughout the whole of Parsons's *oeuvre*.

This is revealed clearly in his early work. Central to *The Structure of Social Action* is Thomas Hobbes's problem of order: how can society persist given that each of its members pursues his or her own goal?³⁶ Idealist, positivist and utilitarian attempts to solve the problem of order are shown to be inadequate. Idealist views mistakenly ignore the extent to which human conduct is conditioned by external constraints.³⁷ Likewise, positivist perspectives erroneously ignore the relatively independent role of the symbolic realm, and utilitarian perspectives are mistaken in reducing value patterns to a mere cost-benefit analysis.³⁸ Instead, Parsons found inspiration for his sociological answer to Hobbes's problem of order partly in Weber's action theory, and partly in Durkheim's notions of *conscience collective* or *représentations collectives* (see chapter 1). Parsons's solution to the problem of order is basically a Durkheimian one, referring to the internalization of shared central values and norms of society within need-dispositions of the personality structure. People tend not to adopt an instrumental attitude towards internalized values. By pursuing their own goals, socialized individuals unwittingly contribute to fulfilling the central needs of society.³⁹

In the course of the 1940s and 1950s, Parsons developed his 'general theory of action'. Given its central place in his work, I will pay special attention to it here. The aim of the theory was to provide a theoretical framework which united various disciplines in the social sciences: sociology, politics, psychology and economics. Parsons's attempt to develop this unifying framework fitted in with his position at that time at Harvard. After teaching in the economics and sociology departments, he became chairman of the newly founded Department of Social Relations in 1946. The new institute grouped together several disciplines. Amongst Parsons's colleagues at the department were the psychologists Gordon Allport, Henry Murray and Robert Bales, the sociologists George Homans and Samuel Stouffer, and the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn. Many of these collaborated with Parsons and influenced his thinking. Parsons's general theory of action was both the academic backbone and the output of his tenure in office.

Central to Parsons's general theory of action is the notion of a 'system'. System theory had become increasingly popular at the time, and Parsons was heavily influenced by it. For him, a 'system of action' refers to a durable organization of the interaction between what he called an 'actor' and a 'situation'. The actor might be an individual or a group. The situation might or might not incorporate other 'actors'. Parsons argued that there are three features to any system. First, a system is relatively structured. In the social realm, he maintained that value patterns and what he called the 'pattern variables' contribute to the structured nature of the system. Second, certain functions need to be fulfilled for a system to survive. Social systems thus

have particular needs, and Parsons tried to list and classify these 'functional prerequisites'. Third, social systems change, and that change takes place in an ordered fashion. Parsons introduced the notion of cybernetic hierarchy in order to capture the phenomenon of ordered transformation in the social realm.

These three components require elaboration. Before discussing his notions of functional prerequisites and internal dynamics, I will first analyse at length Parsons's treatment of the structured nature of interaction. His starting point is that systems of action are structured by value patterns, which stipulate the ultimate objectives towards which people's action will be directed. Without those ordering principles, people would not have any guidelines regarding their conduct. But Parsons argued that the value patterns are structured as well, by what he termed 'pattern variables'. He considered these to be the ultimate principles through which systemic structure is achieved. They are universal dichotomies which represent basic choices underlying social interaction.⁴⁰

Parsons's pattern variables can also be seen as an attempt to reconstruct in a sophisticated manner dichotomies which were introduced by earlier authors. In particular, Tönnies's distinction between the *Gesellschaft* and the *Gemeinschaft* springs to mind. Tönnies described earlier types of society as *gemeinschaftlich*, based on personal relations and affective bonds. Modern society is more *gesellschaftlich* in that impersonal interactions are more frequent. Parsons's view was that Tönnies's typology of relationships conflates several dichotomies, and is thus too crude to have any heuristic value. Several observed relationships are indeed *gesellschaftlich* in some respects, *gemeinschaftlich* in others. Parsons set out to distinguish analytically the underlying dichotomies or pattern variables. This enabled him to redefine Tönnies's question. Rather than attempting to establish whether a given relationship is *gesellschaftlich* or *gemeinschaftlich*, Parsons's pattern variables enable him to establish *in which sense* that relationship is one or the other.

The pattern variables apply to any system of action, and refer to choices faced by an actor in relation to an object. As mentioned earlier, the actor does not have to be an individual – it can be a collectivity or a group. Likewise, the object does not have to be an inanimate object – it can be an individual or a social group. The pattern variables are universalism versus particularism, performance versus quality, specific versus diffuse relations, and affective neutrality versus affectivity. The first of each pair is characteristic of Tönnies's *Gesellschaft*, the second of each pair ties in with the *Gemeinschaft*. Underlying Parsons's scheme is the observation that our society is moving in the direction of universalism, performance, specific relations and affective neutrality. Whereas the first two pairs refer to the meaning which the actor attributes to a particular object, the remaining pairs allude to the nature of the relationship between actor and object. In Parsons's terminology again, the first two are the pattern variables of the modality of the object, and the others are the pattern variables of orientation to the object.

As to the pattern variables of the modality of the object, the actor makes use of universalistic criteria if he attributes meaning to the object according to criteria applicable to many other objects, whereas he draws upon particularistic criteria if the object is defined and judged in terms which are unique to that object. A bureaucracy, for instance, draws upon universalistic criteria, whereas relationships within the nuclear family are particularistic. Whereas the actor can judge the object in terms of its performance or achievement, the actor may also treat it in terms of its intrinsic quality. Performance is more prominent in the occupational structure, whereas quality can be exemplified in friendships. With respect to the pattern variables of orientation, the actor might adopt an attitude of affective neutrality towards the object as opposed to a relationship of affectivity. For example, the relationship between a doctor and patient demonstrates affective neutrality, whereas affectivity characterizes the interaction within the family. Finally, the actor may be involved with an object in rather specific ways, or relate to the object in multiple ways. Again, the relationship between doctor and patient is typically specific, and relationships within a family typically diffuse.

The pattern variables refer to the more voluntaristic dimensions of Parsons's theory, for they summarize and classify choices on the part of the actor. In contrast, Parsons's notion of 'functional prerequisites' points out the extent to which these attitudes or meanings are embedded within and constrained by social sub-systems. Parsons's functionalist theory rests upon the notion that any system of action only exists in so far as four basic needs are at least in part fulfilled by four types of function.⁴¹ The four needs and functional prerequisites of any system of action are, according to Parsons, adaptation (A), goal-attainment (G), integration (I) and latency or pattern-maintenance (L). Hence Parsons often refers to this aspect of his theory as the AGIL-scheme. 'Adaptation' refers to the fact that any system of action should be able to adapt to its external environment and make the environment adapt to its own needs. 'Goal-attainment' is the need of any system of action to define its goals and to mobilize resources in order to obtain them. 'Integration' refers to the need of any system of action to regulate and co-ordinate its parts for the sake of its stability and coherence. Finally, 'latency' or 'pattern-maintenance' means that a system must provide means for sustaining the motivational energy of its members.

Parsons noted that the four functions can be arrived at with the use of two dichotomies: external versus internal, and instrumental versus consummatory. Activities directed towards goal-attainment and integration are 'consummatory' in that they aim at the accomplishment of the ultimate goals of the system, whereas activities directed towards adaptation or latency are 'instrumental' in that they are directed towards the employment of means in order to achieve the ultimate goals. Likewise, Parsons noted that adaptation and goal-attainment refer to the interaction between the system and its external

environment, whereas latency and integration refer to issues concerning the internal organization of the system. So the AGIL-scheme can be summarized by noting that any system of action needs to relate successfully to its environment and internally organize itself.

For every system of action four sub-systems can be identified, each specializing in fulfilling one of the four functions: the organism directed towards adaptation, the personality system related to goal-attainment, the social system directed towards integration, and the cultural system geared towards pattern-maintenance. The difference between the four sub-units can also be captured in terms of Parsons's 'cybernetic hierarchy'. From cybernetic theory Parsons derives the idea that a system of action, like any other system, circulates and exchanges information and energy. The units with high information tend to control the units with high energy, whereas the latter tend to condition the former. The sub-system directed towards pattern-maintenance tends to control the other sub-systems. Similarly, the sub-system geared towards adaptation conditions the other sub-systems.⁴²

Parsons's theory of action is general. For each sub-system similar distinctions can be identified. It follows that his scheme is like a set of Russian dolls, each doll incorporating a smaller version of itself with an identical structure. For example, the social system itself can be divided up into four sub-systems. There is, first, the economy which deals with the adaptation of society towards its environment. Second, the polity of society deals primarily with goal-attainment. Third, the social community focuses upon integration and solidarity. Finally, the cultural sub-system provides values and normative regulations which make for appropriate socialization.

Parsons goes to great lengths to show the interrelationship between the AGIL-scheme and the pattern variables.⁴³ Systems with different functions imply different pattern variables. For instance, systems directed towards fulfilling the adaptive function are characterized by universalism, neutrality, specificity and performance, whereas systems fulfilling the integrative function emphasize particularism, affectivity, diffuseness and quality (see table 2.1).

Whereas Parsons's earlier work ignored issues related to long-term change, his later work drew upon analogies with biological evolution to develop a 'paradigm of evolutionary change'.⁴⁴ Four notions are crucial here: differentiation, adaptive upgrading, inclusion and value generalization. First, with time, a process of 'differentiation' occurs in that different functions are fulfilled by sub-systems within the social system. For instance, the economic and the family unit gradually become differentiated. Second, with differentiation goes the notion of 'adaptive upgrading'. This means that each differentiated subsystem has more adaptive capacity compared to the non-differentiated system out of which it emerged. Third, modern societies tend to rely upon a new system of integration. Process differentiation implies a more urgent need for special skills. This can only be accommodated by moving from a

Table 2.1 Relations between pattern variables and functional prerequisites of any system of action

	Universalism (O) Neutrality (M)	Affectivity (O) Particularism (M)	
Specificity (O) Performance (M)	ADAPTATION	GOAL-ATTAINMENT	Performance (O) Specificity (M)
Quality (O) Diffuseness (M)	PATTERN-MAINTENANCE	INTEGRATION	Diffuseness (O) Quality (M)
	Neutrality (O) Universalism (M)	Particularism (O) Affectivity (M)	

O = pattern variable of orientation to the object
M = pattern variable of object-modality

Source: Based on Parsons (1960, p. 470)

status based on 'ascription' to a status on the basis of 'achievement'. This implies the 'inclusion' of previously excluded groups. Fourth, a differentiated society needs to develop a value system that incorporates and regulates the different sub-systems. This is made possible through 'value generalization': the values are pitched at a higher level in order to direct activities and functions in various sub-systems.

Three basic weaknesses can be identified in Parsons's social theory. First, his general theory of action is a conceptual scheme, rather than an adequate theory. There is no doubt that, as such, the general theory is a remarkable achievement. It is, after all, analytically very tight and, because of its high level of generality, it allows us to categorize various aspects of the social realm. But equally beyond question is that the explanatory power of the theory is weak. It provides few testable propositions about social reality.⁴⁵ Second, intrinsic to Parsons's theoretical frame of reference is a neglect of conflict and disequilibrium. In his earlier work he developed a theoretical argument aimed at understanding how social order is brought about. Likewise, his system analysis was primarily aimed at explaining how the stability of a system is achieved – how it manages its boundary-maintenance and its internal integration. Parsons's frame of reference not only fails to account sufficiently for widespread dissensus and major political or industrial conflicts, but also occasionally seems to exclude the very possibility of their existence.⁴⁶ Third, some of the weaknesses of early functionalism reoccur in Parsons's work. He argued that there are four functional prerequisites to any social system. Underlying his theory is thus the assumption that these pivotal

functions are essential to the maintenance and survival of the system. If these pivotal functions were not fulfilled adequately, the social system would disintegrate and eventually be selected out. However, like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, Parsons remains ambiguous about what exactly constitutes survival and maintenance in the social realm. And as with early functionalists, it remains unclear *how much* goal-attainment, adaptation, latency and integration are needed for a system to maintain itself.

Robert Merton

Talcott Parsons trained several promising sociologists who later turned out to be influential scholars in their own right. His long list of Ph.D. students included, for example, Robert King Merton and Harold Garfinkel. Robert Merton (1910–) was one of Parsons's first doctoral students at Harvard. His dissertation dealt with science and economy in seventeenth-century England, and it already exhibited his functionalist viewpoint, albeit in an embryonic form. Other influences on Merton during his stay at Harvard included the sociologist P. A. Sorokin and the historian of science George Sarton. Amongst European scholars Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel had a lasting impact on his work.

Merton spent most of his teaching career at the University of Columbia, which, with him, Paul Lazarsfeld and others, became a centre of excellence for sociology. There was a remarkable compatibility between Merton's 'middle-range' functionalism and Lazarsfeld's quantitative methodology. In comparison to Parsons's abstract theorizing, Merton's middle-range theory seemed more obviously suited to empirical research, for which Lazarsfeld's sophisticated use of statistics would provide the methodological backbone. Merton had a remarkable gift for demonstrating the validity of his theoretical constructions with the help of relevant empirical applications. He dealt with several substantive topics, ranging from American politics to science. With the publication of *Social Theory and Social Structure*, he became one of the leading proselytizers of the functionalist cause.⁴⁷

Although once a pupil of Parsons, Merton's functionalist viewpoint differed substantially from that of his former mentor. Merton's writings were more cautious and defensive; underlying them is a constant awareness of the various criticisms levelled against previous functionalist frames of reference. A significant part of his work deals with these criticisms. Indeed, he regularly attempted to show that they were invalid, or pointed to errors which, although committed by some functionalists, were not intrinsic to the functionalist argument. Merton's proposal for a functionalist paradigm endeavoured to avoid these intellectual faults.

A similar prudence lies behind Merton's middle-range theories.⁴⁸ Contrary to Parsons's grand theory, a middle-range theory does not aim to encompass

the whole of society. But neither is it a sequence of unrelated empirical hypotheses. 'Theories of the middle range . . . lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization and social change.'⁴⁹ Merton believed the theory of reference groups (and relative deprivation) to be an example of a successful middle-range theory in sociology. This theory, to which Merton himself contributed, set out that individuals evaluate their own situation by comparing and contrasting it with that of a reference group. Merton thought that the theory was successful in that it counters common sense and has been validated empirically.⁵⁰

Although Merton is considered to be one of the high priests of modern functionalism, he distanced himself from a significant number of writings under that banner. He tried to demonstrate that most early functionalists drew upon untenable presuppositions. The German word *hineinlesen* summarizes well what Merton found so problematic in early functionalism. *Hineinlesen* (not a term used by Merton himself) refers to the activity of reading too much into something. And that is exactly what, according to Merton, early functionalists did. They tended *ex post facto* to read too much functional rationality into social practices.

How did early functionalists attribute too much functional rationality onto social reality? Merton argued that they did so by adhering to three erroneous principles: the postulate of functional unity of society, the postulate of universal functionalism and the postulate of indispensability.⁵¹ The first principle states that society is a functional whole, and all its parts are fully integrated and well balanced. The second principle asserts that all cultural items and social practices are functional. The third principle states that there are certain universal functional prerequisites to any society, and *only* specific cultural items or practices can fulfil these functions. Merton argued that the early functionalists were mistaken in postulating these principles in advance. They need to be shown empirically, and empirical research shows them to be incorrect. The first principle might be consistent with Malinowski's and Radcliffe-Brown's data on 'primitive' non-literate societies. But it would be a gross error to extend this principle to differentiated literate societies. The second principle fails to acknowledge the existence of social survivals: that is, items which might have fulfilled a function at some point in the past but which do so no longer. The third principle disregards the existence of 'functional alternatives' or 'functional equivalents'. The fact that a given item fulfils a particular function does not necessarily imply that the very same function cannot be fulfilled by alternative items.

Merton's proposal for a functionalist perspective was based on his criticisms of the above trinity of functional postulates. First, he abandoned the early functionalist view that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Many

beliefs or practices persist in spite of the fact that they do not have notably beneficial effects for the individuals involved or for the wider society. They might have negative consequences, or they might have no socially significant effect. Merton argued that early functionalists have hitherto been biased towards exclusively focusing on the *positive* consequences of social items for the wider social system in which these items are situated. His paradigm for functional analysis, on the other hand, attributed equal status to what he coined 'functions' and 'dysfunctions'. He defined functions as those observed effects of social items which contribute to the adaptation or adjustment of a system under consideration. Dysfunctions are those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of a given system. Certain items might appear to be neither functional nor dysfunctional. They are 'non-functional' in that they are irrelevant for a given system. Merton believed that his attention to dysfunctions makes his functionalism well suited for analysing social transformation.⁵²

Second, early functionalists tend to focus on so-called functions for 'the society'. But the notion of society as a totality is misleading, because the same item might be functional for some individuals, group(s) or system(s), whilst dysfunctional for others. Merton therefore distinguished between different units for which the item might have consequences. So rather than referring to observed effects *in general*, he chose to specify the nature of the units which are affected and how these units are affected. The unit might be the society, the cultural system, a group, the psychological unit, etc. Likewise, there are societal (dys)functions, cultural (dys)functions, group functions, psychological functions, and so forth.⁵³

The phenomenon of war can be used to clarify Merton's distinction between functions and dysfunctions and his distinction between various units of analysis. Consider the following units: the society, the economic unit, the psychological level and the political realm. At the societal level, war is obviously dysfunctional in that it leads to the immediate breakup of families, and the likely injury and possible death of relatives. But war also tends to enhance the internal solidarity of a country. Confrontation with a visible external enemy tends to increase feelings of togetherness and belonging.⁵⁴ At the psychological level, some point out that the increased cohesiveness in its turn contributes to the well-being of the citizens – hence the observed decrease in suicide rates during periods of war. Notwithstanding this, going to war also has damaging psychological effects for the soldiers and their families, and for anybody who cares for peace and humanity. At the economic level, war efforts are beneficial for those sectors of the economy which are directly or indirectly involved in the production of arms. However, war also inevitably leads to the neglect of other sectors of the economy; it occasionally leads to economic sanctions from other countries, and it is almost always accompanied by decreasing trade and a decline in the standard of living. At

a politico-strategic level, going to war might deflect attention from domestic problems, raise the popularity of those in power, and thus be crucial to their re-election. But strategic errors might also have the opposite effect.

Third, Merton noted that a common critique of functionalism was its conservative bias. He acknowledged that early functionalists tended to provide interpretations which legitimized the existing order, though he denied that this tendency was intrinsic to functionalism. Early functionalists came to such conservative conclusions precisely because their analysis was confined to the identification of positive effects for the society as a whole. Once functionalists include dysfunctions and once they specify various units or levels of analysis, they will be able to establish a 'net balance of an aggregate of consequences' for every item. By searching for which functional alternatives are possible in a given social structure, functionalism can help us to improve society.⁵⁵

Fourth, some functionalist accounts conflated subjective states of individuals with objective consequences. Merton insisted that the function of a practice is an observable effect, and therefore to be distinguished from the motive underlying the practice. Some practices have, of course, functions which are both intended and recognized by the individuals who are involved in the practices. Merton called these 'manifest functions'. But other functions are neither intended nor recognized by the individuals involved. Merton called the latter 'latent functions'. Take the example of Christian church-going. One of its manifest functions is to commemorate Jesus and to be closer to God. One of its latent functions consists of reinforcing social integration. Functional analysis can be liberating in that it makes latent (dys)functions manifest.⁵⁶

An example of Merton's middle-range, functionalist theory can be found in his seminal articles 'Social structure and anomie' and 'Continuities in the theory of social structure and anomie'.⁵⁷ Underlying this theory is the distinction between culture and social structure: whereas culture provides people with normative guidelines, social structure refers to the organized set of social relationships. Culture informs people about what is desirable and to be aimed at, whereas the very fact that they operate within a social structure implies various opportunities and constraints.

More specifically, Merton distinguished between the ultimate values which are central to a particular culture on the one hand, and the availability of legitimate means to achieve these goals on the other. Anomie is defined as a state of discrepancy between ultimate values and legitimate means. For example, whereas material and professional success are highly valued in western society, few people have the structurally induced opportunities to achieve these goals. Merton argued that people will be driven towards reducing the discrepancy, and that deviant behaviour can be seen as an attempt to restore the equilibrium.

Merton devoted much time to the construction of a classificatory scheme about different ways in which individuals can adjust to this state of anomie

Table 2.2 How people adapt to the state of anomie

Modes of adaptation	Culture goals	Institutionalized means
I. Conformity	+	+
II. Innovation	+	-
III. Ritualism	-	+
IV. Retreatism	-	-
V. Rebellion	+/-	+/-

Source: Based on Merton (1968, p. 194)

(see table 2.2). 'Innovation' occurs when people accept the ultimate goals but introduce illegitimate means to achieve them. Merton cited some forms of white-collar crime as examples of this particular phenomenon. 'Ritualism' is reserved for cases in which people have lowered their aims but in which they do accept the institutionalized ways of doing things. 'Retreatism' occurs when both goals and means are rejected, and when people retreat from involvement with society. Certain subcultures fall under that category. 'Rebellion' occurs when individuals seek to change the culturally prescribed goals of society and the legitimate means for achieving them. To complete the picture (although not a case of deviancy), Merton talked about 'conformity' when people accept both the ultimate goals and the institutionalized means.

Merton's accomplishment was to reflect critically upon and to elucidate pivotal concepts which were regularly in use at the time; for instance, the concept of function or the notion of functional equivalent. His framework was more sophisticated than that of early functionalists, and he carefully avoided some of their errors; for instance, he distanced himself successfully from the once-widespread picture of society as an organic whole with nothing but functional and indispensable parts. But Merton's frame of reference is not without weaknesses either. First, although he developed a frame of reference, which, he hoped, would avoid the errors committed by early functionalism, he ultimately failed to provide convincing explanations for people's actions. By rejecting the simple functionalism of his predecessors in favour of a more cautious approach, he unfortunately managed to throw the baby out with the bath-water. Compared to Malinowski's and Radcliffe-Brown's theories, Merton's framework has merely a descriptive and heuristic value; it might delineate and categorize social life, but that is all there is to it. Indeed, to point out existing or potential unintended effects of recurring practices, as Merton does, is, in isolation, not an explanation of those patterns.

Second, commentators have rightly indicated that some of Merton's own contributions to middle-range research can hardly be called functionalist. He does not pay much attention to the unintended outcomes of people's practices,

and certainly not in the way in which functionalists normally proceed. Most of his assertions in 'Social structure and anomie', for instance, allude to a causal, non-functionalist logic. It is, of course, not surprising that, in practice, Merton deviates from his functionalist framework. Its explanatory power is so weak that he has to resort to alternative modes of explanation in order to say anything significant at all.

Third, there are a number of imprecisions in Merton's framework. These are especially problematic given that, if there is any value to the framework, it should lie in its descriptive or heuristic qualities, and therefore analytical precision is central. One example of the lack of precision concerns his definition of manifest and latent functions. In this definition, he conflated knowing something will occur and intending it to take place. Neither latent nor manifest functions cover instances where individuals wittingly, though unintentionally, bring about particular functional effects.⁵⁸

Once a promising research programme aimed at unifying the manifold branches of the social sciences, functionalism came under severe criticism from the late 1960s onwards. At least part of the upsurge of dissident voices can be explained by the changing political climate of the time. In a period of political radicalization, students and academics became increasingly dissatisfied with the alleged ideological bias in functionalism. It is ironic that whilst many regarded the functionalist emphasis on equilibrium and stability as conservative, if not reactionary, quite a few of the 'radical' alternatives in vogue at the time employed functionalist types of reasoning.⁵⁹ Notwithstanding this, functionalism as a school became equated with justifying the existing order and was therefore to be abandoned. Furthermore many critics argued that, because of its focus on 'social statics', functionalism is inherently ahistorical. Functionalist research became associated with synchronic types of analysis in which a snapshot of society is regarded as sufficient for grasping the mechanisms of stability. Against this ahistorical bias, it was argued that a diachronic analysis is needed even for the purposes of explaining social order (see chapter 4).⁶⁰ In addition, sociologists became dissatisfied with what they saw as the functionalist neglect of agency – the ability of people to intervene in the course of events. In functionalist reasoning, people's conduct was mistakenly conceived to be the mere product of system imperatives. Relatedly, it was argued that functionalism wrongly underplayed people's knowledgeability: the fact that they know a great deal about social life and that they actually employ that knowledge in their daily interaction (see chapters 3 and 4).⁶¹

These criticisms were often justified, but they unintentionally reinforced a stereotyped picture of what functionalism stands for. First, the political implications of functionalism are not as clear-cut as some critiques have made them out to be. It is true that functionalist reasoning *can* be used to legitimize existing patterns in society. Functionalists *have* done so in the past. However,

from this does not follow that functionalism *ipso facto* justifies the status quo. Merton's writings demonstrate that it is possible to employ functionalist notions without falling victim to a conservative bias. Second, although it is true that early forms of functionalism tended to focus only on the present, this was often due to methodological considerations (for instance, the absence of reliable historical sources), not theoretical ones. Any type of functionalist reasoning necessitates some form of evolutionism, and thus a sensitivity to longer temporal spans. It is therefore not surprising that Parsons's later work dealt very much with long-term change, and that other functionalists were to follow him in this regard. Third, a similar argument applies to the alleged neglect of agency. Some functionalists, indeed, purposefully or unwittingly neglect people's active intervention in the course of events, but for others (like Parsons) agency remains a pivotal feature of their theory. But even in the case of the former, there is no need for a theory to take everything into account, and no theory *can* account for every feature. Neglecting agency is not problematic as long as the theoretical format has satisfactory explanatory power.

Neo-functionalism and Niklas Luhmann

As has been noted, from the mid-1960s onwards functionalism lost its wider appeal. Sociologists became dissatisfied with the alleged conservative bias in functionalist reasoning, and they soon became attracted to a number of alternative theoretical arguments; for instance, Norbert Elias's figuration sociology, Giddens's structuration theory and Bourdieu's generative structuralism (see chapters 1 and 4). But since the early 1980s there has been a revival of functionalist reasoning, at first mainly in Germany, and later in the United States. In Germany Niklas Luhmann's (1927-) 'functionalist structuralism' has been decisive for the re-emergence of functionalist reasoning. In the United States Jeffrey Alexander's and Paul Colomy's writings heralded the neo-functional movement. Both functionalist structuralism and neo-functionalism draw upon Parsons, but they are not uncritical inheritors of his legacy.

Whilst following the basic outlines of a Parsonian argument neo-functionalists aim at being less dogmatic than their predecessors, and they address a number of criticisms. They try to merge Parsons with other 'classics' in social theory (in particular Marx and Durkheim) and with other schools of thought (especially phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and exchange theory). Like functionalism, neo-functionalism pays attention to the interconnections between different components of a social system. But unlike most functionalist authors, neo-functionalists are particularly sensitive to the potential conflicts between the different sub-systems. Whereas some earlier

functionalists were inclined to overestimate the impact of culture onto other parts of society, neo-functionalism explicitly rejects any reductionist or mono-causal argument. Whereas some functionalists dismiss the micro-dimension of social life as irrelevant for the purposes of social theory, neo-functionalists also pay attention to the extent to which order is continually produced in our daily interactions (see chapter 3). Whereas some earlier functionalists saw social integration as given, neo-functionalism recognizes its problematic nature within modern society. Whereas former functionalist accounts of social change conceive of societal development in terms of increasing and irreversible differentiation, neo-functionalists like Colomy acknowledge the possibility of de-differentiation and uneven differentiation. The concept of de-differentiation is self-explanatory: it refers to the process by which society moves towards a less differentiated state. That is, de-differentiation occurs when several functions which were previously fulfilled by various differentiated sub-systems are now fulfilled within one system. Uneven differentiation takes place when certain sectors of society are more (or less) differentiated than others.

Niklas Luhmann has probably been the most innovative German contributor to a functionalist theory of society. He relies upon a wide variety of sources ranging from general system theory, to Parsons's structural-functionalism, Gehlen's philosophical anthropology, and phenomenology. Luhmann also relies upon analogies between the social world and other realms, hence his interest in the theory of autopoiesis and self-organizing systems. Although he is a theorist at heart, he has also provided many examples and applications of his viewpoint, ranging from legal and administrative matters to the issue of romantic love. Luhmann's impact on European sociology has been very important, whilst Anglo-Saxon sociologists seem in general to be more reluctant to adopt his ideas.

Niklas Luhmann's starting point, one could say, is the system. In his view, the workings of a system can only be fully understood if the relationship between that system and its environment is taken into account.⁶² Luhmann's main assertion is that systems in general reduce the complexity of the environment in which they are embedded. The complexity of an environment depends on the number of actual or possible events in that environment. Reduction of complexity refers to the process by which a system selects relevant events from the environment, and how it reduces the number of ways of dealing with that environment. The process of internal system differentiation is one of the mechanisms by which complexity becomes managed or filtered.⁶³ In Luhmann's abstract terminology, systems can range from, say, physiological systems to social systems.

Luhmann's interest is obviously in social systems; these are defined as organized patterns of behaviour. The term 'social system' can refer to societies at large, institutions within societies, or rule-governed forms of behaviour. Social systems are different from other systems in that the reduction of

complexity takes place through communication of meaning (*Sinn*).⁶⁴ Here, Luhmann relies heavily upon Gehlen's philosophical anthropology and in particular his notion of *Entlastung*, referring to the way in which institutionalization allows human beings to compensate for their intrinsic indeterminacy and open-endedness. In contrast with animals, the innate adaptation of humans to their environment is far less developed, and this intrinsic lack of orientation leads to the necessity of regulative principles.

In Luhmann's parlance, the main regulative device is 'double contingency', referring to the process by which in interaction individuals have to take into account the orientation of others towards them. From double contingency, Luhmann argues, it follows that social systems are autopoietic systems. These are systems which, once faced with an environment which potentially endangers their autonomy, record and interpret that environment such that it contributes to their autonomy. Through double contingency, potential threats to the autonomy of the social system are processed such that they enhance that autonomy. Luhmann takes a lot of effort to explain the autopoietic nature of social systems (and hence their self-referentiality).⁶⁵ The main thrust of his argument is that there are three dimensions to self-referential systems: the 'code' of the system, its 'structure' (or programme), and its 'process'. Codes are binary procedures through which information is processed – binary oppositions such as 'true versus false', or 'significant versus insignificant'. The structure or programme involves the central values, norms and expectations held within that system, whereas the process is the ongoing interaction. For a system to reproduce itself, the code needs to remain identical, whilst the structure or process might be altered.

Double contingency is thus a universal ordering principle, but as modernity implies increasing contingency and complexity, more sophisticated mechanisms are needed which would allow for further reduction of complexity. Luhmann provides many examples of progressive reduction of complexity in high modernity, ranging from changes in the legal system to transformations in administration. With the advent of high modernity 'self-reflexive' procedures and social differentiation become especially important for diminishing complexity. Self-reflexive procedures are those that can be applied not only to other phenomena but also to themselves. Teaching others how to teach, or carrying out scientific investigation of scientific activities – these are examples of self-reflexive procedures. Self-referential procedures imply the possibility of readjustment and therefore become essential for the continuous adaptation of a social system to a rapidly changing and increasingly unpredictable environment.⁶⁶

Modern social systems are not only self-reflexive; they are also differentiated. For instance, Luhmann observes that through time three levels of social systems become distinct from each other: the level of situational interactions,

the realm of organizations, and the societal level. But Luhmann also talks about differentiation in a less trivial fashion. In a way reminiscent of Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, Luhmann distinguishes between 'segmental' and 'non-segmental' differentiation: the former implies the splitting-up of systems into differentiated units which perform identical functions, whereas the latter involves parts which are functionally different. The non-segmental type of differentiation can be either 'hierarchical' or 'functional': the former implies a hierarchical structure and the latter does not. With respect to the ability to lessen complexity, functional differentiation is superior to hierarchical differentiation, and the latter is superior to segmental differentiation. Given that modernity is characterized by increasing complexity in the social environment, it is not surprising to find that the evolution of society follows these different types: segmental differentiation comes first, then hierarchical differentiation and finally functional differentiation. Luhmann's evolutionary view of history relies upon three central concepts: variation, reproduction and selection. Variation refers to the fact that the emergence of social systems is accidental. Their reproduction takes place, for instance through socialization, and in the long run they are selected on the basis of their ability to adjust to the environment.⁶⁷

It is obvious from the above that Luhmann is highly critical of those theorists who conceive of compartmentalization and differentiation as sources of social conflict and disorder, or who see modern depersonalization in terms of alienation or 'mass culture'. For him, this is to conceive of modernity in terms of a pre-modern sociological logic: rather than a source of disorder, various forms of differentiation are central to the creation of order in modern society; rather than alienating, impersonal relations provide new forms of freedom previously unknown to mankind. Luhmann is also critical of Parsons's assertion that common values and norms are a prerequisite for social order. With the advent of modernity, social order is accomplished without central values or widespread normative integration.

There is a tension between Luhmann's philosophical anthropology on the one hand, and his evaluation of the cultural manifestations of modernity on the other. Influenced by Gehlen and coming close to Malinowski, Luhmann's philosophical anthropology postulates that human beings have no significant inborn traits, and that they need effective institutions to counteract the lack of an internal structure. However, this position necessitates a more critical attitude towards modernity than Luhmann is willing to adopt. He tries to get around this problem by reducing modernity mainly to differentiation and related notions. But it is obvious that modernity also implies a decrease in the power of value patterns and institutions. Taking on board Gehlen's philosophical anthropology cannot be reconciled with an uncritical appraisal of contemporary society.

Further reading

A concise, but critical account of functionalism can be found in Giddens's 'Functionalism: après la lutte' (in his *Studies in Social and Political Theory*). An extended, and more sympathetic, overview of functionalist theories can be found in Abrahamson's *Functionalism*. Kuper's *Anthropologists and Anthropology* includes two excellent chapters on Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, elucidating the intellectual background at the time. Rocher's *Talcott Parsons and American Sociology* is a remarkably lucid introduction to Parsons's writings. For those who insist on reading the master himself, *The Structure of Social Action* is probably one of Parsons's more accessible texts; *The Social System* has undoubtedly been his most influential work. Sztompka's *Robert Merton: An Intellectual Profile* remains the best introduction to Merton's functionalist framework, although it is not very critical. I very much recommend Merton's seminal article 'Manifest and Latent Functions' (in the collection *Social Theory and Social Structure*). *The Differentiation of Society* is Luhmann's most accessible work in the English language.

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