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"IS 'NEOFUNCTIONALISM' REALLY FUNCTIONAL?"

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In his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Kingsley Davis (1959) proclaimed that there is little which can be considered distinctive about functional analysis. After all, he emphasized, each sociologist is concerned with the "interpretation of phenomena in terms of their interconnections with societies as going concerns" (Davis, 1959:760). Davis' view was in response to the early and mounting criticisms being leveled at functionalism, in general, and its Parsonian variant, in particular. More recently, Jeffrey Alexander (1985:7–8) has made an argument similar to Davis', although the old structural functionalism has been resurrected as "neofunctionalism." For Alexander as for Davis before him, functionalism studies the interrelationships of social phenomena within their systemic and environmental context. Moreover, Alexander echoes Davis in his assertion that the term functionalism "indicates noting so precise as a set of concepts, a method, a model, or an ideology" (Alexander, 1985:9).

We argue that both Davis and Alexander are incorrect in their respective assertions. While we share both Alexander's and Davis' beliefs that functional analysis and its greatest exponent, Talcott Parsons, have been subject to unfair criticism, there is nonetheless something very distinctive about functional sociology. It *does* dictate a logic, a method, model, and perhaps even an ideology, although this last point has been overemphasized by unreflective and unfair critics. And contrary to Davis' contention, there is nothing "mythical" about functional analysis.

One way to appreciate the distinctiveness of functionalism is to review its emergence, ascendance, decline, and apparent resurrection as neofunctionalism. In this way, we can see what became distinctive about functionalism, what alarmed its critiques, and what its current apologists—from Davis to Alexander—wish to sweep under the rug. Functionalism may indeed have a future in sociological theory, but we had best look into the past to see if this is a good thing.

THE EMERGENCE OF FUNCTIONALISM

As with his predecessors, Auguste Comte was a conservative, seeking to restore order in the chaotic aftermath of the French Revolution.[1] In light of this concern, it is little wonder that the emergence of sociology as a self conscious discipline would ask the question: what can social structures "do for" and "contribute to" the construction and maintenance of social order? This tendency to analyze and assess parts in terms of their consequences for the social whole was furthered by Comte's efforts to legitimize the new science of society. He went to great lengths to separate sociology from the speculative moral philosophy that dominated the social thought of his time. And, as he sought to emancipate sociology from moral philosophy, he began to link the new science to biology. Thus, the science of society was inexorably linked to biology, allowing Comte (1975:234) to invoke the "organismic analogy" in which "a true correspondence between Statical Analysis of the Social Organism in Sociology, and that of the Individual Organism in Biology . . ." could be confidently proclaimed. This form of analogizing marks a critical moment in sociological theorizing. It communicated a vision of the social world as a complex whole with each part contributing to its maintenance and survival. When society is seen as an organism, it is a short analytical step to asking: What does a structure "do for" society? Comte was disposed to ask such questions because of his desire to use sociology as a way of restoring social equilibrium.

It is of enormous significance, we think, that sociology was born as a discipline with this kind of intellectual orientation. For such questions are at the heart of functionalism, and they are what make functionalism distinctive. While Comte never employed the word

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[1] Comte's ideas are best presented in his six volume *Course of Positive Philosophy* written between 1830–1842. For a more condensed version of the ideas in these volumes, see: Comte (1875, 1897).

"function" nor carried his argument very far, subsequent scholars were to transform his ideas into an explicit form of functionalism—sociology's first theoretical perspective.

Herbert Spencer was the next key figure in the emergence of functionalism. Spencer wore two intellectual hats: (1) As a philosopher, he was a staunch utilitarian who will forever be remembered for the phrase, "survival of the fittest," which was later the rallying cry for Social Darwinists. (2) But Spencer was also an organicist who begrudgingly was to give Comte credit for teaching him that "the principles of organization are common to societies and animals . . . and . . . that the evolution of structures advance from the general to the special." Many contemporaries were to chide Spencer for the inconsistencies in his philosophical and sociological views—that is, society, on the one hand, consists of competitive struggles while, on the other hand, it involves functional integration and cooperation. But the critical point is that Spencer continued Comte's tendency to analogize to organicisms, making both general comparisons between social and animal organisms[2] as well as highly detailed analogies.[3] Spencer thus codified organismic analogizing in the social sciences, making it a highly respectable form of analysis. But his most important contribution resides in the

distinction between structure and function (Spencer, 1976:1–2):

> There can be no true conception of a structure without a true conception of its function. To understand how an organization originated and developed, it is requisite to understand the *need* subserved at the outset and afterwards.

This quote marks the first time in sociological thought that the concept of "functional needs" is used as an explanatory device for understanding why a structure emerges and why it persists within a systemic whole. Such an emphasis is unique to functionalism, and consequently, Spencer is the explicit founder of functionalism in the social sciences.

Spencer's star was to fade by the latter part of the 19th century, at just the time when another key figure, Émile Durkheim, was gaining prominence in France. Durkheim was one of Spencer's harshest critics, since the libertarian thrust of Spencer's philosophy conflicted with the long tradition of French collectivism. But Durkheim borrowed extensively from Spencer's sociology and organicism, often without proper citation. In so doing, he was to couple Spencer's insights with Comte's advocacy for a "science of society" and extend the functional approach into the 20th century.

Much like Comte before him, Durkheim viewed the science of society as providing insights into how social integration and order could be created. Yet, Durkheim recognized that functional analysis must be separated from causal analysis, since the reasons for a structure's existence are not typically the social needs that it functions to meet (Durkheim, 1895:90). For Durkheim, therefore, sociological analysis must ask two questions: What are the antecedent causes of a structure? And, what need of the larger social system does it meet? To Durkheim, an answer to *both* questions was essential to scientific *explanation* (Durkheim, 1895:96):

> When, then, the explanation of a social phenomenon is undertaken, we must seek separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills. We use the word "function" in preference to "end" or "purpose," precisely because social phenomena do not generally exist for the useful results they produce.

Durkheim had difficulty maintaining this distinction, for he often hinted that needs for integration cause such structures as the

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[2] For example, Spencer noted that both societies and organisms can (1) grow and develop, (2) increase in complexity and differentiation with increases in size, (3) differentiate functions, (4) be composed of "living" subsystems, and (5) "live" for a while after their "death" (Turner, 1974:16–17).

[3] For example, Spencer (1876:534) once analogized along the following lines:

> The general law as discovered by Ludwig and Loven, is that when by the nerves of sensation there is sent inwards that impression which accompanies the activity of a part, there is reflected back to the part, along its vaso-motor nerves, an influence by which its minute arteries are suddenly dilated; and at the same time, through the vaso-motor nerves going to all inactive parts, there is sent an influence which slightly constricts the arteries supplying them: thus diminishing the flow of blood where it is not wanted, that the flow may be increased where it is wanted. In the social organism, or rather in such a developed organism as our own in modern times, this kind of regulation is effected by the system of banks and associated financial bodies which lend out capital. When a local industry, called into unusual activity by increased consumption of its products, makes demands first of all on local banks, these, in response to the impressions caused by the rising activity conspicuous around them open more freely. . . .

division of labor and religious ritual to emerge and meet these needs. But far more important than Durkheim's unintended lapses is the fact that those who were to carry the banner of functionalism to the mid-point of this century deliberately obliterated his carefully drawn distinction between cause and function. The result, as we will examine shortly, was for functional analysis to fall prey to a host of logical problems which even neofunctionalism cannot obviate.

THE PRESERVATION OF FUNCTIONALISM

If we examine the intellectual climate of the early 20th century in America, there was little reason for functionalism to prosper in sociology, especially in America. The first generation of American theorists—Ward, Sumner, and Keller, for example—were heavily influenced by Spencer's evolutionary theory, but remained unresponsive to either Spencer's or Durkheim's functionalism. Indeed, they knew very little about Durkheimian sociology. And, as this early generation of theorists was replaced by the Chicago School and its attendant concern for first hand research, Spencer was forgotten and Durkheim had still not burst on the theoretical scene in America. Even Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), which finally brought Durkheim to the forefront of the sociological imagination, does not deal with Durkheim's functionalism and, of course, the founder of functionalism is dismissed with the book's opening query: "Who now reads Spencer?"

Thus, in light of the ignorance of Durkheim and the rejection of Spencer, how was functionalism preserved? Here, we believe, is yet another critical moment in the history of functionalism, but a moment that belongs to anthropology and the efforts of two scholars, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. For these two thinkers, Durkheim's functionalism represented a solution to certain intellectual problems in anthropology and it is their solution to these problems that spawned modern sociological functionalism.

We can best recognize these problems by visualizing the intellectual milieu of early 20th century anthropology. Travelers, missionaries, explorers, and amateur anthropologists had been accumulating data on traditional peoples, with three competing orientations seeking to order and interpret these accumu-

lating data: (1) diffusionism in which cultural traits are seen as moving out from certain "cultural centers"; (2) evolutionism in which humankind is viewed as progressing on one evolutionary path culminating, coincidently, in Western European civilization and in which "primitive" cultures are conceptualized as existing at different states of evolutionary development; and (3) historical reconstruction in which traits are not viewed as the result of diffusion or evolutionary development, but rather, as the result of unique historical events operating to produce a given culture.[4]

As Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and their students began to grapple with the problems of conducting ethnographies and of interpreting data on traditional peoples, the inadequacies of these dominant approaches became all too clear.[5] Traditional societies do not keep written historical records and their verbal accounts are idealized and sketchy. Traditional peoples, as soon became evident to serious ethnographers, are not at a lower stage on an evolutionary line culminating in Western civilization; and traditional populations are often isolated from hypothesized "cultural centers," a fact which became all too obvious to ethnographers in the far reaches of the globe.

How, then, were ethnographers like Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski to interpret their data? A critical period appears to have been between 1912 and 1913, when Durkheim (1912), Malinowski (1913), Radcliffe-Brown (1913), and Freud (1913) all published analyses of the Arunta aborigines as described in Spencer and Gillian's (1899) well known travel log. Indeed, Malinowski (1913) was so impressed with Durkheim's (1912) *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* that, at the last moment before publication, he incorporated some of its ideas in his *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines*. While both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown had read Durkheim's (1895) methodological statements on functional explanation, it was only when functional analysis was actually applied by Durkheim to "ethnographic data" of interest to anthropologists that the seeds of

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[4] For a discussion of these schools of thought, see Turner and Maryanski (1978).

[5] Malinowski (1922) and Radcliffe-Brown (1922), it should be emphasized, were two of the first systematic ethnographers in anthropology.

their subsequent conversion to functionalism were planted. Curiously, Spencer, who reported and catalogued literally volumes of far superior ethnographic data within a functional framework, was forgotten or ignored by the anthropologists of this era; and thus, as functionalism entered the 20th century, it was Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown who were to carry it forward, reformulating Durkheim's ideas to their specific projects.

Radcliffe-Brown's[6] conception of function is virtually the same as Durkheim's: a structure is to be assessed in terms of its consequences for meeting the "necessary conditions of existence" in a system, of which there are two (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952): (1) The need for social systems to evidence "consistency" of structure whereby rights and duties over persons and possessions are specified; and (2) the need for social systems to reveal "continuity" in which rights and duties between persons are specified. In a vein similar to Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown visualized these two conditions as the minimal necessary to avoid conflict and to assure system integration.

Radcliffe-Brown and his followers believed that by understanding how a structure functioned to meet these two "necessary conditions," it would be possible to discover explanatory "laws" about human social systems. In this effort to generate explanatory laws, however, Radcliffe-Brown made an important departure from Durkheim: He abandoned the search for historical causes — thereby disregarding Durkheim's insistence on separate causal and functional analysis. Instead, he suggested that historians are to seek antecedent causes, while sociologists must attempt to find the "sociological origins" of social structures. Through some rather fancy conceptual footwork, the "sociological origins" turn out to be the discovery of the function of a structure (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952:43):

Any social system, to survive, must conform to certain conditions. If we can define adequately one of these universal conditions, i.e. one to which all human societies must conform, we have a sociological law. Thereupon if it can be shown that a particular institution in a particular

society conforms to the law, i.e. to the necessary condition, we may speak of this as the 'sociological' origin of the institution. Thus an institution may be said to have its general . . . sociological origin and its particular . . . historical origin. The first is for the sociologist or social anthropologist to discover . . . The second is for the historian . . .

For Radcliffe-Brown, then, notions of "needs" or "necessary conditions of existence" now constitute concepts that will be incorporated into theoretical *explanations* of why structures emerge and persist. 20th century functionalism was increasingly to view system "needs" as somehow critical for *explanatory* purposes, but without the benefit of Durkheim's carefully drawn (but rarely practiced) distinction between cause and function.

Malinowski was to depart significantly from Radcliffe-Brown's emphasis on the concept of "function" as an explanatory tool and to advocate a functional *method* for collecting and arranging data (Malinowski, 1944). Malinowski began to view the social world as comprised of system levels—the biological, psychological, social, and symbolic—and to advocate inquiry into the properties of each level as they affect the social and symbolic activities of humans. In this emphasis, he was to anticipate by twenty years Parsons' parallel emphasis on system levels and integration among them. Malinowski was also to advocate the assessment of the functional needs of each system level, arguing that each system level has needs which must be met if it is to remain viable.

Malinowski's scheme has been subject to some misinterpretation, primarily because he was a figure of great controversy.[7] Yet, misinterpretations aside, his orientation can be viewed as stressing several points. First, humans must first satisfy their biological or "basic needs," but to satisfy these they must organize collectively. Secondly, as they organize, new "derived needs" are created and must be met if patterns of collective organization are to remain viable. Malinowski (1944)[8] then provided a list of "basic needs,"

[6] Since Radcliffe-Brown's work on kinship terminology was respected and since he was highly influential within the professional discipline of anthropology, his functionalism was to attract many followers.

[7] Malinowski is much like Parsons in the sense that unthinking critics have seriously distorted his thinking.

[8] Malinowski in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s had advocated this vision of reality. We have merely cited one work—his last—because all of his ideas are brought together in this volume. For a full list of

but his conceptualization of the two types of "derived needs" is far more crucial to subsequent functional analysis. One type of derived need he termed "instrumental," or those conditions necessary for (1) education and socialization, (2) social control, (3) economic adaptation, and (4) political authority. (We should note how this catalogue anticipates Parsons' later conceptualization of his famous four functional requisites.) The other type of "derived need" is what Malinowski termed "integrative," or those conditions necessary for (1) the transmission of knowledge (technology), (2) the creation of a sense of control over destiny (magic and religion), and (3) the maintenance of a sense of communal rhythm (art, rules of games, ceremonial rules).

Malinowski's scheme was designed to facilitate the comparative analysis of ethnographic data. His cataloguing of functional needs at different system levels was only a part of a much more comprehensive methodological strategy. Because social institutions operate to meet basic and derived needs, Malinowski felt that by specifying the common elements of all institutions, the comparisons of diverse cultures in terms of a common analytical yardstick would be possible. By displaying data in comparable categories which are connected to fundamental survival requisites, sociological laws about human organization could be induced (Malinowski, 1941:198). Thus, for Malinowski functional needs were only one element of social institutions, as can be seen by his listing of elements common to all institutions: (a) personnel, (b) charter, (c) norms, (d) material apparatus, (e) division of activities, and (f) function. Thus, by comparing social patterns of different cultures with respect to elements (a) through (f), Malinowski felt that data could be arrayed in ways that would facilitate generalization.

Because Malinowski's scheme is often misrepresented, he has been used as a "straw man" by subsequent sociological functionalists, such as Robert Merton (1949:25–37) who should know better. Yet, Malinowski extended Durkheim's and Radcliffe-Brown's limited functional orientation into directions that were to be adopted by the first sociological functionalists of the 1940s and early

references on Malinowski's scheme, see: Turner and Maryanski (1978).

1950s. This fact is rarely acknowledged, but there can be little doubt that Malinowski's work shaped the course of sociological functionalism. Malinowski's ideas thus represent, we feel, the critical link between earlier functionalisms and its more modern variants. His legacy can best be summarized as follows (Turner and Maryanski, 1978): (1) Social reality exists at different levels, minimally at the biological, psychological, social, and cultural (symbolic). (2) The properties of these levels must be analyzed by separate sciences, but the interconnectedness of levels forces sociologists to examine how biological, psychological, and cultural needs impinge upon social structural arrangements. (3) Systems can be analyzed in terms of needs and it is appropriate to investigate the relation of system parts to different needs or requisites. (4) At the social system level, the needs for economic adaptation, political control, legal and moral integration, and socialization are important in understanding the place and operation of institutions in social systems.

THE ASCENDANCE OF FUNCTIONALISM IN SOCIOLOGY

In the late 1930s, Robert K. Merton's arrival at Harvard as a graduate student and part time instructor marks the beginning of modern sociological functionalism.[9] While Talcott Parsons, then a young instructor, had studied briefly for one year with Malinowski in the early 1920s, it was Merton who began to introduce Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski to a sociological audience.[10] Much of this introduction was critical, as was to become evident with Merton's (1949) classic article, "Manifest and Latent Functions." Yet, the influence was decisive, for it was during the late 1940s and 1950s that functionalism became the dominant theoretical perspective in American sociology.

Functionalism took hold in sociology not only because of the strategic location of Merton and Parsons in the academic world, but also because American sociology lacked the conceptual capacity to examine total

[9] Turner is grateful to Wilbert E. Moore who was kind enough to tell him about the intellectual climate at Harvard in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

[10] Parsons had first encountered Malinowski at the London School of Economics in his first year of graduate study.

social systems. The perspectives of the Chicago School were clearly inadequate for explaining total societies, or even large social systems. And, the evolutionary analysis of Spencer and his early American followers, such as Ward, Sumner, and Keller, had been discredited at the same time that anthropological evolutionary theory was also being discarded. Thus, functionalism held the promise of filling a theoretical vacuum and providing sociology with a way to "explain" both macrostructural and microstructural processes. In a very real sense, this adoption in the 1940s of a perspective that asks what system parts "do for" social wholes is not dissimilar to Comte's use of the organismic analogy a hundred years earlier as a means for legitimatizing the new "science of society."

The emphasis in these early sociological functionalisms was on "functional requisites" as a way to explain social processes. For example, the first clearly functional explanation of the modern era, the famous "Davis-Moore hypothesis" (1945), relied heavily on the concept of "functional importance" as an explanation of stratification processes. Merton's more tempered statement (except for his criticism of Malinowski) in "Manifest and Latent Functions" (1949) also stressed functional requisites, although the emphasis was on empirically established requisites for each particular system. But, a more analytical thrust soon came to dominate. In this analytical approach, universal system requisites were postulated, as is clearly evident in David Aberle's, et. al. (1950), effort to specify the functional requisites of society, in Kingsley Davis' *Human Society* (1948), and in Marion J. Levy's *The Structure of Society* (1952).

In these works, Malinowski's use of the concept of function as a heuristic device or methodological tool for the comparison of cross-cultural data is replaced by Radcliffe-Brown's emphasis on function as an *explanatory principle*. This shift from descriptive to explanatory logic was, in turn, to encourage the development of abstract theory of social system *in general*. Indeed, except for Merton's (1949) advocacy, the concern for specific empirical systems was soon replaced by an attempt to understand "analytical" systems by reference to the functional requisites met by their various subsystems.

Talcott Parsons' action theory, especially as it developed in the 1950s, represents the

culmination of this analytical approach.[11] Borrowing from Malinowski, if only subconsciously, the social universe is divided into four system levels in terms of their importance for meeting four universal functional requisites and much like Radcliffe-Brown, Parsons began to visualize these functional categories as offering an explanatory theory.

THE CRITIQUE AND DECLINE OF FUNCTIONALISM IN SOCIOLOGY

In the 1950s and 1960s, as functionalism came to dominate sociological inquiry, a series of logical and substantive criticisms were increasingly leveled at Parsons' action theory. The substantive criticisms concerned the image of the social world connoted by the functional orientation, while the logical criticisms questioned the legitimacy of functional explanations. Until the emergence of neofunctionalism, this two-pronged attack led to the decline of explicitly functional analysis and, for a time, to the virtual disappearance of those who would proclaim themselves to be "functionalists."

These criticisms are well known, but since they represent a crucial turning point in functionalism's (and sociological theory's) history, we should briefly review them. Moreover, since neofunctionalism is often viewed as having avoided and/or incorporated these criticisms, we need to review them in order to assess the claims of neofunctionalists.

Substantive Criticisms

Through all the acrimony of the 1960s, three general lines of substantive criticism were leveled against functionalism (Turner, 1974, 1986; Turner and Maryanski, 1978):[12] (1) Functionalism is ahistorical; (2) functionalism is conservative and supports the status quo; and (3), functionalism cannot adequately account for social change.

(1) *The Question of History*. Durkheim's functionalism was historical in that it sought "antecedent causes" of present events, but as functionalism was adopted by anthropolo-

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[11] The key works in this development are: Parsons (1951), Parsons, Bales, and Shils (1953), Parsons and Smelser (1956).

[12] For a list of relevant criticisms, see: Turner and Maryanski (1978: chapter 6).

gists, it became decidedly ahistorical. Subsequent sociological functionalisms did not evidence much concern with history. Yet, Parsons' (1966, 1971) later evolutionary events and current neofunctionalists' projects are decidedly historical. The criticism is, therefore, without much merit.

(2) *The Question of Conservatism*. There can be little doubt that since its origins functionalism has been concerned with order, stability, and integration. Comte and Durkheim worked to create a "healthy" and "integrated" society; Radcliffe-Brown consistently assessed structures in terms of their "integrative" functions; and notions of "survival," "equilibrium," "homeostasis," and "adaptive upgrading" were prominent in Parsonian functionalism. Yet, neofunctionalists argue that this criticism can be met by incorporating the analysis of conflict, protest, dissent, and other potentially disintegrative and disequilibrating processes. And we sense that they are correct, since there is no logical barrier to the analysis of disintegrative processes by functionalism.

(3) *The Question of Change*. Critics often argued that functionalists' concern with order and equilibrium precluded the analysis of change, especially revolutionary social change. Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, and Parsons certainly emphasized evolutionary change[13]; and Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski studied small systems where revolution and conflict are unlikely. Yet, neofunctionalists are correct in their assertion that there is no reason why specific structures cannot be analyzed with respect to their potential (or actual) effects on conflict and change in social systems.

In sum, then, we would agree with the neofunctionalists that there is little merit to the substantive criticisms leveled against functionalism. Critics have assumed that, because early functionalists chose to emphasize some topics and underemphasize others, there is something inherent in the logic of functional analysis that precludes the analysis of history, disorder, and change. Such is clearly not the case, as the works of such contemporary scholars as Smelser, Eisen-

stadt, Alexander, Prager, Barber, Gould, Colomy, and others clearly document.

Logical Criticism[14]

We can now turn to the logical criticisms leveled against functionalism, of which there were two: (1) Functional explanations are tautologous; and (2), functional explanations are illegitimate teleologies.

The Question of Teleology. An illegitimate teleology can be said to exist when end or goal states are presumed to cause the events leading to their realization, without being able to document the specific causal processes by which this is so. The concept of requisites is the most vulnerable on this score, for many functional explanations appear to argue that the "need for" meeting some requisite brings about the very structures that met this need. Such explanations are likely, though not necessarily, to be illegitimate teleologies.

Durkheim sought to avoid this problem with his distinction between causal and functional explanation, but Radcliffe-Brown plunged back into the problem by abandoning this distinction. Subsequent functionalists have, to varying degrees, often slipped into this logical trap and have appeared to argue that a satisfactory explanation of why a particular structure should exist is rendered by the discovery of its function for the social whole. In order to make such explanations legitimate, it is usually necessary to invoke a "selection" process in which the need or requisites creates selection pressures for a particular structure to emerge. In such an argument, it is not assumed that the relevant structures will inevitably emerge, only that the environment is receptive to their creation, whether by design, planning, chance, trial and error, or luck. For example, it might be argued that a state-government became more centralized and authoritarian to deal with public unrest and protest (translation: the need for integration created selection pressures for social control which, in this case, emerged through centralization of power). Sociologists frequently make such selection arguments, although they are often implicit and the needs or requisites that create these pressures are unacknowledged.

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[13] I should emphasize, however, that Parsons has insightfully analyzed revolution (Parsons, 1951) and Merton has discussed rebellion and revolution (1949). Critics seem to ignore the fact that most "functionalists" have analyzed revolutionary and conflict-induced change.

[14] For a more detailed discussion of these and for lists of relevant reverences, see Turner and Maryanski (1978: chapter 6).

The problem with these kinds of explanations, however, is that unless one can document the historical processes—usually some combination of chance, intent, design, and luck—by which a particular requisite-failing situation led to the requisite-fulfilling end state, the explanation will be an illegitimate teleology. Durkheim recognized this necessity in his distinction between causal and functional analysis, but Radcliffe-Brown submerged it; and most Parsonian theory is insensitive to the problem, because it assumes that explanation has occurred when the functional requisite of a structure has been determined.

Thus, while this logical problem of illegitimate teleology can be avoided,[15] it surfaces so frequently in functional analysis as to render suspect this perspective as an *explanatory* tool. Perhaps it is for this reason that neofunctionalists avoid the issue of system needs, with a few noticeable exceptions (e.g., Münch, 1982, although Münch obviates the problem of illegitimate teleology by using Parsons' A, G, I, L framework to generate abstract propositions, with the predictive capacity of the propositions, rather than the location of empirical events in a functional grid, constituting the explanation). But among neofunctionalists, Münch is virtually alone in translating problematic functional explanations into deductive-nomothetic ones. Most neofunctionalists tip-toe around questions of needs; and in so doing, they abandon what is distinctive about functional analysis. Thus, much neofunctionalism is not functional at all, since needs and requisites do not appear as part of the theoretical explanation of events. And, to the extent that they do appear, they generally have not obviated this problem of illegitimate teleology.

The Question of Tautology. Many functional explanations boil down to statements of the following form: A structure is a part of a surviving systemic whole; it therefore must be meeting some crucial need or requisite of this whole; and the structure exists and persists because the system's needs are being met. Again, while the problem of tautology can be avoided, through invocation of a selection argument or translation of functional statements to propositions connecting variables, it occurs so frequently in functional explana-

tions employing the concept of requisites or needs that questions about functionalism as a useful *explanatory* strategy are appropriate. Neofunctionalists avoid the problem to the extent that they expunge notions of needs and requisites which, ironically, no longer makes them functionalists. Or, as is often the case, neofunctionalists slip in and out of functional arguments. For example, Robert Wuthnow's (1987) recent book on cultural analysis makes many statements along the lines that the function of ritual or ideology is to dramatize and stabilize social relations (translation: the need for integration is why human societies have rituals), without offering any clues about the selection processes involved. Alongside these purely functional statements, however, are propositional ones (if *x*, then *y*; or *y* is a function of *x*) which are not functional (except in the mathematical sense). Thus, much neofunctionalism is a mixture of functional and nonfunctional statements. Perhaps quasi-functional is a better term than neofunctional.

These logical difficulties are far more severe than the imputed substantive problems. They raise questions as to whether or not functionalism is capable of consistently generating non-problematic theoretical explanations. Since functionalism has, since its inception, been considered a useful explanatory tool, this is a serious charge which neofunctionalists have tended to ignore and avoid in favor of addressing the substantive criticisms leveled against Parsonian functionalism.

THE RESURRECTION OF FUNCTIONALISM BY NEOFUNCTIONALISTS

In Alexander's (1985:7-17) short manifesto for neofunctionalism, he admits that "although not providing a model in an explanatory sense, functionalism does provide a picture of the interrelation of social parts" (p. 9). Here again, we have the Kingsley Davis ploy: deny what made functionalism unique. That is, the defining quality of sociological functionalism is a model of explanation in terms of need states of systemic wholes. Alexander then goes on to list the other general features of neofunctionalism as a concern with action as well as structure; a recognition of the dialectic among control, integration, and deviance; a reformulation of

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[15] See Stinchcombe (1968) and Turner and Maryanski (1978), for more extended discussion and illustrations.

equilibrium in Keynes' sense of systemic strains; a maintenance of the distinctions among, as well as a description of the strains between, personality, culture, and social structure; and an emphasis on differentiation as a major mode of change.

What is distinctly functional about these? In fact, if we can believe them, neofunctionalists have not resurrected functionalism, but killed it off. Only to the extent that the above list of activities is carried out with a view to explaining events in terms of their consequences for meeting need states in system wholes is their analysis functional. Most neofunctionalists, with some notable exception, have avoided just this point of emphasis.

What, then, is neofunctionalism? In actual practice, notions of functional needs often slip back into analysis, and so neofunctionalists are much like old-functionalists, except they are more attuned to the substantive criticisms of Parsonian action theory. For example, Niklas Luhmann's (1982) systems theory is, in fact, clearly functional because it analyzes system processes in terms of an implicit functional requisite: systems' need to reduce environmental complexity. That is, Luhmann analyzes structures (law, the state, organizations, etc.) and cultural codes in terms of their function for reducing environmental complexity. This basic need is, in actuality, several related needs to reduce complexity with respect to (1) perceptions of time, (2) organization of space, and (3) use of symbols. At the most general level, three types of systems meet these requisites—interaction systems, organization systems, and societal systems; and while Luhmann never specifies the process, there is an implicit selection argument: requisites to reduce complexity over the infinite reaches of time (both the future and past), over the manifold ways for ordering social relations, and over the infinite number of arbitrary signs as well as their combination and permutation into an unlimited number of symbol systems forces (read: exerts selection pressures on) actors to reduce this complexity. But this selection argument is typically left implicit, making much of Luhmann's scheme an illegitimate teleology, or tautology, at least to the extent that it is assumed to explain anything. Other modern-day neofunctionalists, such as Richard Münch (1982), are even more in the mainstream of old functionalism, extending and elaborating upon Parsons' four

requisite model, but as we mentioned above, Münch often moves out of the functional mode of analysis and into a more nomothetic, deductive mode. For example, in one article (Münch, n.d.), he discusses a variety of theories within the Parsonian A, G, I, L framework, but this is not the end-point of his analysis. Instead, he develops specific proposition or laws on economic achievement, political accumulation, associational inertia, and the like. Moreover, he employs the laws, not the A, G, I, L framework, for comparing the structure of the United States, France, Britain, and Germany. Thus, for Münch, functionalism is a preliminary procedure for formulating testable propositions, and it is in this way that he avoids the logical problems associated with functional explanations. In a sense, Münch increasingly becomes a nonfunctionalist by the time he develops explanatory principles. In addition, many prominent scholars identified with functionalism—including Bernard Barber, Neil J. Smelser, and S.N. Eisenstadt, to name but a few—appear less prone in recent years to begin analysis with assumptions of need-states and requisites, and so, they too do not fall into the logical traps evident in much functional analysis.

Thus, in a sense, Alexander is correct in his portrayal of the current scene as one where "nothing so precise as a set of concepts, a method, a model, or an ideology" characterizes these self-proclaimed neofunctionalists. What, then, unifies these scholars? Our answer is close to Alexander's, but it is not functionalism that unite them. Rather, it is concern with theory that conceptualizes social phenomena in terms of: (1) analytical levels (particularly, the cultural, structural, and individual); (2) systems and subsystems as well as their interchanges; (3) normative processes (in an era where many are trying to rid sociology of this central concept); (4) differentiation dynamics (from conflict between groups through social movements to long term historical changes); and (5) differentiated substructures (particularly the interrelations among institutional subsystems).

Hence, much of the substance of the Parsonian action scheme is retained, but the propensity to explain social phenomena in terms of need states and requisites is attenuated, except perhaps in the work of Luhmann and in occasional lapses in others, such as Wuthnow (1987). In fact, a careful

review of much neofunctionalist work reveals that it is far more descriptive than explanatory which, given the problems of earlier functionalism, is probably just as well. But is there something lost in abandoning the notion of needs and requisites? Can they be used in some creative manner in sociological analysis?

SHOULD WE ABANDON NOTIONS OF 'NEEDS' AND 'REQUISITES'?

As tools for explanations, notions of needs should probably be dropped, as the neofunctionalists have quietly done. The reason for this conclusion is that while "selection arguments" can be invoked to "save" many functional statements, such is not always the case and, even when it is, selection arguments will often appear too historical (as opposed to deductive) for many theorists. Our sense is that, if an approach causes so many potential problems in generating explanations, why stick with it?

Yet, though functionalism may not provide adequate theoretical explanations, it can perhaps still be a useful *method* for collecting and organizing data on empirical systems. This conclusion may seem surprising, since the work of such functionalists as Talcott Parsons has been considered obstructive to empirical inquiry. Yet, the fact that Parsons's own examinations of empirical events, from the American school classroom to the American kinship system, are regarded by functionalists and nonfunctionalists alike as insightful should alert us to the potential of functional analysis as a way to describe empirical events. Moreover, Spencer's and Malinowski's effective use of system needs as a device for arraying data should also alert us to potential along these lines. And, to further buttress this conclusion, much of the work by supposed neofunctionalists—i.e., Eisenstadt, Smelser, Alexander, etc.—is insightfully descriptive, making one suspect that hidden notions of requisites are guiding descriptions of historical and current events.

Thus, before "throwing the methodological baby out with the explanatory bathwater," we should pause and consider functionalism as method, not theory. Like Spencer before him, Malinowski recognized that social anthropology must develop a common set of categories if it is to compare diverse cultures. While sociologists have tended to rely on Max

Weber's ideal type method or on elaborate correlational analyses to compare different social systems, the anthropologists, Walter Goldschmidt (1966), once advocated an alternative approach which is highly compatible with Spencer's advocacy in his *Descriptive Sociology* (1873–1934) and later Murdock's (1936) effort to develop the Human Relation Area Files.

Like Spencer, Murdock, and Malinowski (and Weber in his advocacy of "ideal types"), Goldschmidt recognizes that descriptions of diverse social systems require a common yardstick for comparison. He has recommended that functional requisites can best provide this comparative yardstick. For example, a list of basic problems that social systems confront can provide a common frame of reference for comparing diverse systems. Thus, by providing detailed lists of necessary functions, the diversity of ways that system have become structured with respect to these problems can be recorded. For example, Goldschmidt provides a list of requisites that would allow for comparisons of different societies with respect to certain critical activities. (1) Delineation of rights to sexual access, including the public presentation of those rights and sanctions against breach. (2) Provision for the nurture of infants and care of pregnant and lactating mothers including the definition of rights and obligation. . . . (3) Provision of a defined social status and social identity for the child. (4) Provision of education and indoctrination of the child. . . . (5) Provision of an identification object for both parents through which they may project themselves into the future through sociologically established descendants. By comparing societies with respect to these other lists of requisites, problems over definitions of structures are obviated and a common analytical yardstick for comparison is provided. Much as Spencer (1873–1934) sought to do in his *Descriptive Sociology*, such data will be presented in comparable categories and will thus be more amenable to interpretation by nonfunctional theorizing.

The list of functional requisites will, of course, represent *assumptions* about what is crucial and important for describing social systems. But this has always been the appeal of functionalism: It has addressed the question of what is essential for the survival of the social whole. And it is always an assumption in description: scholars describe what they

think is most important, but this is often done idiosyncratically. Would it not be better to have common categories that would allow data to be arrayed for comparative purposes? Categories based upon notions of requisites are not a very good way to begin a theoretical explanation, but we argue that it is a reasonable way to begin a description of a social system. For without such assumptions, it will be difficult to discern important processes and to compare diversely structured systems.

It can be questioned, however, as to whether or not it is feasible to separate a requisite-inspired methodology from theoretical explanations. If one describes empirical processes in terms of requisites, will not explanations incorporate, at least implicitly, these needs or requisites? Such need not be the case, we believe, because descriptions do not have to be conducted in a functional manner. For example, if one assumes that "adaptation," to take one of Parsons' and Münch's favorite requisites, as our descriptive category, we become alerted to (1) how a given empirical situation secures resources, (2) converts these resources into usable commodities, and (3) distributes them. Description of events with respect to these three processes does not, in our view, force one into a functional mode of explanation. There are many nonfunctional theories that could be used to explain regularities in these data. And, if many different situations were described in terms of how adaptation occurs, a set of reasonably comparable data with respect to securing resources, converting them, and distributing them would be generated.

Another question could be raised here: Of what use would piles of data arrayed in terms of some scheme of functional requisites be to researchers and theorists? Our sense is that too much historical and comparative work is ad hoc. Investigators gather their own data, in their own way, and for their own purposes, with the result that their analyses and conclusions are difficult to assess or compare to those of others working with yet another ad hoc data set. Spencer and Murdock had the right idea in their efforts to catalogue data in ways that would make them comparable and less idiosyncratic; and while we have forgotten this simple methodological insight, it is what a successful science depends upon. To test alternative hypotheses, or to assess one in varying contexts, we need some degree of compatibility in the data. If we collect new data, or analyze old data, with a brand new methodology each and very time we test a theory, it becomes difficult to cumulate knowledge, since the data are about somewhat different things. Thus, if sociologists could agree (of course, we know how naive this is) upon a limited number of requisites—and A, G, I, L, as these are defined by Parson would not be bad set—and if they could consent to array data with respect to these, the test of nonfunctional theories would be greatly facilitated, especially those that require comparative data sets.

In fact, this is just what Spencer (1873–1934) in his *Descriptive Sociology* and Murdock in his *HRAF* tried to do; and Malinowski's and Goldschmidt's similar efforts represent a further appeal to this kind of methodology. Functionalism can help implement this methodology, but alas, neofunctionalists seem unaware, at least explicitly, of this potential. One consequence, we believe, is that sociology, and anthropology as well, seem more and more relativistic and less interested in theory testing.

CONCLUSION

What, then, can we conclude about neofunctionalism. First, it downplays what is distinctly functional, and instead, emphasizes culture, system levels, and problems of differentiation and integration. Second, it does not seem to recognize explicitly that there is a difference between functional methods and explanations. Explanations in terms of needs and requisites are almost always going to be problematic; and so, the "neofunctionalists," who are really nonfunctionalists, are perhaps wise to downplay notions of requisites. But since so much of neofunctionalism is macro and comparative, it is important, we argue, that a reassessment of functionalist-inspired methodology be undertaken. Sociology desperately needs a way to record, catalogue, and array comparative data; notions of requisites might serve this truly "neo" function in sociology.

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