Accessible collections of essays and extracts from Simmel in English are *Simmel on Culture*, ed. Mike Featherstone and David Frisby (Sage, 1997), *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations*, ed. Kurt Wolff and Reinhard Bendix (Free Press, 1955), and *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago University Press, 1971). It is worth beginning with Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *Simmel on Culture*. In Simmel's 1908 *Soziologie* is available the most interesting chapters is the last, titled 'The Style of Life'. Simmel's 1908 *Soziologie*, titled 'How Is Society Possible?'. Also in abridged form in English as *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Free Press, 1950). Also important is Simmel's essay at the beginning of the 1908 *Soziologie*, titled 'How Is Society Possible?', available in English in *Georg Simmel, 1858–1918*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Ohio State University Press, 1959).

For Simmel's writings on women, see Chapter 11 of this book, p. 236, as well as *Georg Simmel on Women, Sexuality and Love*, ed. Guy Oakes (Yale University Press, 1984).

Some good secondary studies of Simmel are David Frisby's short *Georg Simmel* (Routledge, rev. edn 2002) and longer *Sociological Impressionism: A Reappraisal of Georg Simmel's Social Theory* (Routledge, 1981) and his *Fragments of Modernity* (Polity Press, 1985). Also good are Gianfranco Poggi's *Money and the Modern Mind* (University of California Press, 1993), Donald Levine's *Simmel and Parsons* (Arno Press, 1980), and Lewis Coser's *Georg Simmel* (Prentice-Hall, 1965). On Simmel on art, see 'Georg Simmel: Money, Style and Sociability', in Austin Harrington's *Art and Social Theory: Sociological Arguments in Aesthetics* (Polity Press, 2004), 150–4.

WEBSITES

Verstehen: Max Weber's Homepage at www.faculty.rsu.edu–felwell/Theorists/Weber/Whome.htm Provides a good resource at a basic level, including summaries of concepts such as bureaucracy and rationalization.

SocioSite on Max Weber at www2.fmg.uva.nl/sociosite/topics/weber.html Contains links to summaries of Weber's key texts.

Max Weber Studies at www.maxweberstudies.org Displays the site of a journal devoted to new translations of Weber texts and the reception of Weber's work in different language communities.

Georg Simmel On-line at http://socio.ch/sim/index_sim.htm Includes a biography with links to works in translation.

Georg Simmel Page at www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/undergraduate/introsoc/simmel.html Presents links to Simmel's work, taken from the Dead Sociologists' Society.

4

Functionalism and its Critics

John Holmwood

TOPICS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER

This chapter discusses the legacy of *functionalism in modern social theory. Functionalist theorists argue that society should be understood as a system of interdependent parts. They believe that there are specific requirements—functional prerequisites—that must be met in all social systems and that these can provide the basis for the comparative analysis of social institutions. Functionalism came to prominence in North American sociology in the 1950s. This was a period of affluence, consolidation, and growth in Western capitalism. At the time, several commentators—including notably Daniel *Bell—believed that the prosperous post-war years marked an 'end of ideology' (Bell 1962). By this they meant that the once defining conflict of nineteenth-century capitalism—between a bourgeois ideology of radical 'individualism' and a socialist ideology of 'collectivism'—had lost its relevance. The North American functionalist theorists affirmed this view of the obsolescence of

ideological struggles between classes and collective social movements. They were frequently liberal in their political outlook, and the ideas of Marxism, which continued to exert a significant impact on sociology in Europe, played little role in their work.

This was the context in which Talcott *Parsons and Robert *Merton came to prominence. Parsons and Merton sought to distinguish sociology from other disciplines, such as economics and psychology, and to celebrate its relevance to the new social problems of affluent capitalism. For Parsons (1949a), the 'end of ideology' heralded a 'new age of sociology'. Parsons's claim was far-reaching in its implications. He argued that sociology was entering a 'post-classical' phase (Parsons 1937). Functionalism could provide a frame-work that would integrate the insights of *Durkheim and *Weber but would otherwise draw a line under sociology's past in creating the foundations for future development.

In this chapter, we first consider the origins of functionalist thinking in anthropological research from the early decades of the twentieth century. Then we look in detail at the key contributions of Merton and Parsons. The final parts of the chapter discuss various criticisms of functionalism, associated with rational actor approaches and with what came to be called 'conflict theory'.

Functionalism in anthropology

Although functionalism mainly came to prominence as a school in the 1950s, its origins can be traced to an earlier generation of writers working in the field of anthropology. These included notably the British-based anthropologists Bronislaw *Malinowski and Alfred *Radcliffe-Brown. Elements of a functionalist way of thinking can also be traced to the work of Durkheim.

A central methodological precept of the early twentieth-century anthropologists was that social actions are not to be explained by the immediate meanings they have for indi-vidual actors. They are to be explained by the *function* they serve for wider social groups. On this view, meanings for individual actors cannot be understood independently of a wider system of collective practices and beliefs within which they are embedded. These collective practices are to be explained in turn by the functions they serve for the system of social life as a whole. Different elements of social life depend on each other and fulfil functions that contribute to the maintenance of social order and its reproduction over time.

We can illustrate this mode of analysis by looking at a typical piece of explanation in functionalist anthropology. For many years, anthropologists had observed how the Hopi tribe of North America engage in a complex series of rituals and dances prior to the planting of their crops. The Hopi were well known for their rain dances. For anthropolo-gists, it seemed clear that the Hopi dances could not be understood as instrumental action intended directly to produce the rains. At the same time, it did not seem right to suggest that the Hopi were behaving irrationally. The claim that they were behaving irrationally looked suspiciously like a judgement from the perspective of modern Western beliefs in the superiority of scientific knowledge.

The functionalist response to this puzzle was to suggest that the Hopi rain dance was not a form of instrumental activity but rather a form of *expressive* activity. This expressive

activity served to reinforce the bonds of 'solidarity' among the group. It had the *function of* generating group cohesion. Such cohesion was important because the Hopi lived in dispersed shelters, and so the dances brought them together. In their other activities, such as planting and harvesting their crops, the Hopi showed themselves to be competent at organizing instrumental activities too. The Hopi rain dances were thus explained by the function they fulfilled in the life of the tribe as a whole. The function in question was that of the *reinforcement of group solidarity*.

It is a small step from this to suggest that all social relations fulfil certain functions and that all social groups need to meet certain universal functional requirements—even if these requirements are handled differently in different societies (compare Malinowski 1944). Examples of such 'functional prerequisites' could include sexual reproduction, economic subsistence, social control, socialization and education of new generations, and the management of sickness and death, as well as 'group solidarity'.

We should note here that in a typical case of functionalist explanation, the existence of a phenomenon or the production of an action is not explained by its direct efficient causes but rather by its indirect *effects* in relation to an environment. Functionalism departs from the traditional logic of causal argument where a cause precedes its consequences. Functionalists instead reverse this sequence and assign causal powers to effects (see further Isajiw 1968). Durkheim captured this distinction when he stated that 'when ... the explanation of a social phenomenon is undertaken, we must seek separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfils' (1895: 95). In this respect, the func-tionalist anthropologist who asks 'why do the Hopi dance for rain?' looks for an answer not in factors that immediately cause the Hopi to dance on a particular occasion. Rather, the anthropologist considers the effects or consequences of the Hopi's dancing for all the other elements of the Hopi's way of life, noting that these effects have a positive function for those other elements. The functionalist concludes that if the rain dance did not have this positive function, the dance would not be reproduced. Therefore the dance is explained by its function, by its effects in an environment of diverse other elements of a social system.

One problem for functionalism is that explanations of phenomena by reference to effects in an environment can often degenerate into scientifically illegitimate kinds of 'teleology', where that which is described as the 'function' of a phenomenon is tacitly assumed to be the 'purpose' or 'goal' of the phenomenon. The function is implicitly described as something necessarily 'good', or alternatively it is imagined as marking an end-state to which the phenomenon tends to develop over time. These were the kinds of 'metaphysical problems that infected much nineteenth-century thinking about social evolution. Most notorious were the assumptions of writers influenced by Darwinist notions of 'natural selection' and the 'survival of the fittest', as applied to history and society.

For this reason, the British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown sought to distinguish sharply between 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' analysis: between the analysis of change in a sys-tem and the analysis of interaction among parts of a system at any given moment in time. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the task of anthropology (and sociology) lay primarily in synchronic analysis. Anthropology and sociology were not to make any illicitly diachronic assumptions about the positive, beneficial, or progressive unfolding of functional systems over time. He wrote that '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. . . . [An] institution may be said to have its general *raison d'être* (sociological origin) and its particular *raison d'être* (historical origin). The first is for the sociologist or social anthropologist to discover' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 43).

The task for sociology and anthropology were to aim at impartial scientific analysis of the recurring properties of social systems. They were not, however, to speculate on the meaning of the historical development of social systems over time.

There are some problems with functionalist explanations among early twentieth-century anthropological writers. The division between 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' analysis is something that came to haunt functionalism. This and other problems were directly addressed by the American sociological theorists who came to prominence in the 1950s, including particularly Robert 'Merton. It is to Merton's work that we turn first.

Robert Merton: manifest and latent functions

Although Merton is standardly treated by commentators in a secondary position after Talcott Parsons, this procedure is somewhat invidious. In the following account, we look first at Merton's path-breaking article of 1949, 'Manifest and Latent Functions', which not only pinpointed a number of difficult issues in anthropological functionalism but also anticipated much of Parson's important work from the 1950s. The article appeared in Merton's major collection of studies titled *Social Theory and Social Structure*, first published in 1949, which sought to codify functional analysis. Merton republished *Social Theory and Social Structure* twice in 1957 and 1968 with new additions. In 1941 he became Assistant Professor at Columbia University in New York where he remained for the rest of his career.

In order to produce a satisfactory statement of functional analysis, Merton proposed a distinction between *manifest* and *latent functions*. The former refers to the *conscious intentions of actors*; the latter to the *objective consequences* of their actions, which were often *unintended*. According to Merton, most of the mistakes of existing functionalism were the result of a conflation of these two different categories. In particular, existing functionalism failed to see adequately that the historical origins of an item can be explained by reference to the conscious intentions of actors, while the selection of the item and its reproduction is to be explained by reference to latent functions.

Merton's methodological strategy was to separate the scientific substance of functionalism from its historical origins in anthropology. This was necessary if functionalism was to be a proper framework for empirical research. In his view, the tendency hitherto was for functionalist arguments to supplant research rather than to support it. He identified three problematic postulates in anthropological functionalism: the postulate of the *functional unity of society*; the postulate of *universal functionalism*; and the postulate of *indispensability*.

We look at these three in turn.

Merton associated the postulate of the functional unity of society primarily with Radcliffe-Brown. He cited the British author's comment that 'the function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system' (Radcliffe-Brown 1935: 397). According to Merton, it may be that some

non-literate societies show a high degree of integration, but it is illegitimate to assume this would pertain to all societies. Moreover, it is possible that what is functional for society, considered as a whole, does not prove functional for all individuals or for some subgroups within the society. Conversely, what is functional for an individual or group may not be functional for the wider society. Merton suggested that alongside the concept of function, it was necessary to propound a concept of *dysfunction*, where the objective consequences of an item are negative for some individuals or groups. For example, inequality may have the function of motivating individuals to perform at their different job tasks, but high degrees of inequality may give rise to the alienation of some individuals and groups.

The second postulate of universal functionalism refers to what was a rather old debate in anthropology concerning 'survivals'; that is, practices that have no present role but are understood in terms of the past history of a group. This was used by some anthropologists to construct highly speculative evolutionary histories. Merton argues that if we accept that there are degrees of integration, then practices can 'survive' if they are functional for *some* individuals or groups, most typically for those groups who are *dominant* in the social system. This identifies *power* and *coercion* as important issues. Merton writes: 'far more useful as a directive for research would seem the provisional assumption that persisting cultural forms have a *net balance of functional consequences* either for society considered as a unit or for subgroups sufficiently to retain these forms intact, by means of direct coercion or indirect persuasion.' (Merton 1949*t*: 86).

Merton's final postulate of indispensability was directed as a criticism of Malinowski's view that every item fulfils a vital function and represents an indispensable part within a working whole. Merton comments that such an assumption makes unclear whether it is the *function* that is indispensable or the particular *item* held to be fulfilling the function. Merton argued that once this is clarified, it is evident that it is necessary to distinguish between functional *prerequisites*—preconditions functionally necessary for a society—and the particular social forms that fulfil those prerequisites. In Merton's view, while the prerequisites are for the most part indispensable, the particular forms or items that meet those functions are *not* indispensable. There are always alternative ways of meeting any particular function. Thus Merton points out that 'just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items' (Merton 1949*t*: 87–8).

Each of Merton's qualifications of anthropological functionalism is designed to transform the postulates into "variables that can be the objects of empirical research. Furthermore, by identifying the possibility of dysfunction and by suggesting that practices can have different consequences for individuals and groups, depending on how they are placed within a social structure, Merton explicitly made power and conflict central issues for research within a functionalist paradigm. This is in line with another of Merton's ideas about how sociological theory should be built. He reiterated that theory and research belong together and that topics should be carefully chosen for lying in what he called a "middle range" between minor working hypotheses of routine research and all-inclusive "grand theory" (Merton 1949c).

One problem with Merton's essay, however, was its terminology. Merton's reference to both 'latent functions' and 'manifest functions' was unfortunate since his actual concern was to distinguish only between latent functions and manifest *motives*. His terminology

encouraged critics to think that sociological functionalism neglected agency, just when agency was being identified as a central concern in American sociology. At the same time, Merton's proposed codification of social enquiry in terms of an analytical distinction between 'subjective motive' and 'objective function' was also the solution that Parsons had proposed. The further elaboration of Merton's critique of anthropological functionalism led him directly onto terrain occupied by Parsons concerning the relationship between actors' intentions and the objective consequences of their actions. It was this that took functionalism in the direction of all-inclusive 'grand' or "unified" theory and away from the 'middle range'. Thus what in fact came to be identified as functionalism in American sociology did not develop in the way proposed by Merton. Instead it developed as a single all-embracing theoretical system, as set out by Talcott Parsons. It is to Parsons's general theory that we now turn.

Talcott Parsons: functionalism as unified general theory

In 1927 Parsons took up a position at Harvard University, where he would remain for the rest of his career until his death in 1979. Commentators commonly identify three phases in the development of his work: an early, a middle and a late phase. In the early phase, beginning in the 1930s, Parsons sought to develop a rigorous theory of the nature and structure of social action. In the middle phase, from the 1940s and 1950s, he was more concerned to set out processes of structural differentiation and a typology of different stages of social development. However, the core assumptions of this approach remain throughout.

Almost from the outset, Parsons's intention was to produce a scheme of general categories that would form the necessary foundation for social-scientific enquiry. Identifying these categories was the objective of his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), a work that came to define European social theory for subsequent generations of North American sociologists. In this book, Parsons described how the classical generation of European social theorists active in the years 1890–1920 had brought about a decisive break with the past. The most important thinkers he addressed were Weber and Durkheim, but he also wrote extensively on the English economist Alfred *Marshall and the Italian theorist Vilfredo *Pareto. He did not consider it necessary to treat Marx because he believed that Marx belonged to a redundant stage of social thought whose insights had essentially been recuperated in the best way possible by Weber. Parsons argued that while no single one of these theorists presented all the elements of an appropriate general scheme, taken together they provided an early intimation of the functionalist synthesis of sociological theory. Parsons continued to develop and refine the scheme in all his subsequent writings. He was, in the words of the Preface to his middle-period treatise *The Social System* (1951), 'an incurable theorist'.

We begin with the following account with Parsons's analysis of action in *The Structure of Social Action*, before turning to his later more elaborate conceptions of social structures, functions, and systems.

Parsons's 'voluntaristic theory of action'

Any general theoretical scheme, Parsons argues, must represent the diverse influences on social behaviour and must take as its point of reference human *action*. In European sociology, Parsons first noted a tradition of 'positivism', which sought to explain behaviour in terms of certain putatively 'objective' influences upon it. At the same time, he identified a counter-tradition, that of 'idealism', which emphasized the 'subjective' aspect represented by Weber and German historical thought. In Parsons's view, these two traditions had developed in mutually antithetical ways. He argued that it would not do 'merely to say that both the positivistic and the idealistic positions have certain justifications and that there is a sphere in which each should be recognised. It is necessary, rather, to go beyond such eclecticism, to attempt at least in outline, an account of the specific modes of interrelation between the two' (1937: 486). It was necessary to provide 'a bridge between the apparently irreconcilable differences of the two traditions, making it possible in a sense, to "make the best of both worlds" ' (1937: 486).

As a first step in setting out how objective and subjective elements can be combined in a single scheme, Parsons developed what he called a "voluntaristic theory of action', emphasizing the "action frame of reference'. Within this theoretical framework, he focused on what he called the *unit act* and its component elements. The unit act did not refer to any concretely existing phenomena or to the empirical acts of any specific individual person. Rather, Parsons sought, by a process of logical abstraction, to identify the most basic elements of a wider scheme. Any manifestation of action could only be addressed once that wider scheme had been fully elaborated. Its categories were not to refer directly to concrete entities, even though, ultimately, the scheme must be capable of direct empirical application. For Parsons, unit acts are not concrete empirical components of a theory, as they are in methodological-individualist approaches.

Parsons defines action as intentional behaviour oriented to the realization of an end. Action occurs in conditional circumstances that must be calculated and utilized by actors in pursuit of their *ends*. Actors must accommodate and calculate upon *conditions* if their actions are to be successful. Ends and conditions (including *means*) are here analytically distinct categories. In addition, action involves effort or agency to transform circumstances in conformity to *norms*, which govern ends and the selection of their means of realization. Finally, action, to be rational, must be adequate in terms of the *knowledge* necessary for the realization of ends. Thus Parsons refers to the 'intrinsic rationality of the "means-end relation' and to the necessary role of 'valid knowledge as a guide to action' (1937: 600).

Social systems and the 'problem of order'

Parsons states that the concept of the unit act 'serves only to arrange the data in a certain order, not to subject them to the analysis necessary for their explanation' (1937: 48). 'Explanation' requires a further step in the analysis, from unit acts to their location within systems of action. This step 'consists in generalising the conceptual scheme so as to bring out the functional relations in the facts already descriptively arranged' (1937: 49). In Merton's terms, this represents a move from consideration of manifest functions to that of *latent functions*.

This further generalization of the scheme is linked to what Parsons sees as *emergent properties* of systems of action. These are properties that arise in the coordination of actions and are not reducible to analysis in terms of unit acts alone. Here Parsons espouses a key methodological position which marks his explicit attachment to methodological *holism*, rather than to methodological individualism. He writes that 'action systems have properties that are emergent only on a certain level of complexity in the relations of unit acts to each other. These properties cannot be identified in any single unit act considered apart from its relation to others in the same system. They cannot be derived by a process of direct generalisation of the properties of the unit act' (1937: 739). The concept of emergent properties serves to identify the 'elements of structure of a generalised system of action' (1937: 718), and these elements are to be further analysed in terms of their functional relations; that is, in terms of the logical relations established in the theoretical system. This is what underlies Parsons's use of the analogy of an organism: 'the very definition of an organic whole is one within which the relations determine the properties of its parts. The properties of the whole are not simply a resultant of the latter' (1937: 32). It can be seen here that Parsons was very much preoccupied with the idea of systems of action in his early work, no less than in his later work in which he comes to use the word 'system' more and more frequently.

The idea of emergent properties of systems of social action is at the heart of what Parsons refers to as the 'problem of order'. Parsons here refers to the thought of the seventeenth-century English political philosopher Thomas *Hobbes, author of *Leviathan* (1651), written in the context of the English Civil War of the 1640s–1650s. Hobbes had sought to answer the question of how it is possible that a society of self-interested individuals does not end up in a state of 'war of all against all', which Hobbes also described as the ''state of nature'. Hobbes's answer was to postulate an external authority—the sovereign—to whom the power to enforce agreement is voluntarily given. For Parsons, this answer was too bleak and too directly focused on coercive power. Hobbes's mechanistic idea of the human animal neglected the 'normative regulation of social relationships through aspects of cultural communication. Parsons did not intend to make the opposite kind of mistake by neglecting power. He acknowledged that sometimes social relationships do indeed descend into a war of all against all, just as the English Civil War impressed itself on Hobbes, so Parsons was concerned with the rise of fascism in Europe and its terrible consequences (1942a, 1942b). But in his approach to such cases of disorder, he wanted first to set out a few basic sociological principles within an all-embracing theory that could account adequately for the everyday, routine phenomenon of social order, through what he called 'normative integration', or through what is more commonly known as 'civil', 'normal', 'acceptable' social behaviour.

Parsons's way of solving this problem was to point to various mechanisms capable of securing the coordination of action. Action occurs in systems and these systems have an orderly character. There are two aspects of order, identified by Parsons. These are what we can term *personal order* and *interpersonal order*. Personal order involves a recognition that any given act is, for the actor, one among a bunch of other chosen and possible actions with a variety of different ends and different requirements for their realization. Interpersonal order involves a recognition that actions occur in contexts that include, as Parsons put it, 'a plurality of actors' (1937: 51).

Where means are scarce relative to ends, any individual actor will maximize outcomes by the most efficient selection of means and by placing his or her ends in a personal hierarchy of preferences. The ends of actors are determined by their preferences and values, but actors' cognitive reflection on the means to their ends is also governed by what Parsons terms a 'normative standard', namely a 'norm of efficiency'. In this regard, one of the most significant and emergent properties of personal order is 'economic rationality' (1937: 288 ff.). As Parsons put it, 'economic rationality is thus an emergent property of action which can be observed only when a plurality of unit acts is treated together as constituting an integrated system' (1937: 40).

Fundamental issues of social theory arise for Parsons when systems of social action involving multiple actors are the focus. These are the issues of interpersonal order. It is here that Parsons confronts, directly, the Hobbesian problem of social order. Interpersonal order concerns the coordination of systems of action where these systems include the activities of a number of actors. The actions of any given actor form the conditions and means of other actors in the system. Just as there is an interdependence of acts within the means–end chains of an actor's system of personal order, so there is an interdependence of acts and means and chains among the interactions of a plurality of actors.

Power, values, and norms

In all his works, Parsons stresses the role of a common culture, both as the source of the standards governing interaction and as internalized within the personality as the basis of dispositions to act. At the same time, he is far from arguing that the stability of systems of action depends *only* on the functioning of common value elements, as many of his critics came to maintain—especially the 'conflict theorists'. Parsons's conception of normative order is more subtle than is often granted, and he most certainly intended to include a treatment of issues of power. Several considerations can be noted in this connection.

The first consideration concerns Parsons's weighting of the significance of coercion (force) in relation to economic rationality and to common values. He writes that where the behaviour of particular actors is at stake, 'coercion is a potential means to the desired control, which is not included in the economic concept as such. It also has a similar double aspect—the exercise of coercive power as a means and its acquisition as an immediate end' (1937: 239–40). In other words, coercive power does not define the social system in the sense of being the ground on which the system is based. Rather, coercive power is a relation *within* the system. Thus Parsons writes that coercion 'cannot be a property of the *total* action system involving a plurality of individuals; it can only apply to some individuals or groups within a system *relative* to others. Coercion is an exercise of power over others' (1937: 740). What Parsons is concerned to establish here is that the coercive aspects of power do not define its essential features. Power is not simply something that one person has at the expense of another; it is also something that is generated within social relationships as a mutual benefit or 'facility', as he terms it.

The final emergent property of the total action system is thus to the requirement that 'in order that there may be a stable system of action involving a plurality of individuals, there must be normative regulation of the power aspect of individuals within the system; in this sense, there must be a distributive order' (1937: 740). In other words, the distribution of

resources within the system, and therefore the actions by which those resources are produced and reproduced, must be governed by some legitimizing principles or *norms*.

The fact that most people, generally, most of the time, do not freak out, commit murder or rape in the streets, cannot simply be attributed to the fact that if they were to do so, they would be punished with physical force by representatives of a system of state laws. Individuals internalize the threat of physical punishment for deeds they ought not do, or would even contemplate. Sanctions restrain individuals from so acting, not simply by sublimated fear of the consequences. Rather, they come to develop a sense of the intrinsic normative illegitimacy of such acts, based on an understanding that such acts are 'wrong,' or 'evil,' 'indecent' or 'distasteful,' and so on, in an ethically significant sense. It is in this manner that Parsons—by a similar route to Durkheim—arrives at a sociological understanding of our ideas of morality and civilization. What is called 'moral,' 'civil,' or 'lawful' behaviour in ordinary laypeople's language is explained sociologically by reference to processes of socialization that involve a fusion between elements of *coercion* on the one hand and elements of *common value understandings* on the other.

As Parsons developed this theory—chiefly in *The Social System* (1951) and after—he went on to offer further distinctions between different *levels of analysis*. He distinguished between the level of the *social system*, and the level of *culture*. These levels correspond to the later adding a fourth level of the *personality* (the 'biological organism'). These levels correspond to the later statement of the action frame of reference.

• The level of the *personality* corresponds to the individual actor viewed as a system. As well as conscious motivations, it includes unconscious motivations or what Parsons calls 'need dispositions.' The latter are important for understanding how *sanctions* operate. Actors respond not only to positive rewards, as economists suggest, but also to internalized feelings of guilt, anxiety, and the need for approval.

• The level of *culture* refers to symbols and meanings that are drawn upon by actors in pursuit of their personal projects and in their negotiation of social constraints and tactics. The three key features of the cultural system are 'that culture is *transmitted*, it constitutes a heritage or a social tradition; secondly, that it is *learned*, it is not a manifestation, in particular content, of man's genetic constitution; and thirdly, that it is *shared*. Culture, that is, is on the one hand the product of, on the other hand a determinant of, systems of human social interaction' (1951: 15).

• The level of the *social system* corresponds to the level of interaction among a plurality of actors which was Parsons's primary focus concerning the 'problem of order' in *The Structure of Social Action*. The social system is a structure of positions and roles organized by normed expectations and maintained by sanctions.

Parsons proposes that each of the three levels forms a system in its own right, where at the same time, each system functions in relation to other systems and "interpenetrates' with them. This is characteristic of a system is logical coherence in the relations among its parts. At the same time, each system functions in relation to other systems and, *also* constitutes a system. This is what Parsons had previously referred to as the 'total action system'. In his middle-period work, Parsons sees the total social system as having four basic functional prerequisites

which are necessary to its constitution and operation. Parsons describes these in the following four-part scheme, which he terms the AGIL scheme:

• The first prerequisite is *adaptation* (A). This refers to the relationship of a system to its external environments and the utilization of resources in pursuit of goals.

• The second prerequisite is *goal attainment* (G). This refers to the directedness of systems toward collective goals.

• The third prerequisite is *integration* (I). This refers to the maintenance of coordinated relationships among the parts of the system.

• The fourth prerequisite is *pattern maintenance or latency* (L). This refers to a society's symbolic order as a generalized series of mutually reinforcing meanings and typifications.

Once again, Parsons does not argue here that actual, empirically existing social systems manifest integration and interdependence in the way described in the analytical theory. The functional imperatives only identify general tendencies generated by concrete systems, namely tendencies toward integration and interdependence—although these tendencies are never fully realized in actual empirical systems. The functional imperatives supply the axes of the two-by-two tables that proliferate throughout Parsons's later writings. Figure 4.1, taken from Parsons's late text titled *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory* (1977a), presents his idea of the subdivisions of the social system, defined by priorities accorded to one or other of the functional prerequisites in its organization.

Structural differentiation

A final key element in Parsons's functionalist theory is this conception of 'structural differentiation', which is entailed by the fourfold AGIL scheme of functions. In this conception,
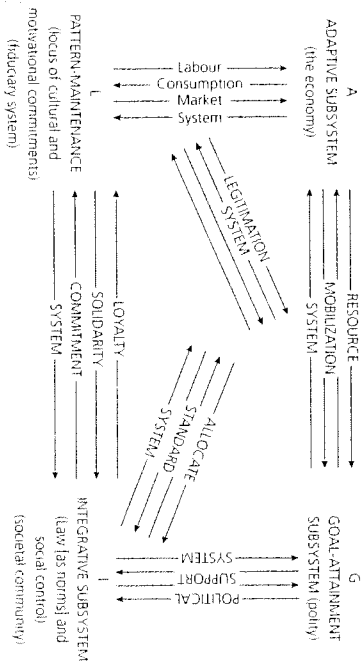

Figure 4.1 Format of the societal interchange system
Source (Parsons 1977a): 356

societies are classified according to the extent of institutional specialization around functions; for example, the extent to which political institutions are separated from the household; or the extent to which economic institutions are separated from functions of socialization. Societies can be characterized according to different patterns and degrees of structural differentiation.

In his books *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (1971a), Parsons sets out a developmental account of the emergence of modern societies. These are conceived in terms of evolutionary stages derived from the application of the four-function paradigm. One problem with this, however, was that his scheme of functional imperatives was supposed to apply to *all* societies in the *synchronic dimension*. It ought to have followed from this that societies with lesser degrees of specialization could nonetheless be an 'internal requirement' for greater structural differentiation would have been on the assumption of an overarching system goal of more effective performance. This would have carried some problematic 'teleological implications'. The idea of the superiority of higher over lower stages of developmental complexity carried the implication that better-adapted forms are realized out of the deficiencies of 'lesser' forms. The way in which structural differentiation occurs around the four functions, each with its characteristic subsystem, is suggestive of an overall 'end' to the process. In this scheme, modernity—or more specifically North American modernity, which Parsons (1966) called the new 'lead' society of modernity—is presented as the culminating stage of social development. It is in this respect that the Parsonian model of modernization can be criticized for its Western-centredness, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 13 of this book (pp. 31–3, 275).

In general, many sociologists have felt uneasy about the seemingly endless conceptual elaboration that makes up the bulk of Parsons's writings. Unlike Weber, whose reflections on sociological concepts derived from a more historical focus on definite empirical problems, Parsons was less engaged with empirical questions. This is not to say that Parsons took no interest in empirical matters at all. He frequently claimed that the ultimate purpose of his theoretical scheme was to facilitate practical sociological research. In addition, he wrote a number of important empirically oriented articles in fields such as the sociology of professions, deviance, youth, medicine, social 'stratification', and the family. Parsons's analysis of the family in particular is discussed in Box 10.

But whatever Parsons's insights into empirical problems—and they are undoubtedly strong ones—there is always a sense in his work that it is the theory that drives the argument, rather than the findings or the data. Rather than providing a means for integrating theory and research, as he had intended, he seemed to have driven a wedge between them.

American sociologists in the 1960s increasingly found sympathy with the views of C. Wright 'Mills (1959), one of Parsons's most outspoken critics. They increasingly took the view that Parsons's 'grand theory' was arid and pointless, and that the emperor of theory had no clothes. The presentation of North American modernity as the end-state of social development also seemed to represent an extreme form of functionalist teleology, revealing ideological biases inherent in a scheme that Parsons had wished to present as neither partial nor ideological but simply and innocently as an 'indispensable logical framework' (1937: 733). In the remaining sections of this chapter, we consider some key criticisms and some further critical extensions of functionalism that came to be propounded in Anglo-American sociology from the 1960s to the 1980s.

BOX 10. TALCOTT PARSONS ON THE NUCLEAR FAMILY: A FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

Parsons's account of structural *differentiation proposes that with increasing social complexity, institutions become more specialized around particular functions. Parsons illustrates this in the case of changing forms of kinship with the rise of modern industrial society. Where kinship had previously served a number of functions—for example, regulation of sexual activity, socialization of children, meeting of the basic needs of subsistence, and organization of political authority—these functions had become more dispersed across institutions. With the rise of processes of industrialization, economic needs were met by paid employment that took place outside the family household. Authority was mediated through political institutions where office holders were elected or chosen on merit. It seemed that the functions of the family were very much reduced to those of the regulation of sexuality and the socialization of children in Western society since the nineteenth century, the form of the family was changing, becoming much more focused on the nuclear family—the nexus of father, mother, and their children—with fewer obligations to extended kin (Parsons 1949b; 1949c; 1956; 1977a).

When Parsons first turned his attention to the sociology of the family in the 1940s, there was something of a moral panic about the family in American society. Commentators had seized upon a rising divorce rate and a falling birth-rate to suggest that the family was in crisis, deriving in part from its loss of functions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Parsons concluded that the problems had to do only with transition, and were not fundamental. The functions of the family were fewer but they were no less important. Divorce rates had increased but they were stabilizing, and rates of remarriage remained high, indicating that marriage continued to play a meaningful role at the centre of people's lives.

As Parsons developed his arguments about the nuclear family, he was concerned to demonstrate how its internal structure reflected its more restricted functions. He identified how male and female roles were concentrated respectively on instrumental and expressive aspects. The male role was concerned with the external linkage of the family to the world of occupations and paid work, while the female role was more associated with the rearing of children. Although housework was an instrumental task, its menial character was alleviated for women through the emotional significance with which it was invested.

According to Parsons, the family produced the human personality through child socialization. It was therefore important that the family remained an environment on which a child could fully depend and in which it could invest all of its emotional resources. But it was also important that the family did not become too isolated. The family was, a differentiated subsystem of a society, not itself a 'little society' or anything too closely approaching it (1956: 19). Family members needed other roles outside the family. The most important one according to Parsons was the father's occupational role.

Alongside the socialization of children, the family also had a secondary function of stabilizing adult personalities. The marriage pair was more concentrated when compared with extended kin relationships. In both cases, children were important to parents insofar as they allowed for an element of acceptable 'regression' in which parents could express childish' elements of their own personalities. In this regard Parsons accepted some of the insights of psychoanalysis and sought to incorporate them in his own theory.

Parsons's analysis of the family soon came to be criticized by feminist sociologists for its inadequate theorization of the position of women in families. These important critiques are discussed later in this chapter in Box 12.

Criticisms of functionalism: objections and alternatives

Parsons's theory is subtle and complex, but it is certainly not without problems. In some cases, criticisms of his work have rested on simple misunderstandings. In other cases, they have pointed to some genuine deficiencies. Here we must bear in mind that Parsons's critics did not always represent a unified position. Frequently they criss-crossed between different bodies of criticism from the late 1960s onwards. These are (1) conflict theory, (2) Marxist and mutually exclusive criticisms as their own positions unfolded. We now look at four main approaches, (3) rational actor or rational choice approaches, and lastly (4) 'neo-functionalist' criticisms. In Box 12 we also discuss some feminist responses to Parsons's analysis of the family. We begin with conflict theory.

Conflict theory

For C. Wright *Mills (1956), James *Lockwood (1956), Ralf *Dahrendorf (1958), John *Rex (1961), and Randall Collins (1975), the problem with Parsons's theory was straightforward: it was too one-sided. Parsons's language of systems gave far too much weight to interdependence and integration, neglecting independence and contradiction. It also seemed to give greater emphasis to values and norms than to power. These 'conflict theorists', as they came to be called, drew inspiration from Marx and Weber, to whom Parsons had indeed failed to give proper attention in *The Structure of Social Action*, especially Marx. It was true that Parsons had not merely excluded Marx from the founding sociological generation of 1890–1920 for reasons of chronology. More especially, he had believed that Marx's writings were tied to a moment in capitalism that had been superseded and that the German thinker's ideas had been too influenced by the ideological formations of early capitalism to be relevant to the mid-twentieth century (Parsons 1949a). Conflict theorists did not greatly disagree with Parsons's judgement on Marx and the superiority of Weber in this regard. Dahrendorf, Rex, and Wright Mills certainly tended to draw more inspiration from Weber than from Marx. But they felt that Weber owed more to Marx than Parsons had allowed for and that Parsons's attempt to synthesize Durkheim and Weber had meant that the more conflict-oriented aspects of Weber's writings had been lost. It was Durkheim's approach, with his emphasis on order and social *solidarity, that dominated Parsons's interpretation of the classics.

In his essay 'Out of Utopia' (1958), Dahrendorf disagreed with Merton's implied judgement that the problem with Parsons's scheme was that it was too generalized. The problem was rather that Parsons was insufficiently explicit about the values that informed his approach. For Dahrendorf, the 'consensus' model with its emphasis on synchronic analysis and on processes tending toward integration was part of a long-standing conservative tradition in social thought reaching back to *Plato. It was utopian in the sense that it rested on a model of society in which change and conflict are wholly absent. As Dahrendorf suggested, 'it may well be that society, in a philosophical sense, has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony, and consensus, and one of change, conflict and constraint. Strictly speaking, it does not matter whether we select for investigation problems or problems for which the conflict model is required.

There is no intrinsic criterion for preferring one to the other' (1958: 127). The problem, then, was that Parsons had placed consensus above conflict for no good reason. A similar argument was put forward by Rex, who argued that while 'perfect cooperation' and 'perfect conflict' are polar theoretical cases, 'all actual cases lie somewhere along the continuum between perfect cooperation and perfect conflict' (1961: 54). Dahrendorf, Rex, and Mills all recommended that forms of perfect co-operation' (1961: 54). Like Dahrendorf, Rex argued sociological attention should be redirected toward conflict.

The criticisms of the conflict theorists struck a chord. Yet their own position was unstable for a number of reasons. Parsons had in fact sought to account for both power and consensus in his model. Therefore it was difficult to argue that the two models could be kept entirely apart and used separately for different purposes. In Parsons's actual thinking, the issues of conflict and cooperation, and power and legitimation, were very much intertwined. This was Parsons's argument when he set out to synthesize positivism and idealism in *The Structure of Social Action*. He repeated this in his response to the conflict theorists (1971b: 385) and especially in his opposition to C. Wright Mills's book *The Power Elite* (1956), which he saw as resting on an inadequate 'zero-sum' view of power, where a gain in power for one group is wrongly automatically, equated with a loss in power for another group (Parsons 1967).

On the whole it can be said that the conflict theorists were more successful in pointing out the empirical significance of conflict *within* systems—in terms of the power of classes (Dahrendorf 1958) or the power of elites (Mills 1956)—than they were at finding a way of expressing this in the general language of analytical theory. In Box 11 we consider a more subtle extension of conflict theory in the work of David *Lockwood.

Marxist criticisms

To a large degree, the fate of conflict theory was overtaken by more radical approaches. By the late 1960s, the USA was embroiled in the Vietnam War and opposition to it was growing. Along with the anti-war movement, there was an increasingly radical movement of civil rights for black Americans, while the women's movement and feminism waited in the wings to emerge in the 1970s as a powerful force for change. The growth of universities and favourable employment opportunities for sociologists were conditions that encouraged disciplinary transformation (compare Turner and Turner 1990). A younger generation of sociologists influenced by the new social movements promoted radical sociologies in opposition to the functionalism of their seniors. They were on the side of dissent and change, not on the side of the system and order (compare Becker 1967).

While their own sympathies lay with Weber rather than Marx, the conflict theorists had contributed to a re-evaluation of the relation between Marxism and academic sociology. In the changed social and political circumstances of the 1960s, many sociologists were now open to a more explicit appropriation of Marxism. By the early 1970s, conflict theory appeared insufficiently radical and its theoretical arguments less sophisticated than those of Marx. It was not just that the Durkheim–Parsons axis of theorizing was called into question but that the whole generation of 1890–1920, including Weber, was seen to represent a 'bourgeois reaction' to Marxism (Therborn 1976).

BOX 11. DAVID LOCKWOOD ON 'SOCIAL INTEGRATION' AND 'SYSTEM INTEGRATION'

David Lockwood (1964) developed the argument of the conflict theorists on a different tack. He agreed with the conflict theorists that Parsons placed too much emphasis on mechanisms of integration but he argued that they were too much concerned with overt conflict between actors. Drawing on Marx's analysis of capitalism, Lockwood suggested that what was missing was a concept of system contradiction. Simply put, Parsons had no place for the idea that the parts of a social system may con-tain tendencies toward mal-integration—or contradiction. According to Lockwood, those tendencies may eventually come to the surface in the form of oppositional interests and conflicts among actors, and these conflicts may or may not be contained by the 'normative order'. Rather than proposing two separate models, then, Lockwood argued that it was necessary to consider the question of coopera-tion, conflict, and social change in terms of two distinct but interrelated sets of processes. One concerned normative processes of *social integration*, the other concerned material processes of system *integration*. The problem was that Parsons had conflated the two concerned type and not of a status which seriously competes overemphasized the aspect of mutually between the system and of how they were managed sociologists was to be more aware of contradictions within the system and of how they were managed at the level of social integration.

Lockwood's argument can be seen as returning to and reinforcing Merton's statement of functionalism. Merton had argued for the importance of recognizing the role of 'dysfunctions', which is similar to what Lockwood meant by problems of 'system integration'. At the same time, while it is apparent that the idea of 'function' lends itself to general expression, it is not clear that the same is true of 'dysfunc-tion' or contradiction. Dysfunctions and contradictions seem to be specific to particular cases, rather than to have a general form. If this is so, Lockwood's argument, properly understood, would reinforce Merton's turn away from general theory towards middle-range theory. Indeed, when he returned to the themes of his earlier article in a book-length discussion of Marx and Durkheim and the problem of dis-order, Lockwood (1992) declared himself to be uncomfortable with the way in which such discussions tended to conclude with a new general framework of social theory, rather than with specific, pro-grammes of substantive research.

For North American sociologists, Alvin 'Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*' (1970) was the definitive statement of these criticisms. Gouldner was a one-time function-alist, turned its sternest critic. The book was part of a wider critique of conservative social theory, which, like Dahrendorf, he traced back to Plato (Gouldner 1965). But Gouldner also sought to extend the analysis to the relationship between academic sociology and other agents of advanced welfare capitalism. At best, professional sociology seemed irrelevant to the pressing social and political issues of the times. At worst, professional sociology was partisan, not only for implicitly supporting the status quo but also for being part of what Gouldner described as the modern 'military-industrial-welfare complex'. In Gouldner's view, this complex was in collusion with government agencies, including the military, on an increasingly large-scale. Sociology had become absorbed into the management of the advanced state as part of the apparatus of social control. Parsons's theory, which seemed so abstracted from the world, was an expression of the dominant interests of welfare capitalism.

In place of professional claims to objectivity, Gouldner proposed that sociology should organize its activities in 'new theoretical communities' connected to the new social movements that were emerging to challenge welfare capitalism. In this way, he directly subverted the professional ambitions of Parsons and Merton and set an agenda for radical sociology. These were the kinds of attitudes that would evolve into postmodern criticisms of general theory in the 1980s.

A similarly radical body of criticisms came from the side of feminist sociologists, who took a highly sceptical view of Parsons's work on the family. These criticisms are discussed in Box 12.

BOX 12. FEMINIST CRITICISMS OF PARSONS

Parsons himself suspected that his functionalist analyses of women, work, and the family were oversimplified. For example, he was aware that many women were in paid employment, although he correctly observed that the tendency was for women to be found in jobs that mirrored their family roles and for competition for jobs between men and women to be restricted. 'In general', he observed, 'the woman's job tends to be of a qualitatively different type and not of a status which seriously competes with that of her husband as the primary status-giver or income earner' (1956: 14). Nonetheless, he was rather insensitive to the asymmetry between men and women, where men were enjoyed a primarily public role and women were restricted to dependency in the domestic sphere.

In the period of the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1960s, several feminist writers began to point to the changed fertility conditions that meant that a large part of women's lives would be spent with-out dependent children in the household. This would involve new social problems, including female poverty on divorce or in old age, given increasing female longevity (Myrdal and Klein 1956). Parsons had written that the fact that 'the normal married woman is debarred from testing or demonstrating her fun-damental equality with her husband in competitive occupational achievement creates a demand for a "functional equivalent" (1949e: 193). Parsons had accepted that housework was a relatively mental task, suggesting that women might instead develop specialized interests in matters of taste relating to personal appearance, furnishing, and the like—although he acknowledged that these could frequently be ex-pressed as neuroses. Once again, this was something that feminists also came to argue, but in a much more radical way, notably in the influential book by Betty 'Friedan *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Increasingly, feminists were to identify such 'dysfunctions' in a more systematic and rigorous way. Much like the conflict theorists, they would see functionalism as an obstacle rather than a means to a fruitful understanding of the family. They pointed out that dependency within the family was increasingly a reflection of power relationships, and that far from being a place that stabilized adult personalities, the family was frequently a site of violence and abuse. Women were tied to unsatisfactory relationships precisely because the gender segregation of employment and lower pay for women meant that they were economically dependent.

Some feminists have suggested that Parsons was correct in his description of the nature of the family-household and its relation to the occupational sphere (Johnson 1989). However, there is no doubt that he lacked a feminist sensibility and that the weight of his analysis was to emphasize the positive functions for society of the nuclear family, rather than its dysfunctions for women (see Barrett 1980). Yet it should be acknowledged that Parsons was one of the first male sociologists to write of the close interconnections between age, sex, family, and social 'stratification'. The more usual response by male sociologists—even those of a radical persuasion—was to concentrate on the class relationships of the occupational sphere and to regard the household and gender as secondary matters. For a more detailed overview of feminist interventions in social theory, see Chapter 11 of this book.

Rational actor approaches

For other critics, the problem with functionalism was its concentration on systems at the expense of individual actors. This problem was also seen as linked to functionalism's concern with elaborating a general conceptual framework, rather than specific testable propositions. One major criticism came from those who held that the social sciences could be unified only if sociologists based their research on the testable 'individualistic concepts of economics or psychology'. Representatives of this line of argument defended a conception of the individual as 'rational actor' or 'rational egoist', capable of 'rational choices'. This school of approach provided the foundation for what is commonly called *rational choice theory, which has been especially prominent in economics. Here we look at the work of two among several champions of rational actor thinking. These are George *Homans and James *Coleman.

Homans maintained that functionalism was unscientific because it deviated from the proper hypothetico-deductive form of scientific explanation. Functionalists had fashioned a conceptual scheme, and however necessary a conceptual scheme may be, it is not the same as a *theory. A theory involves testable propositions about the world and, according to Homans, these are conspicuously lacking in the functionalism of Parsons. Homans's idea of theory was avowedly positivist and firmly methodological-individualist.

For Homans, functionalists analyse social systems in terms of roles, and their normative expectations but nowhere explain why and how norms exist. The answer, he suggested, is to be found only in direct examination of the attributes of real individuals, their dispositions, motives, and calculations. These attributes are derived from the studies of psychologists and economists and can be given a general form as the basis of sociological explanation. Homans (1961) proposed that the units from which sociological explanations should be fashioned were the real, concrete acts of individuals. Where Parsons had argued that the 'whole' is one within which the relations determine the properties of its parts', Homans argued that the 'whole' is nothing more than the resultant of the properties of its parts. Homans called his approach 'social *behaviourism', adapting the terminology of behavioural psychology.

Other critics of functionalism, including notably Peter Blau (1964), took inspiration from the *utilitarian axioms of economics, arguing in a similar fashion to Homans that theory needed to be built from propositions about actors. Similarly, from a conflict theory perspective, Randall Collins (1975) accepted Homans's critique of functionalism and set out to produce a compilation of causal principles that would constitute 'conflict sociology' as an explanatory science.

One of the most ambitious of such enterprises was undertaken by James *Coleman. Coleman had been a student of Merton and was an early critic of Parsons (Coleman 1971). He continues to be influential in social theory. Towards the end of his career, he produced a major treatise in rational actor theory that sought to develop the explanatory theory proposed by Homans and to present it in a mathematical form (Coleman 1991). Coleman presented a further argument for the individualist approach. This is that the data collected by social scientists comprise evidence about individual behaviour, about individuals and their opinions. The social system *as a whole* cannot be observed. Social theory, Coleman wrote, 'continues to be about the functioning of social systems of behavior, but empirical research is

often concerned with explaining individual behavior' (1991: 1). For this reason, while he accepted that concrete social systems are what sociologists want to explain, Coleman argued that it is rational actor thinking that offers the best building blocks with which to construct an explanatory theory that is directly supported by empirical evidence. For example, while trust may be important in maintaining stable social relationships, it is vulnerable to actors defaulting on it. Coleman therefore argued that rather than constructing an analytical theory that makes trust a central presupposition of social order, it would be better to examine the different empirical circumstances that serve to sustain or undermine trust. This will be facilitated by the use of models describing dilemmas faced by rational actors in behaving altruistically when confronted with the possibility that other actors may 'free-ride'; that is, fail to live up to an expectation or take self-interested advantage of the altruism of others.

Over the years, the debate between functionalists and rational choice theory has been continuous (see further Turk and Simpson 1971; Coleman and Fararo 1991). Although there are strong advocates of rational actor approaches, many sociologists find these approaches compromised by reductionism and by an excessively behaviouristic form of *objectivism. Rational choice theory tends to lack a sense of the expressive, creative, and self-interpretive character of action. It typically lacks a sufficiently strong or 'thick' concept of the 'reflexivity of actors who monitor their own preferences. It has difficulties in accounting for meaningful social norms that are presupposed in action, in historically specific contexts of ethical belief, and that are not merely the products of intended action (Bohman 1991). These are arguments that have been developed in *interpretive or *hermeneutical traditions of social thought, and they have particularly been defended recently by writers such as Charles *Taylor (1989), Hans *Joas (1992), Margaret *Archer (Archer and Tritter 2000, and others (for detailed discussion of interpretive social theory, see Chapter 5 of this book). Here it is important to note that Parsons's emphasis on the subjective meaning of action was itself an attempt to draw on the insights of the interpretive tradition and to develop them as part of a systematic theory. In this regard at least, it can be argued that Parsons provided the definitive critique of the utilitarian concept of action, on which a large part of rational choice theory is based (see further Scott 1995; Lockwood 1992).

We now turn lastly to a revived strain of functionalist thinking prevalent in the 1980s, known (somewhat artificially) as 'neo-functionalism'.

'Neo-functionalism'

Two of the strands of criticism directed at Parsons lead back to this starting place. Conflict theory set out a dualistic approach to sociological problems, where Parsons had sought to synthesize the dualism, mediating between positivism and idealism and between power and consensus. For its part, rational actor theory promoted the utilitarian scheme of action as the micrological foundation for a scientific sociology, which Parsons had already criticized in *The Structure of Social Action*. Yet many critics did not recognize this as Parsons's own starting point. They usually viewed sociological functionalism as a positivistic systems approach that neglected action. Anthony *Giddens's criticism is typical: 'there is no action in Parsons' "action frame of reference", only behaviour which is propelled by need dispositions, or role expectations. . . . Men do not appear in [Parsons's writings] as skilled and knowledgeable agents, as at least to some extent masters of their own fate' (1976: 16, 70).

A similar view of functionalism was taken by Jürgen *Habermas, whose work is discussed at length in Chapters 7 and 13 of this book (pp. 164–5, 279–83). In his *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1981b) argued that social enquiry had been unhelpfully divided between two conceptual strategies, one taking the standpoint of 'systems', which 'ties the social scientific analysis to the external perspective of the observer', the other taking the standpoint of the *lifeworld*, which 'begins with members' intuitive knowledge' (1981r: 151). According to Habermas, 'the fundamental problem of social theory is how to connect in a satisfactory way the two conceptual strategies indicated by the respective notions of "system" and "lifeworld"' (1981r: 151). Habermas offers his own theory as just such a generalized integration of categories.

Several contemporary theorists have proposed general theories as alternatives to Parsons, arguing that their schemes avoid his problems because they incorporate action from the start. However, it can be argued that what they propose is very similar in conceptual structure and intention to Parsons. This can be illustrated briefly with reference to the work of Giddens, whose contributions are discussed in greater detail in Chapters 10 and 13 of this book (pp. 217–20, 287–9). Although Giddens argues vigorously that his own theory of 'structuration' has no 'functionalist overtones at all' and has declared that it would be helpful to 'ban' the term altogether (1981: 16, 19), he proposes certain universal 'structural features' that are remarkably similar to those of Parsons. Giddens identifies four basic structural principles, with similar points of reference to Parsons's four functional imperatives. Giddens calls them 'signification', 'legitimation', 'authorisation' and 'allocation'. He argues further that two aspects of these principles can be identified as follows: 'one is how far a society contains distinct spheres of "specialism" in respect of institutional orders: differentiated forms of symbolic order (religion, science, etc); a differentiated "polity", "economy" and "legal/repressive apparatus". The second is how modes of institutional articulation are organised in terms of overall properties of societal reproduction: that is to say "structural principles"' (1981: 47–8). This is very similar to Parsons's AGIL scheme.

A common pattern in contemporary discussion is that each critic of functionalism is careful to distance his or her position from that of Parsons, but has little difficulty in accusing others of converging with his scheme (see further Holmwood and Stewart 1991; Holmwood 1996). Thus Giddens (1982: 158–9) accuses Habermas of converging with Parsons, while Archer (1988: 87) offers the same criticism of Giddens. Jeffrey *Alexander (1988) takes these convergences as indications of a 'new theoretical movement' *back to functionalism, which he calls 'neo-functionalism'. In the 1980s Alexander set himself the self-conscious task of reviving functionalism through the project of a four-volume rewriting of Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action*, each volume devoted respectively to nineteenth-century positivism, Marx and Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons (Alexander 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984). According to Alexander, Parsons's approach was deficient in its detail but correct in its fundamentals. Current social theory is converging on a reinvigorated functionalist paradigm that recognizes action alongside function (Alexander 1985, 1998; Colomy 1990; Munch 1987). Alexander argues that Merton's middle-range approach is insufficiently ambitious. What is required is a revised exercise in unified general theory.

Yet one may reasonably question whether neo-functionalism is anything more than a restatement of the standard approach which retains its problems. From Parsons's perspective, if empirical circumstances are less than fully integrated, this implies that there

must be relevant factors that operate in addition to those represented within the general theoretical statement. For Habermas, Giddens, Alexander, and Margaret Archer, such factors are assigned to actors, thought of as acting concretely, while the structural-system point of view is bracketed or taken as a given. This is what is promoted by Alexander when he defends neo-functionalist analysis against the older functionalist paradigm's overextension of the concept of system. Alexander writes that functional analysis 'is concerned with integration as a possibility and with deviance and processes of social control as facts. Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functional systems analysis, though not for participants in actual social systems as such' (1985: 9). Yet despite Alexander's claim for a fully integrated theoretical statement, it can be argued that his project rests on an unsatisfactory unreconciled dualism between grand theory construction on the one hand and empirical data input on the other hand.

Conclusion

There is some validity in Kingsley Davis's (1959) assertion that functionalism is integral to sociology. The concepts, issues, and problems of functionalism are not easily avoided. Simple oppositions between functionalist and action approaches are inadequate because the most elaborate and extended forms of functionalist argument are themselves based on a highly developed concept of action. In the case of Parsons, they incorporate the very action assumptions that are often taken to express an opposition to functionalism. This is why Parsons's writings have retained lasting significance, no matter how difficult they may be to read. Taken as a whole, they contain one of the most sophisticated statements of problems that have beset sociological enquiry since the earliest days.

While the project of general theory remains attractive to some sociologists, there can be no doubt that it has been increasingly singled out for criticism. For some, *postmodernist commentators, it is an example of inappropriate 'grand narrative' (for further discussion of this theme, see Chapter 12 of this book). For some feminist writers, it is an expression of a masculine taste for abstraction. In light of this, other sociologists have been attracted by the promise of rational actor theory to provide a science of society capable of reuniting theory and research. Where conflict theorists argued that functionalism overemphasizes consensus and social order, neglecting conflict and power, rational actor theorists argue that functionalism overemphasizes systems and neglects individual actors. The rational actor theorists argue that there is no such thing as a social system, that only individual actors interact with each other, and that the motives and calculations of individuals can and should be taken as the building blocks of general social theory.

Yet the rational actor theorists' ambition to produce a deductive system of interlocking laws and propositions—after the fashion of Homans and Coleman—seems almost as unlikely to win general support as Parsons's original ambition in unified functionalist theory. In all of the approaches that have followed in the wake of functionalism, what seems to be missing is some evidence of direct integration between theory and empirical research. Parsons's own contribution was directed toward establishing sociology as a collective collaborative enterprise. Yet in retrospect, it seems that Parsons probably did more than

anyone else to establish theory as an activity for autonomous 'grand theorists', separated from immediate empirical research programmes. This has certainly not helped to improve the poor public image of 'theory', in contrast to 'research' which tends to be seen as something more open to new findings. In the early 1960s, the arguments of Merton and Lockwood were seen as being insufficiently ambitious in their aspirations and too much preoccupied with discrete empirical issues. Today, however, it can be argued that the most likely context in which functionalism might flourish again is not as an all-embracing theoretical scheme but as an empirically grounded enterprise directed at specific explanatory problems.

QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 4

1 What are the advantages of explaining social life in terms of systems and functions?

2 Is Merton's middle-range theory preferable to Parsons's 'unified theory'?

3 What is 'social order'? How satisfactory is the functionalist explanation of social order?

4 Does functionalism neglect power, conflict, and social change?

5 Does rational actor theory provide a better basis for sociological explanation than functionalism?

6 Is it possible to avoid functionalist explanations in sociology?

7 How convincing is the functionalist account of the nuclear family?

FURTHER READING

Talcott Parsons's writings are numerous. Particularly important to read are his first book *The Structure of Social Action* (McGraw-Hill, 1937) and his middle-period work *The Social System* (Free Press, 1951). But these will be difficult to approach without first reading some of the secondary guides. Useful introductions and studies are Peter Hamilton's short *Talcott Parsons* (Tavistock, 1983), Neil Smelser and A. J. Trevino's edited *Talcott Parsons Today: His Theory and Legacy in Contemporary Sociology* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), Uta Gerhardt's *Talcott Parsons* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), Guy Rocher's *Talcott Parsons and American Sociology* (Nelson, 1972), Jonathan H. Turner and Alexandra Maryanski's *Functionalism* (Benjamin Cummings, 1979), and John Holmwood's *Founding Sociology? Talcott Parsons and the Idea of General Theory* (Longman, 1996), which considers convergences between Parsons and the more recent work of Anthony Giddens, Jeffrey Alexander, and Jurgen Habermas from a critical perspective. A study of the politics of functionalism is W. J. Buxton's *Talcott Parsons and the Capitalist Nation State: Political Sociology as a Strategic Vocation* (University of Toronto Press, 1985). Other notable studies include Jeffrey Alexander's *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, IV: The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons* (University of California Press, 1984), Donald Levine's *Simmel and Parsons* (Arno Press, 1980), Bernard Barber and Uta Gerhardt's *Agenda for Sociology: Classic Sources and Current Uses of Parsons's Work* (Nomos, 1999), Thomas Favaro's *Social Action Systems:*

Foundation and Synthesis in Sociological Theory (Praeger, 2001). For an evaluation of Parsons's approach to the family, see the broad study by Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies* (Polity Press, 1998).

A comparison between functionalism and exchange theory, and rational actor approaches is M. K. Mulkay's *Functionalism, Exchange and Theoretical Strategy* (Schocken Books, 1971). One of the most comprehensive books on American sociological theory by a leading neo-functionalist is Jeffrey Alexander's *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II* (Columbia University Press, 1987), which also covers exchange theory and conflict theory. Also substantial as guides to technical sociological theory in the American scientific tradition are Randall Collins's two books *Four Sociological Traditions* (Oxford University Press, 1994) and *Theoretical Sociology* (Harcourt Brace, 1988). Two collections of readings in functionalism are Paul Colomy's *Functionalist Sociology* (Edward Elgar, 1990) and *Functionalist Sociology* (Edward Elgar, 1990). See also James Lockwood's 'Some Remarks on "The Social System"', in the *British Journal of Sociology*, 7 (1956).

For a detailed introduction to Robert Merton, see Piotr Sztompka's *Robert K. Merton: An Intellectual Profile* (Cambridge University Press, 1986). In Merton's own writings, it is best to begin with the chapter 'Manifest and Latent Functions' in his main work *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Free Press, 1968). A key text for criticism of functionalism from the standpoint of conflict theory is John Rex's *Key Problems of Sociological Theory* (Routledge, 1961). An informative overview of evolutionary thinking in social theory is Jonathan H. Turner and Leonard Beeghley's *The Emergence of Sociological Theory* (Dorsey Press, 1981).

WEBSITES

Functionalism at www.wikipedia.org/wiki/functionalism Provides an overview of functionalism, with links to associated theorists.

Conflict Theory at www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_theory Contains a summary of conflict theory, with links to texts and associated theorists.

Rational Choice Theory at www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rational_Choice_Theory Covers rational choice theory, with links to related terms.

Rational Choice Theory Essay http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~scott/socscot7.htm Contains an essay by John Scott on rational choice theory.

Quotations from Talcott Parsons at www.mdx.ac.uk/www/study/xpar.htm Displays quotations, with links to key concepts.