
 THE MYTH OF FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS AS A SPECIAL
 METHOD IN SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY *

KINGSLEY DAVIS

University of California, Berkeley

Several lines of analysis show that functionalism is not a special method within sociology or social anthropology. First, the definitions most commonly agreed upon make functionalism synonymous with sociological analysis, and make non-functionalism synonymous with either reductionist theories or pure description. Second, the issues raised with respect to functionalism, except insofar as they spring from the ambiguities of words like "function," are really the basic issues or questions of sociological theory. Third, historically the rise of functionalism represented a revolt against reductionist theories, anti-theoretical empiricism, and moralistic or ideological views under the name of sociology or social anthropology. Although functionalism may have been salutary at the time it arose, the ambiguities of its special terminology make the myth that it is a special method a liability now. It seems wise to abandon the myth for the sake of increased clarity and efficiency.

FOR more than thirty years now "functional analysis" has been debated among sociologists and anthropologists. Perhaps the time has come for the debate to be either settled or abandoned. My view is that it should be abandoned, because it rests on the false assumption that there is a special method or body of theory called functional analysis which can be distinguished from other methods or theories *within* sociology and social anthropology. It is not that the work done under the functional label is poor or unscientific (quite the contrary), but rather that the label itself signalizes and fosters the myth of a homogeneous mode of analysis distinct from other sociological modes of analysis. Not only is this assumption false, in my view, but it is increasingly a source of confusion. However strategic it may have been in the past, it has now become

an impediment rather than a prop to scientific progress.

In seeing the rationale of this thesis, one should first realize that consensus on the definition of structural-functional analysis does not exist, but that examination of the features most commonly mentioned and of the work actually done under the label shows it to be, in effect, synonymous with sociological analysis. Next, one should recognize that the issues involved in the debate over functionalism—issues with respect to problems, assumptions, methods, evidence—are the issues of sociological analysis itself. To debate them under the guise of evaluating functionalism, therefore, is to inject into the discussion a spurious obstacle to clarity and objectivity. Finally, one should undertake to see how this interpretation fits into an analysis of the history of anthropology and sociology, first with respect to the conditions under which functionalism emerged as a scholarly movement, then with respect to

* Presidential address read at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, September 1959.

the subsequent circumstances that altered its role.

THE MEANINGS OF FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Diversity and ambiguity are easily found in conceptions of functional analysis. Characteristics that the functionalists themselves regard as either accidental faults or as totally alien to their point of view—teleology, conservatism, preoccupation with social statics, assumption of complete social integration—critics often regard as the essence of the approach. Even within each camp there are differences of definition, some as wide as those between the two sides. Among the critics we find that functionalists are described on the one hand as “primarily concerned with maintaining a stable, integrated and harmonious social equilibrium,”¹ and, on the other, as deriving “‘cultural necessities and imperatives’ from physiological sources.”² While one critic characterizes functionalism as using psychological explanations,³ another praises it for at least not committing this error,⁴ and a third berates it for neglecting motivation.⁵

The functionalists themselves exhibit scarcely more agreement. Although Firth points out that “all British social anthropology today is functionalist,” and quotes Fortes to the effect that functionalism is “the generally accepted basis of theory and research in British social anthropology,” he admits that the off-hand definitions and the actual practice in contemporary anthropology reveal anything but agreement or clarity as to the nature of functional analysis. There is “Redfield’s description of ‘the functional model’ as one in which a culture or society is seen as an organization of means designed

to achieve ends, . . . ;” or the view that functionalism is properly the study of the “conjunction of cultural behaviors.”⁶ Radcliffe-Brown’s distaste for Malinowski’s functionalism is well known, and is hardly stronger than that of non-functionalists Kroeber.⁷

One’s first impulse, when faced with this diversity, is to try to redefine structural-functional analysis clearly and consistently. But so many have tried this—notably Merton, Levy, Radcliffe-Brown—without visibly improving general usage, that one is forced to view the diversity itself as an essential rather than an accidental feature of the situation, and thus as requiring explanation. If we avoid the assumption that functionalism refers to a consistent and recognizable approach *within* sociology, and instead entertain the hypothesis that, as most commonly defined, it is as broad as sociological analysis itself, we can understand both the extent and the limits of disagreement. We can see that the lack of agreement on functionalism reflects the lack of agreement on the issues of sociological analysis, and that the features of functionalism most commonly cited are the essentials of sociological interpretation itself.

Turning from the sheer variety of conceptions to the traits most frequently cited as characterizing functional analysis, we find that functionalism is most commonly said to *do* two things: to relate the parts of society to the whole, and to relate one part to another. Almost as common is the specification of *how* it does this relating—namely, by seeing one part as “performing a function for” or “meeting a need or requirement of” the whole society or some part of it. It strikes me that the first two traits simply describe what *any* science does. Every science de-

¹ Wayne Hield, “The Study of Change in Social Science,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 5 (March, 1954), p. 1.

² Dorothy Gregg and Elgin Williams, “The Dismal Science of Functionalism,” *American Anthropologist*, 50 (October-December, 1958), p. 597.

³ Alexander Lesser, “Functionalism in Social Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist*, 37 (July-September, 1935).

⁴ Sidney Morgenbesser, “Role and Status of Anthropological Theories,” *Science*, 128 (August 8, 1958), p. 285.

⁵ Harry C. Bredemeier, “The Methodology of Functionalism,” *American Sociological Review*, 20 (April, 1935), pp. 173-179.

⁶ Raymond Firth, “Function” in *Current Anthropology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, pp. 247-251. He gives further quotations and references showing diversity of definitions, including Fortes’ claim “that the chief innovation for which the functionalist movement stands was a contribution of the Cambridge School of anthropology—the principle of the intensive study of limited areas.”

⁷ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown: “As for myself, I reject it entirely, regarding it as useless and worse.” “Functionalism: A Protest,” *American Anthropologist*, 51 (April-June, 1949), p. 321. A. L. Kroeber: “I have long considered Malinowski’s whole scheme of need-derivation a verbal wish-fulfillment. . . .” “An Authoritarian Panacea,” *ibid.*, p. 318.

scribes and explains phenomena from the standpoint of a *system* of reasoning which presumably bears a relation to a corresponding *system* in nature. In the case of sociology, what is distinctive is the subject, not the method; for it deals with human societies whereas other disciplines deal with other kinds of systems. Given its subject, the least it could do is to relate the parts to the whole of society and to one another.

A better case for the distinctiveness of functionalism can be made on the basis of the "requirement-meeting" mode of reasoning. The distinctiveness seems to dissolve, however, when semantic problems are recognized. For this purpose Merton's characterization offers a point of departure. He describes "the central orientation of functionalism" as "the practice of interpreting data by establishing their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated."⁸ If "interpreting" here means "explanation," the sense of the statement can hardly be that in functionalism data are explained *solely* in terms of their consequences; for nothing is explained that way. Evidently the statement means that *among* the considerations used in interpretation are the consequences for larger structures. In this case, however, we have added nothing to the two characterizations discussed in the preceding paragraph. How else can data be interpreted except in relation to the larger structures *in which they are implicated*? How can data on the earth's orbit, for example, be understood except in relation to a system in which they are involved—in this case, the solar system or the earth's climatic system? Since in science some kind of system is usually being dealt with, an analysis of the effect of one factor must always be made with the possibility in mind of a possible return effect ("feedback") on that factor itself. If, for example, the increase of fish (y) in a pond has the effect of increasing the toxicity (x) of the water, the growth of the fish population (y again) will eventually cease unless other factors intervene. This is not explaining things solely by their consequences, but rather by the way their consequences react upon them.⁹

Misunderstanding in this matter seems to arise from two sources: first from the language used in describing the relationships, second from the special problems of applying systematic analysis to human societies. As to language, if the investigator uses phrases like "has the function of," "meets the need of," or simply "is for," the words have so many connotations and ambiguities that the effect is often to obstruct rather than to facilitate the conveyance of meaning. Part of the reason is that these are words borrowed from common discourse and hence mainly used to indicate moral imperatives and volitional intent rather than sheer causal relationships. Actually, when such terms are used in natural science there is not much debate as to what is meant. An agronomist, for instance, theorizing that certain types of fruit trees die when particular trace elements are missing from the soil, may say that the trace elements "contribute to" or "have the function of" keeping fruit trees alive. He may say this without being accused of teleology, conservatism, or worse;¹⁰ but the same phrases used in sociological or anthropological discourse are often either actually intended this way or are so interpreted. The reason relates to the second source of difficulty—the fact that human society is being dealt with. Terms connoting moral obligation or censure, or indicating explanation by intent, are particularly unsuited for the description of causal relationships because the meanings they stand for are properly part of the *object* rather than the *basis* of explanation. It is of course extraordinarily difficult to escape from such words, not only because nearly all language is infused with them, but because they contain conceptions and values

¹⁰ For an excellent account of questionable language in textbooks of natural and physical science, see A. J. Bernatowicz, "Teleology in Science Teaching," *Science*, 128 (December 5, 1958), pp. 1402–1405. The author finds the infinitive verb is a common linguistic gateway to teleological and anthropomorphic phraseology. The *to* in these cases "is merely an abbreviation of *in order to*." Thus atoms "strive to attain the stable arrangement of electrons . . .," "the ultimate goal of stream erosion is to reduce the land surface to a nearly flat plain. . . ." Other key words of similar effect are "for," "has to," "must." Such language is justified as being useful in avoiding awkward circumlocutions and making for livelier reading, though Bernatowicz disagrees.

⁸ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957, p. 19.

⁹ Cf. Bredemeier, *op. cit.*

that the observer himself has as a member of society.

It thus appears that the most nearly agreed-upon traits of functionalism are those broadly characterizing scientific analysis in general. Any distinction is due, not to method *per se*, but to linguistic usage and the particular subject (society). Granted the linguistic matter is superficial,¹¹ we find nothing to upset the view that it is another name for sociological analysis—the interpretation of phenomena in terms of their interconnections with societies as going concerns.

WHAT IS NON-FUNCTIONALISM?

The same conclusion emerges from examining that neglected concept, “non-functional analysis.” Although seldom defined explicitly, this residual category seems, by implication, to include traits falling into one or the other of two classes: either they constitute some sort of reductionism and are therefore non-sociological in character, or they constitute some form of raw empiricism or sheer data manipulation and are therefore non-theoretical. In other words, whatever falls outside the domain of sociological theory falls outside the realm of functionalism.

Reductionist Theories as Non-Functional. If the word “psychological” is construed as referring to analysis in terms of the individual as a system, especially with the implication that this system is determinative of social phenomena, there is general agreement that, although it may be functional psychology, it is not functional anthropology or sociology.¹² Durkheim phrased the point char-

acteristically: “The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness.”¹³ Functionalists have typically rejected explanations of social phenomena which depended on some alleged trait of the human mind rather than on the operation of a social system. Following Durkheim, for instance, they rejected the evolutionists’ individualistic theory of religion as failing to account for the cultural standardization and normative obligatoriness of religious belief and behavior.¹⁴

If psychologistic solutions are barred from structural-functional analysis, then biologicistic solutions are *a fortiori* barred. One form of biologism—explanation of social phenomena in terms of genetic inheritance—is generally considered to be at the opposite pole from functionalism.¹⁵ Another form—the analysis of society by treating it literally as

hardly escape dealing with psychological phenomena. “Psychological” in the sense of treating the person as a system is a different thing. It is interesting that the science of treating the personality, or the psyche, as a system is often called “functional psychology.” For this reason a disorder of the individual for which no organic cause can be found, and which is thus presumably explicable in terms of the personality system, is commonly designated a “functional disorder.”

¹³ Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950, pp. 110–111.

¹⁴ See W. J. Goode, *Religion among the Primitives*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951, pp. 243–244; Kingsley Davis, *Human Society*, New York: Macmillan, 1949, p. 518; J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual*, New York: Macmillan, 1957, Chapter 3. Psychoanalytic theories of religion and the family were criticized for similar reasons—Goode, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–249, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954, pp. 44–45. As early as 1927 B. Malinowski complained that Ernest Jones “regards the [Oedipus] complex as the *cause*, and the whole sociological structure as the *effect*.” *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1927, pp. 139–140.

¹⁵ Obviously, the biological character of the human species is relevant to the question of the *limits* of variation in human society—see Marion J. Levy, Jr., *The Structure of Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952, pp. 16–17—but recognition of this fact by functionalists has not committed them to genetic interpretation of social variation itself. Admittedly the theoretical status of Malinowski’s “needs” is open to dispute; although often accused of biologism (see cited articles by Gregg and Williams and by Radcliffe-Brown), his writings contain firm statements indicating that in his mind biological needs are necessary but not sufficient causes.

¹¹ Sometimes commentators come perilously near to saying that functional analysis is analysis that employs the word *function*. “The function of religion is to relieve anxiety in a group.’ This asserts nothing not asserted by ‘Anxiety in a group is relieved if (or perhaps, only if) it practices religion,’ or by ‘A (sufficient, necessary, or sufficient and necessary) condition for relief of anxiety in a group is the practice of religion.’ These latter statements are clearly nonfunctional.” Walter Buckley (paraphrasing Nagel), “Structural-Functional Analysis in Modern Sociology,” in Howard Becker and Alvin Boskoff, editors, *Modern Sociological Theory*, New York: Dryden, 1957, p. 247.

¹² The occasional charge that functionalism is psychological evidently arises from an ambiguity. Insofar as the word “psychological” refers simply to *mental* phenomena, such as thoughts, sentiments, and attitudes, sociology and social anthropology can

if it were a biological organism—has sometimes been regarded as one of the precursors of functionalism, but if the only legacy is seeing society as “composed of differentiated, interrelated structures reacting on one another and constituting an integral whole on a *psycho-social*, rather than a biological, level,”¹⁶ nothing biological is left. A third kind of biologism, social Darwinism, more an epithet for a bad ideology than a name for a scientific outlook, has seldom been charged to functionalists.¹⁷ It is identified with Spencer and the evolutionism against which functionalists were in rebellion, and with a rugged individualism hardly compatible with an emphasis on “the functional integration of society.” In fact, the critics of functionalism have accused it of paying *too little* attention to conflict and the struggle for power¹⁸—elements that the evolutionists and social Darwinists stressed.

The type of reductionism represented by technological or economic determinism is equally differentiated from functionalism. Although Marx, for instance, was occasionally called a functionalist,¹⁹ his followers in sociology and anthropology quarrel with colleagues who wear this label. The reason usually given is their aversion to the functionalist concern with integration rather than conflict, but a more basic reason is the reductionism implicit in “materialism.” Any view that sees all change in society as the consequence of technological or economic

change offends functionalists because it reduces other aspects of society to epiphenomena and treats non-rational behavior as simply ignorance and error.

Similarly, the functionalist rebellion against trait-distributionism, signalized by Lowie's charge that Malinowski “flouts distribution studies,”²⁰ is understandable as a reaction of those interested in societies against those interested in culture traits. From the former standpoint the only significant aspect of a trait is its relation to the social system, and for many traits this aspect is trivial. In cultural anthropology, on the other hand, the existence, form, and provenience of traits are important *per se*, whether significant for the operation of society or not.

Empiricism and Data as Non-Functional. So far we have found that, among theories, those that explain social phenomena in terms derived from some other level tend to be classed as non-functional. Now let us recall that if a part of social science consists of theories, there must be another part that consists of observations. It appears that this part of sociology and anthropology, the sheer description and reporting of statistical relationships, is regarded as wholly outside of structural-functional analysis.

The clearest exclusion from functionalism, for instance, is the “historical approach.” Insofar as this approach implies an antagonism to theoretical generalization and a preference for straight description of the past, it is opposed to the functionalists' predilection for explaining phenomena by appeal to abstract principles.²¹ Of course, the attempt merely to state facts is not confined to historicism but appears in contemporary fieldwork of both the ethnographic and survey type. Such an attempt, either as methodological doctrine or as research performance, is regarded as outside of functionalism. The same is true of the empiricist doctrine that science is “nothing but” the establishment of statistical probabilities. Functional analysis is felt to involve interpretation, not simply data or data-manipulation.

²⁰ Robert H. Lowie, *History of Ethnological Theory*, New York: Rinehart, 1937, pp. 234–235.

²¹ Evans-Pritchard characterizes functionalism as holding that “even with the best sources at his disposal, the historian can only tell us what has been the succession of accidental events by which society has become what it is.” *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁶ Buckley, *op. cit.*, pp. 239–240.

¹⁷ Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, revised edition, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, contains no reference to “functionalism” or to Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown. In fact, Hofstadter thinks that social Darwinism was dead by the end of World War I, which is just about the time functionalism began to emerge as a name for a self-conscious school of thought in anthropology.

¹⁸ See Ralf Dahrendorf, “Out of Utopia: Toward A Reorientation of Sociological Analysis,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 64 (September, 1958); Hield, *op. cit.*; David Lockwood, “Some Remarks on ‘The Social System,’” *British Journal of Sociology*, 7 (June, 1956), pp. 134–146. Bredemeier, *op. cit.*, p. 175, is one of the few critics to note that the functionalists' concern with factors governing the survival of societal elements gives them a basis of linkage with biological theory.

¹⁹ Horace Kallen, “Functionalism,” *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, New York: Macmillan, 1931, Vol. 6, pp. 523–526.

CRITICAL ISSUES IN "FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS"

If the most frequent conceptions of functionalism make it, in effect, inclusive of sociological analysis but exclusive of reductionism and sheer description, then the scientific problems of functional analysis are the same as those of sociology in general. That this is true is suggested by the kind of questions most commonly identified with functionalism—for example: What features of social organization or behavior appear in all or nearly all societies? Why are these features so nearly universal while others are more variable? What particular features characterize each type of society, and how do they mesh together in the operation of that type? How in a concrete community are the parts of the social structure mutually congruent or incongruent, as exhibited in attitudes, roles, and conduct? Such "functional questions," when taken together, evoke a comparative science of society, because they are the most general that can be asked. The attempt to find systematic answers to them forms a framework of reasoning that can enlighten any specific inquiry, no matter how limited. Such questions, then, are not peripheral to sociological analysis, but central.

It is therefore puzzling that a distinction should be assumed between sociological and functional analysis, and that once distinguished, the latter should be considered more controversial—as witness the numerous articles and chapters dealing with "functional analysis," the most famous of which opens with this statement: "Functional analysis is at once the most promising and possibly the least codified of contemporary orientations to problems of sociological interpretation."²²

²² Merton, "Manifest and Latent Functions," *loc. cit.*, p. 19. Lowie, in his *History of Ethnological Theory*, *op. cit.*, has a chapter on the French "sociological school" including Radcliffe-Brown, followed by a chapter on "functionalism" including Malinowski. Actually, the terms "sociological" and "functional" are often used interchangeably. Most of Chapter 3 in Yinger, *op. cit.*, entitled "A Sociological Theory of Religion," is devoted to the "functional approach," which is taken for granted as the distinctively sociological approach. Radcliffe-Brown usually avoids the term "functional analysis" in favor of "comparative sociology" or simply "sociological" inquiry or theory. Malinowski was in the habit of calling his approach indifferently either sociological or functional.

Naturally, I am not interested solely in questioning the accuracy of this notion but also in trying to explain its prevalence. I think that an explanation, though hard, is possible if one bears in mind the difficulties inherent in studying society—difficulties arising mainly, if not exclusively, from the circumstance that the observer must analyze objectively the norms of conduct that he and others, as actors, react to emotionally. In pursuing this line of explanation, one can begin by examining some of the major criticisms of functionalism. These, as already indicated, are critical issues in sociological theory (a point well worth demonstrating further), but the fact that they are debated with reference to functional analysis, assumed to be a special method, is of prime significance for our argument. Let us start with the question of evidence.

Evidence and Functional Analysis. Critics note that functionalism "abounds in principles and categories" but offers little by way of verification. Relationships are established "intuitively by the structure of the observer's language, or are assumed to be in nature."²³ Since this is true of functionalist ethnography as well as comparative functionalist theory, there is no value in denial. There is value, however, in asking why the charge is true. In large part it is because functionalism is preëminently social theory. The broader and more general a theory, the less is the chance of proving or disproving it in its entirety.²⁴ Social theory, in particular, tends to be broad and complex, because the observer, reared in a society himself, comes equipped with knowledge and opinion about social matters, including abstractions of great gen-

²³ Buckley, *op. cit.*, p. 258, speaking particularly of Parsonian functionalism. Merton's essay, *loc. cit.*, voices similar criticism of functionalism generally.

²⁴ A body of theory includes a conceptual framework which, not being in the form of evidential propositions, is not subject to verification. Furthermore, disproof of specific propositions logically related to parts of the theory need not kill the system, because the latter can be modified without necessarily changing its essentials. The broader and looser a theoretical system, the more prolific it is of propositions and the less embarrassed by their disproof. Fantastic schemes of reasoning have lasted for decades and finally died of disinterest rather than disproof. On verification and theoretical systems, see Ernest Nagel, *Logic Without Metaphysics*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956, Chapter 7.

erality. He also intuitively understands behavior by imagining himself in the circumstances of the actor, and he constantly deals with ideological controversies woven into learned discourse. Thus the conceptual and linguistic apparatus constituting social theory becomes extremely subtle and highly ramified. By comparison, social research seems puny indeed. One reason is that much of the theory is too ambiguous to be researchable; also, public attitudes severely restrict the possible kinds of social research; and, above all, research on the non-instrumental aspects of society—on norms, values, religion, and so on—has little utility precisely because, unlike research in medicine or business, it concerns goals rather than means. Functional analysis is thus vulnerable to the charge of unverified theorizing because it has the character *par excellence* that social theory in general has.

But beyond this there is the fact that functionalism adopts a kind of language that is peculiarly close to the purposive and moralistic reasoning of ordinary discourse, yet tries to use it in the opposite way, that is, for the disinterested analysis of exactly this type of reasoning and its related behavior. Such words as "function," "dysfunction," "latent," "needs" are treacherous for the same reason that they are handy. Connected with ideas much older than sociology or anthropology, they are susceptible of easy expansion by knitting together ready-made intuitions, connotations, and ambiguities. But for this reason they are strikingly inappropriate for doing the opposite of moralistic reasoning—that is, for explaining in a detached manner the moral and religious ideas and behavior of mankind. It is this paradox that lies behind many charges against functionalism. Lack of evidence, being a good scientific objection, sometimes masks the other considerations.

Evidence is especially scarce insofar as functionalism attempts to state the requisites for the existence of any society or to explain the universals of social organization. In such matters there can be no proof by co-variation, because, by definition, all actual societies exhibit the traits in question. Nor can functionalists create experimental societies to test the effect of omitting this or that ingredient. The analysis must therefore be

heavily deductive,²⁵ the language of which is easily borrowed from ordinary discourse. Anybody can see, for example, that the virtually universal occurrence of incest taboos is due to their being "essential for" the nuclear family; people habitually justify basic norms in terms of their social value. The disinterestedness of functional analysis is hardly clearer when *disapproved* institutions like prostitution, social inequality, or political corruption are being explained, for this seems like either cynicism or satire. The best chance for real evidence is provided by "experimental" communities set up by political or religious sects or brought about by accidental conditions, by exceptional cases occurring in particular segments or classes of some societies, and by the inevitable normal variation in the concrete manifestation of any general rule. But unless the language of functionalism is remedied (which means eliminating the notion of "functionalism"), there seems no way for the analyst to escape having his deductions deliberately or unwittingly confused with moralizing.

The Three Postulates of Functionalism. In criticizing the postulation of functional unity, universal functionalism, and functional indispensability, Merton seems to charge both that these abstractions are reified in functional analysis and that they lack heuristic value in any case. Whether they are actually reified depends on how one reads the evidence.²⁶ Our interest lies, however, in

²⁵ "If we start with a social-system theory, defining and relating all the necessary concepts involved, . . . then the functional requisites, or conditions necessary for the persistence of such a system are, ideally, implied by the system as delineated." Buckley, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

²⁶ Since no functionalist has given his theory a rigorous axiomatic treatment, conclusive evidence as to whether the three abstractions are reified or even postulated cannot be produced. Merton naturally relies on quotations. Most of these are from Malinowski, whose statements are varied and careless enough to afford evidence of numerous errors. In the case of Radcliffe-Brown, a quoted statement assuming only a "degree of harmony or consistency" seems to be the evidence for Merton's implication in the next two pages that he assumes "complete functional unity." Similarly, Clyde Kluckhohn is cited (Merton, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31) as "postulating functional value for all surviving forms of culture," but no reference is made to passages in the same book (*Navajo Witchcraft*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Museum, 1944, p. 68) where Kluckhohn discusses the "costs" and the "disruptive effects" of witchcraft.

the other question, the heuristic value of the abstractions.

This question turns on what the postulates mean. As for the first two, Merton speaks of "*complete* functional unity" and of "*universal* functionalism." Certainly it would be silly to regard such propositions as literally true, and perhaps pointless to use them as abstractions. But if the intended meaning is simply that *some* order in societies is assumed and that every social form *should* be examined from the standpoint of its possible role in societal continuity (thus assuming *heuristically* that each item plays such a role), the analytic value seems plain. What else could a sociologist do? If one sets out to study societies, one presumably sets out to study something that exists. If societies exist, there must be some sense in which each one more or less hangs together, and the question of how this is accomplished and not accomplished is a central one.

The third postulate is, in Merton's view, a dual one: first, that certain *functions* are indispensable for the persistence of a society or group; second, "*that certain cultural or social forms are indispensable* in fulfilling each of these functions."²⁷ He seemingly has no objection to the first version—evidently on the ground that functions are fewer than social forms and that therefore the assumption that some of them are indispensable is a high-level abstraction serving to evoke a theory of the basis of human societies. The second version seems more specific, thus more open to empirical test, and hence more dangerous if assumed to be true concretely. Yet if a social form is actually found in all known societies, it would seem harmless to *entertain* the hypothesis that it is indispensable.²⁸ Such a hypothesis is not a postulate on which a system is built; it is rather a prediction *resulting* from theory and fact—a prediction that no society will be found which lacks the trait. The important thing is not the prediction but the sociological reasoning on which it is based. Equally of value is the opposite assumption, that there may be as yet undiscovered alternative structures that can perform the same function as the

trait in question—provided, of course, that this abstraction is not reified either.²⁹

If Merton is correct in calling attention to the absurdity of reifying the three assumptions but not in impugning their heuristic value, the readiness of the critics of functionalism to accept and repeat the entire charge seems an over-reaction. A clue to the reason appears in the selectivity of the charge. If somebody states that a society must have economic support or biological reproduction, the proposition is taken as a harmless truism made for the purpose of facilitating a process of reasoning. If, on the other hand, it is said that normative control, attitudinal consensus, or social inequality is required, one is likely to be accused, among other things, of making an unwarranted assumption. Not only are things like consensus and inequality less tangible than economic support or reproduction, they are more closely related to ideological controversies.

The postulates are identified with functionalism, and yet Merton says they are "unnecessary to the functional orientation."³⁰ The same has been said of sociology, for the latter has been perennially accused of hypostatizing something called society, of treating social solidarity as if it were the only reality or the only explanatory principle. In the case of functionalism, the idea seems to be that if the postulates can be eliminated, this orientation will be purged of some of its impurities. As I see it, the opposite course is advisable—to eliminate the notion of functionalism as a distinct method along with the confusing terminology that goes with the name, and to keep the basic heuristic assumptions that form part of a system of sociological reasoning.

A system of reasoning cannot be developed without assumptions. As long as these are not reified, it makes little difference where one starts. If one begins by asking why conflict and strife are so rife among human be-

²⁹ In recommending the idea of functional equivalents, Merton does not call it a postulate, but simply a *concept*. *Op. cit.*, pp. 34, 36. Could the ideas of functional unity and functional indispensability also be called *concepts*? For interesting brief statements of the principles of functional equivalents, multi-functionality of structures, and limited possibilities, see B. Malinowski's article, "Culture," *Encyclopedia of the Social Science*, Vol. 4, pp. 621-646.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 33 (italics in original).

²⁸ If societies were found which *lacked* the trait, there would be no point in assuming the trait to be indispensable.

ings, one eventually gets around to asking why there is not even more strife than there is and hence to the problem of social control and integration. If one starts by asking how a modicum of harmony is achieved, one is soon forced to discuss conflict. Viewed in this light, there is no reason to eliminate the basic thinking represented by the three postulates discussed, but there is reason to phrase them differently and in terms less open to logical confusion and ideological attack. Also there is a need to add other assumptions.

Latent, Manifest, and Functional. The distinction between latent and manifest functions might be described as the fourth postulate of functionalism. However, although identified with functionalism by virtue of Merton's brilliant exposition, the idea of the distinction, phrased in various ways, has long been central in sociology. It was stated in 1895 by Durkheim, who spoke of "function" versus "purpose."³¹ It was developed with extreme thoroughness in Pareto's discussion, in 1916, of individual utility and utility to, of, and for the community.³² Accordingly, the distinction in no way depends upon a special functional method or requires the use of the term "function;" yet the fact that it plays a crucial role in both sociological theory and what is called functionalism deserves careful attention.

It seems to me that the scientific issue involved is the explanatory role of subjective elements (goals, norms, knowledge) and of rational and non-rational behavior. Talcott Parsons' classic typology of theoretical positions in social science rests on different ways of handling this issue.³³ For the economist, the problems are not great: he can get along analytically by taking goals as given and assuming rational behavior modified simply by ignorance and error. For the sociologist, however, the goals and sentiments and non-rational behavior are among the phenomena to be explained. He is therefore required to

distinguish carefully between what the actor has in mind and what the social causes and consequences of his action may be, to keep separate always the point of view of the actor and the point of view of the observer. To the extent that he fails to do so, to the extent that he cherishes certain goals or puts his analysis in terms of them and thus adopts the role of an actor, he loses the sociological level of analysis.

Undeniably, the observer role with respect to social institutions is hard to maintain. The investigator, in trying to comprehend the subjective views of his subjects, tends to make the honest mistake of taking these views as an ultimate basis of explanation. Sometimes, in addition, social science is made to validate democracy, tolerance, peace, and other values. The functionalist movement, as I see it, represents an effort to explain social organization and behavior from a disinterested observer's point of view. This is why the manifest-latent distinction is important. Ironically, however, the movement has fallen victim to what it sought to overcome. The inability to see purposes and sentiments as objects of explanation, the unwillingness to remain detached—these have joined the inherent discomfort of analysis from a societal rather than a psychological standpoint and have riddled the weak terminology of functionalism with criticism and confusion.

Teleology and Ideology. Teleology is one fallacy that functionalists try hard to avoid, but when they are charged with it, their language and their own and others' ambiguities make defense difficult. If we accept the dictionary definition of teleology as "the doctrine that the existence of everything in nature can be explained in terms of purpose," the distinction between manifest and latent functions is clearly contrary to it. The functional theory of incest taboos or of magical practices does not hold that these exist because their social consequences (functions) are *perceived*. On the contrary, the purposes the actors have in mind are treated as not necessarily including the consequences but as being part of the mechanisms by which the societal functions are accomplished. This refusal to take purposes at their face value as the basis of explanation often appears incomprehensible or reprehensible. One critic, for example, feels that the only way the con-

³¹ "We use the word 'function,' in preference to 'end' or 'purpose,' . . . Whether there is a correspondence between the fact under consideration and the general needs of the social organism [is independent of] whether it has been intentional or not." *Rules of Sociological Method*, p. 95.

³² V. Pareto, *Mind and Society*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935, Vol. 1, Chapter 2; Vol. 4, Chapter 12.

³³ *Structure of Social Action*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937, Chapter 2-3.

sequences of an action can serve to explain its persistence is by the actor's *perceiving* the possible consequences and guiding his behavior accordingly.³⁴ To visualize the unrecognized social consequences of an action as leading, by their unrecognized effect on the conditions, to the continuous reinforcement or minimization of that action in the society, is too much against the grain of ordinary discourse.

Those interested in social protest or reform necessarily depend upon purposes as the basis of explanation, for they must assign praise and blame. The feature of functionalism they find most objectionable is its refusal to rest with the imputation of motives. To explain anti-semitism for example, as due to the bad motives of either gentiles or Jews is to explain it in terms palatable to either the pro- or the anti-semitite, whereas to explain it in "structural-functional" terms satisfies neither. Indeed, the actionist feels threatened by a system that subjects *his* motives to impersonal scrutiny. He defends himself by charging functionalism with various sins, one of which, ironically, is teleology. He sustains the charge by pointing out that *function* often means purpose or "final cause;" that words like *needs* and *requirements* are subjective; that *functional* or *disfunctional* can often be translated "approved" or "disapproved."

Similarly, the view of functionalism as disguised ideology is most often advanced by those who are themselves ideologically oriented—as shown by the selectivity of the evidence adduced and by the purport of the theories proposed as substitutes.³⁵ Strictly speaking, a theory's support of a moral or political bias is independent of its scientific validity. We thus have no concern with the issue except as illustrating further that functional analysis is attacked for being sociological analysis, under the guise that it is some-

thing else. Merton, noting that functional analysis has been accused of radicalism as well as conservatism, shrewdly takes this as *prima facie* evidence that it is intrinsically neither one.³⁶ What interests us, however, is that in making this point he unconsciously denies the premise that functionalism is a special kind of sociology. "Like other forms of sociological analysis," he says, functionalism "can be infused with any one of a wide range of ideological values." The only other form of sociology he mentions is Marxism, but, curiously, he finds that the Marxist theory of religion is no different from the functional theory in method or structure of analysis.

. . . the functionalists, with their emphasis on religion as a *social mechanism* . . . , may not differ materially in their *analytical framework* from the Marxists who, if their metaphor of 'opium of the masses' is converted into a neutral statement of social fact, also assert that religion operates as a social mechanism. . . . The point of difference appears only when *evaluations* of this commonly accepted fact come into question.³⁷

If Marxist sociology does not differ methodologically from functional analysis, it seems doubtful that *any* kind of sociology does.

Can Functionalism Handle Social Change?

The claim that functionalism cannot handle social change because it posits an integrated static society, is true by definition if "posits" means "to take literally." Here again, as with the other issues, the question for us is not who is right, but why the controversy? It seems strange indeed that the criticism should be voiced so often when in fact some of the

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 38-46. A thoughtful analysis of why the functional theory of religion is radical is W. L. Kolb's "Values, Positivism, and the Functional Theory of Religion," *Social Forces*, 31 (May, 1953), pp. 305-311. "To spread the idea that a belief in ultimate validity of values is necessary but illusory," says Kolb, "would be to destroy society through destroying or confusing this belief." In another vein is the attack on the present writer's "functional" theory of religion by Gordon George, S.J., in "Some Sociologists Out of Bounds," *America*, 93 (January 15, 1955), pp. 397-398. "In the name of science," says George, "he [Davis] has unscientifically reduced religion to a mere device for bolstering social order." Similarly, Thomas F. O'Dea, "The Sociology of Religion," *American Catholic Sociological Review*, 15 (June, 1954), pp. 73-103.

³⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 44 (italics in original).

³⁴ Bredemeier, *op. cit.*, pp. 173, 175. This is the utilitarian position.

³⁵ Gregg and Williams, *op. cit.*, condemn functionalism for not making a clear-cut distinction between good and bad. They say: "the cultural dichotomy which functionalism needs would at the outset distinguish *good* from *bad* goals, stultifying from liberating institutions, efficient from inefficient customs." (p. 608) See A. L. Kroeber's interesting comment on the article, "An Authoritarian Panacea," *op. cit.*, pp. 318-320.

best analyses of social change have come from people labeled as functionalists.³⁸ It seems even stranger when, in looking over these works, we find they do not differ in any basic way from many studies of social change by persons opposing functionalism or at least not wearing the functionalist label.³⁹ Perhaps the idea of incompetence in this regard is a deduction from the fact that functionalism began as a revolt against historicism. As we shall see, however, the revolt was not against the study of change itself but against the omission of sociological analysis from such study. If it is true that functionalists have devoted less attention to social change than to statics, the same can be said of sociology and of social anthropology in general in recent decades. It happens that theories of social change, for understandable reasons, are ideologically significant. Possibly the charge of incompetence in this field represents, in part at least, still another use of functionalism as a means of criticizing sociological analysis.

THE ILLUSION OF A FUNCTIONAL METHOD

The substantive issues so far discussed all point to the conclusion that, if there is a functional method, it is simply the method of sociological analysis. Now let us examine more directly the persistent idea that it constitutes a more special method.

Functionalism and Exact Laws. Evans-Pritchard, following Radcliffe-Brown, says that functionalism rests on two propositions, one of which is "that social life can be re-

duced to scientific laws which allow prediction."⁴⁰ It is therefore startling to find another functionalist, Talcott Parsons, stating the opposite. We cannot yet "develop a complete dynamic theory" of action, he says, and "therefore, the systematization of theory in the present state of knowledge must be in 'structural-functional' terms." The latter is primitive, the highest state of theory being one "permitting deductive transitions to be made from one aspect or state of a system to another." Since this is possible only in the most fragmentary way in the sciences of action at present, "there is danger of losing all the advantages of systematic theory. But it is possible to retain some of them . . . [by] a second best type of theory," the structural-functional.⁴¹

These contrasting views can be reconciled if we forget functionalism and ask how we know when theory is exact. We know it when the theory is logically tight and empirically proven. Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown are saying that a natural science of human society *can be* developed. Parsons is saying that a rather primitive state of theorizing is about *all we have now*, but he too believes that a more exact science is possible. There is actually no contradiction, but there *seems* to be one because the same term, *functional analysis*, is used with opposite meanings.

Functional versus Causal. The occasional view that functional analysis is *not* causal analysis apparently arises from two sources: first, the image of functionalism as theory and hence as excluding raw data or pure data-manipulation; second, the Parsonian image of it as excluding exact laws too. The conclusion would not follow from the first source, except on the premise that causation is identical with evidence or statistical correlation. If, however, *causal analysis* is construed in the usual sense of discovering relationships between phenomena, there is excellent ground for stating this to be impossible in a systematic way without theory. It is the theory which provides the idea of what would be significant to test and the notion of the conditions under which a test would be conclusive.

³⁸ A few examples: Marion J. Levy's analyses of institutional factors in Chinese and Japanese economic development; Merton's studies of the rise of science; Wilbert E. Moore's work on labor and industrialization; Bellah's study of religion and change in Japan; Bryce Ryan's historical chapters on caste in Ceylon; Geoffrey and Monica Wilson's theory of change in central Africa; Schapera's studies of native transition in South Africa.

³⁹ I see no basic difference of method or theory between the analysis of ideology and industrialization by Reinhard Bendix, who opposes functionalism, and the analysis of Puritanism and science by Merton or the study of the family and industrialization by Levy. Nor would I know whether to classify the work on social change by Ralph Linton, E. H. Spicer, Robert Redfield, Margaret Mead, Ralph Beals, Howard Becker, Fred Cottrell, Charles Loomis, and Philip Selznick as "functionalist" or not.

⁴⁰ Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁴¹ *The Social System*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951, pp. 19-20.

While every experiment requires the use of principles of interpretation, the evidence for the truth of these principles comes ultimately through observation and experiment. But such further experiments once more require principles of interpretation, and this process is endless.⁴²

Doubtless the *feeling* behind the separation of functional and causal analysis has some basis. Parsons' characterization of actual functional analysis as primitive theory is correct. Functional studies provide an intuitive grasp of how social structures fit together, of the principles somehow operative in going societies, much more than they provide logically precise or empirically proven propositions. The contribution of such work is that of bringing forth a framework, a point of view, in terms of which interpretation is possible. At the same time, as we have seen, verification is difficult. Some functionalists have seemed unwilling to discipline their language or test their propositions, taking instead the easy path of verbal tapestry. As a result, sociologists who have learned the techniques of empirical research come to feel that functionalism is a crank method, and they are encouraged in this by functionalists themselves who say they are engaged in non-causal analysis, whatever that is. But there will always be speculative sociological theory. From the standpoint of scientific discovery, the interesting part of theory is not the verified but the unverified propositions. A theory proved is no longer theory; it is fact. What is still unproved is speculation; it is, as commonly said, "theoretical." If the broadest theory in sociology is thrown out on the ground that it is "functionalism," and if what is recommended in its stead are neat single propositions whose validity is proved but whose significance is not, the result will be scientific ritualism.

WHY THE MYTH?

Logicians habitually explain schools of thought as due to logical blunders. Thus, according to Ernest Nagel, "Functionalism in the social sciences has admittedly been inspired, and continues to be influenced, by the supposed character of functional analyses

⁴² Nagel, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

in physiology."⁴³ Nagel presents no evidence for this assertion, nor does he explain why the blunder happened to be committed and become popular at the particular time. The record shows that the functional lineage goes in direct line from William Robertson Smith, a philologist and Biblical and Semitic scholar, through Durkheim, a student of law and sociology, to Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, none of whom had any experience or interest in physiology. Radcliffe-Brown drew an analogy between his mode of thinking and that of physiology, but this was merely *post hoc* rationalization of a method he had long been using and had admittedly borrowed from Durkheim.⁴⁴ Malinowski, who became identified with "functionalism" but was a late borrower of the word "function," was even less concerned with physiology.

Actually, the rise of "functionalism" can be explained sociologically, as due to the peculiar conditions found in the sociological and anthropological professions around the turn of the century. Briefly, the key fact was the absence of a sociological point of view, and the key problem (for students dimly perceiving the idea) was how to develop and establish this point of view. We have tried to state earlier the reasons why this point of view is difficult to adopt and maintain. Suffice it to realize that in the discipline called "sociology" there were, concretely, two chief obstacles—the fact that various brands of encyclopedism⁴⁵ and re-

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 247.

⁴⁴ In *The Andaman Islanders*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922, Radcliffe-Brown first attempted "to develop a new method in the interpretation of the institutions of a primitive people." Although the book was not published until 1922, he had written it in 1910, and he says that the new method "will not perhaps seem so novel now as it would have done then" (p. ix). In this book he shows no concern with methods in physiology, but in fact states his methodological assumptions in such a way as to make them incompatible with physiological procedures—e.g., in insisting on the importance of the "meaning" of a social custom (pp. 229–235). His article, "On the Concept of Function in Social Science," in which he spoke of "an analogy between social life and organic life," did not appear until 1935. *American Anthropologist*, 37 (July–September, 1935), pp. 395–402.

⁴⁵ Comte's concept of society included almost everything; Spencer's notion of sociology was that it included the other social sciences, and Ward's that it embraced all truth.

ductionism⁴⁶ were masquerading under the name, and the fact that ethics and social reform were woven into the analysis.⁴⁷ The situation was worse in anthropology, because that field supposedly embraced man as an organism as well as human history and all of culture.⁴⁸ If sociological analysis was to receive recognition as an anthropological specialty in competition with archeology, physical anthropology, historical reconstruction, and cultural anthropology, it had to assert itself. As usual, a movement gains strength if it can rally under a special name. In this case the most appropriate name, sociology, was precluded, not only because it already designated a rival discipline, but also because, as just noted, it was tainted by contrary meanings. There was another term, however, which seemed to pick up the essence of what was meant. This was the term "function" which had been deliberately used by Durkheim, the founder of what has often been called the "sociological school" in anthropology. Although Radcliffe-Brown explicitly adopted the term as a key concept, it was the irrepressible Malinowski who championed it so insistently that the name "functionalism"—long used in philosophical circles to designate a focus on activity rather

than structure—came to be applied to the movement.⁴⁹ Malinowski made it crystal clear that he was fighting against evolutionary theory and trait-diffusion analysis—two contrary points of view that he says had dominated anthropology. Under their dominance there was little room for the study of societies as going concerns. It was his mission to make room for it under the banner of functionalism. As soon as this term came to be applied to sociological analysis in anthropology, it was also used in sociology for the same purpose.

This interpretation of the rise of functionalism explains a paradox in its history—the fact that the hardest battle for functional analysis was fought in anthropology, whereas the most effective critical and methodological discussion of it emerged in sociology. The reason for the hard initial battle in anthropology lay in the entrenched character of the competing interests in that field; the battle was for the *admission* of sociological analysis against the indifference or opposition of older preoccupations.⁵⁰ Subsequently the debate

⁴⁶ Social phenomena were being "explained" in all conceivable terms except the sociological. There were organic, psychological, climatic, racial, ecological, demographic theories in abundance. After finishing two-thirds of his article on "Sociology" for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, MacIver says: "The schools thus far discussed are distinguished by the fact that they applied to social phenomena the specific concepts or the specific methods of some other science or group of sciences." Vol. 14, pp. 232–247.

⁴⁷ Accounts of the "theories" of nineteenth-century sociologists are mostly accounts of what they "advocated." "Spencer was so busy throughout his life attempting to formulate a doctrine of what the state should not do that he failed to develop any coherent positive theory of the state." Harry E. Barnes, *Introduction to the History of Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 128. Comte's religion of positivism got in the way of his science of sociology. Le Play was mainly a social reformer who "set forth the principles of Christian morality, duty and obedience to authority as the bases of a sound economic and social organization." Gottfried Salomon, "Le Play," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 9, p. 412.

⁴⁸ Franz Boas' article, "Anthropology," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, pp. 73–110, in effect claimed for this field the whole of human knowledge.

⁴⁹ In 1931 Horace Kallen, a philosopher, noting in his article on "Functionalism," *loc. cit.*, that a trend toward functionalism was manifesting itself in architecture, law, psychology, etc., added that "Malinowski appears to be aiming at an equally thoroughgoing functionalism in anthropology." Some of the means by which Malinowski became identified as the leader of functionalism are questionable. His writings, which owe many of their ideas to Durkheim and his followers, characteristically ignored or misrepresented these predecessors. His long article on "Culture" in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, where he argued his complete case for functionalism, caricatured Durkheim and ignored Radcliffe-Brown altogether. He was so extreme and careless in his statements that the critics of functionalism found him a convenient standard-bearer for that point of view. Whenever they needed a quotation to illustrate one of the fallacies of functionalism, they could usually find one in Malinowski's writings. His readable and imaginative style of writing, his capacity for eliciting the enthusiasm of students, his prolific output—these were further factors in his acquiring the leadership of the functionalist movement.

⁵⁰ The first edition of A. L. Kroeber's widely used text, *Anthropology*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923, contained nothing on social anthropology. At the end of the chapter on religion (p. 325) he felt uneasy enough to admit "there must be laws underlying culture phenomena;" but he said their source must lie "obviously in the human mind. The laws of anthropological data, like those of history, are the laws of psychology." Boas, in his 40,000-word article on "Anthropology" for the *Encyclopedia of the So-*

died down because, once this kind of work had forced its way into anthropology as functionalism, there was no longer any question of its admission, for it was then recognized as one among a plurality of distinct anthropological interests.⁵¹ Furthermore, having been accepted as a separate type of interest, functionalist anthropology was distracted from theoretical self-criticism by its overwhelming emphasis on ethnography—that is, on informal description and interpretation of single simple societies. “Field work” in this sense became a *mystique* among social anthropologists,⁵² with the result that singularly little systematic comparison was attempted and hence not much empirically disciplined general theory. Functionalism was easily applied at the case-study level, to the analysis of particular primitive societies. Historicism in anthropology thus won a partial counter-victory over its upstart opponent, functionalism. The latter remained methodologically weak and self-satisfied as it gained success in anthropology.⁵³

cial Sciences (1930), makes no mention of Malinowski or Radcliffe-Brown and refers to Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl only in the bibliography. His account of the field is preoccupied with evolution, invention, and diffusion in connection with an encyclopedic array of topics running from “food” to “art” and from “economics” to “psychological aspects.”

⁵¹ The case was somewhat like establishing a new department in a university. The new department is usually strenuously opposed when the question of its admission is raised, but, once created, it is grudgingly accepted.

⁵² The chief innovation for which it [the functionalist movement] stands,” says Meyer Fortes, “was . . . the principle of ‘the intensive study of limited areas’ as Haddon described it . . . the study and analysis of a living community in its native habitat with reference to its total social life.” *Social Anthropology at Cambridge Since 1900: An Inaugural Lecture*, Cambridge: University Press, 1953, pp. 16–17.

⁵³ This interpretation of the anthropologists’ lack of critical interest in functional analysis differs from that of Firth. The latter attributes the lack of methodological criticism in anthropology to the fact “that so much of ‘functional thinking’ has passed into general currency unnoticed or at least unnamed.” *Op. cit.*, pp. 245–247. However, his evidence showing how inconsistently and loosely the concept of function is used in contemporary anthropology makes it clear that some additional factors must have been involved. Why would anthropologists allow such slipshod thinking to pass into general currency? The additional factor, in my

In sociology, on the other hand, structural-functional analysis has been subjected to searching criticism and some codification. Since sociologists deal with complex societies, they cannot rely on informal observation and informants but have to employ a variety of research techniques. This gives them a methodological self-consciousness that makes it inevitable that any development such as functionalism will be subjected to technical scrutiny. Furthermore, the traditional interest of sociologists in systematic theory (in part a reflection of their closer ties with economics and philosophy) prompts them to examine the premises and the logic of functionalism.

In both anthropology and sociology, however, and particularly in the latter field, the intensity of the attack on functionalism suggests something more than a purely technical concern. It suggests a persistence, though in more sophisticated form, of the very factors that had originally obstructed strictly sociological analysis and had given rise to reductionism and empiricism. To understand the role of these factors, we must come back to our central historical theme. Having raised the question of how the idea of functionalism as a separate method got started, we must

view, is the concentration on informal case studies of simple communities or local societies. At this superficial level it is easy to “apply” functionalism, but if this is all that is done, there is little to offer a theoretical or methodological challenge.

The popularity of functionalism in anthropology has been due in large part to the ease of applying sociological analysis to simple local societies. The latter, small and often isolated, can be “seen” as totalities. Having relatively little specialization, they facilitate the task of studying the interrelation of the parts of society. Since primitive societies also live in close dependence on nature, they can be readily regarded from the standpoint of societal survival. Being small, isolated, and relatively undifferentiated, they are more traditionalized than advanced societies, thus manifesting in startling fashion the dependence of individual behavior upon the group, the reality of society. Finally, since aboriginal societies are quite different from our own, the values and purposes of the members can be viewed by the observer as part of the phenomena to be explained, not the basis of explanation; thus the distinction between manifest and latent functions can be more easily applied. By the same token, it is easier for the ethnographer to “get away” with his interpretations. Other social scientists, being unacquainted with the society in question, cannot easily check up on him.

now ask why it is that this illusion has persisted.

In a way it is appropriate to speak of functional analysis as something *within* anthropology, because there are branches of that field that have totally different subject-matters. A similar statement with respect to *social* anthropology or sociology, however, is tautological, for the reason that structural-functional analysis *is* sociological analysis. Realization of this tautology is coming in social anthropology, particularly in Britain,⁵⁴ but is still impeded by the confusion between cultural and social anthropology. In sociology the failure to recognize the tautology is largely due, I think, to the fact that sociologists, working mainly on their own society, often take for granted the broad knowledge and interpretation (the "theory") of this society in order to concentrate on empirical fact-finding and reporting, on practical but limited applications, on social reform, or even on research techniques *per se*. To the technicians in the field, functional analysis is remote and speculative theory; their antagonism to theory in general makes them critical of what seems to be the most speculative kind of all. To applied sociologists functional analysis is uncomfortable, to social reformers it is anathema, because it subjects to scrutiny the very goals for which application is made or reform intended. Such extra-scientific considerations, however, are more effective when not revealed. The belief that functionalism is some special kind of theory or method permits an attack on sociological analysis which seems to be only an attack on functionalism.

REASONS FOR ABANDONMENT

The early rise of functionalism helped to make a place in sociology and anthropology for those wishing to explain social phenomena in terms of social systems, as against those who wished to make no explanation at all, to explain things in terms of some *other* system, or to plead a cause. Now, however, the movement that was once an asset has turned into a liability. The idea that functionalism is a special method has become a source of con-

fusion and needless controversy. Above all, by a curious turn, it has become a convenient cloak under which the old enemies of sociological analysis can make their attack.

We have seen how difficult it is to say *what* functionalism is. Not only do definitions differ within each camp, but we find that so-called functionalists and professed enemies of functionalism are often *doing* the same kind of analysis. The name "functionalism" implies a difference of method or interpretation that does not exist. Not only is energy wasted in protracted discussion of this nebulous method, but the genuine issues are obscured. If a table is made of the theoretical issues in which there is a difference of opinion *on scientific grounds alone*, we shall find that the people called functionalists do not share positions, nor do the people who are non-functionalists. Yet issues are often debated as if they were an incidental battle in the warfare between the functionalists and some other camp, and some issues are meaningless apart from that supposition. For instance, we have seen that the question of "assuming" social integration or social conflict is a false issue conceived as a fight between functionalism and Marxism.⁵⁵ Once issues are understood to be those of sociological analysis itself, the false ones can be eliminated more effectively and the others debated more clearly.

Sociology and social anthropology are too mature to continue the archaic notion that their work is a battle between "isms." As Radcliffe-Brown says, "names ending in *-ism* do not apply to scientific theories, but do apply to philosophical doctrines."⁵⁶ More importantly, we have seen that the special language that gave functionalism its name is itself, if not archaic, at least so close

⁵⁵ To say that functionalism is wrong because it assumes integration, whereas Marxism is right because it assumes conflict, is to overlook that both are wrong as scientific theories insofar as they commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

⁵⁶ He continues: "By calling his doctrine 'functionalism' Malinowski seems to have wished to emphasize that it was the product of one mind, like any philosophical doctrine, not, like a scientific theory, the product of the cooperative thinking of a succession of scientists. Might it not prevent confusion if it were renamed Malinowskianism?" "Functionalism: A Protest," *American Anthropologist*, 51 (April-June, 1949), pp. 320-323.

⁵⁴ As witness Firth's view that all of social anthropology in Britain is functionalist now.

to ordinary moralistic discourse that it tends to lead people (even some functionalists) to do what functionalism has tried to avoid—the substitution of the actor's point of view for that of the observer. To speak of the *function* of an institution *for* a society or *for* another institution in that society is a way of asking what the institution does within the system to which it is relevant. But, having connotations that are impossible to control, the word is more of a hindrance than a help to communication.⁵⁷ Natural scientists occasionally use the term, and others like it, to convey a quick notion of how something fits into a system; but such language is acknowledged to be a way of conveying the general layout at the start of a discussion, not a medium for presenting systematic analysis. That the function of the heart is to pump blood through the body was doubtless a discovery when made, but if every time one establishes a relationship one has to say “the function of such and such is to do such and such” the circumlocution becomes tiresome. Why not say simply that

⁵⁷ To some persons the term has the added meaning of “good,” “necessary,” “sole.”

the heart pumps blood through the system? Insofar as functionalism is defined as analysis that uses the term “function” and derivatives like “eufunction” and “dysfunction,” it is a semantic artificiality—a fact which doubtless explains one's embarrassment when someone in a field of physical science asks what “functionalism” is. It is worth noting that economics, the most systematic of the social sciences, has not found it necessary to evolve a special method using the concept “function” or a school of thought called “functionalism.”

Let me make it clear that I do not consider the myth of functionalism as a special method in sociology or anthropology to be a catastrophe. As stated earlier, in my opinion some of the sociological work wearing the functional label is the best ever done, and some of it is poor. The quality has nothing to do with the label or with use of the term *function*. The designation of a school called functionalism will doubtless die out in time anyway. My effort here has simply been based on the assumption that minor gains will be made if the process of dying is not unduly prolonged.

THE FUNCTIONAL THEORY OF STRATIFICATION: SOME NEGLECTED CONSIDERATIONS

DENNIS H. WRONG

Brown University

The functional theory of stratification advanced by Davis and Moore attempts to explain the universality and the necessity of inequality in societies with a complex division of labor, a task that is independent of efforts to explain the division of labor itself or the intergenerational perpetuation of inequalities along family lines. The theory is so general, however, that it excludes none of the Utopian models of “classless societies” proposed by Western thinkers and, its critics to the contrary notwithstanding, says nothing whatsoever about the range of inequality and the determinants of the range in concrete societies. The theory appears to understate the degree to which positions are inherited by failing to view societies in long-range historical perspective. In common with the arguments of its critics, it also ignores the possible disruptive consequences of mobility and equality of opportunity, a theme notably neglected by American sociologists.

NEARLY fifteen years after its original publication, the issues raised by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore in their article “Some Principles of Stratification”¹ are still being debated by sociologists.

Critics of the authors' thesis have succeeded in showing that there are a great many things about stratification that Davis and Moore have failed to explain, but they have not succeeded in seriously denting the central argument that unequal rewards are

¹ *American Sociological Review*, 10 (April, 1945), pp. 242–249. An extended and revised version of the theory which, as Davis has complained, the critics have largely ignored appears in Kingsley Davis,

Human Society, New York: Macmillan, 1949, pp. 366–378.