

MPhil Lecture Five: Functionalism

Functionalism is the most ferociously holistic of social theories; or would be if it was not inclined to be benign rather than ferocious. That is, functionalism tends to operate by explaining events, institutions and practices – especially the latter – in terms of their *good consequences* either for the social system as a whole or for the individuals who operate that social system. The claim is that a practice or institution ‘functions’ as it does because it is ‘functional for’ individuals or the social system as a whole.

Red Herrings

It is sometimes thought that functional explanation is intrinsically improper; this is usually because people associate functionalism with pre-Galilean explanations in terms of teleology. Pre-Galilean cosmology thought of the world as structured in a way that entailed a ‘proper place’ for everything, and that equipped everything with conative powers that ensured it would try to reach its proper place. (Sublunary matter *belongs* on the surface of the earth, so falls towards it.) Post Galileo, it is obvious that this results in bad astronomy. The temptation is to think it is the sort of explanation not its misapplication that is at fault. But there are many things to which functional explanation is perfectly appropriate – mixer taps have a function that explains how they work. Broadly, anything that has been built to achieve a goal is functionally explicable. (It’d be wholly impossible to understand vanished societies except on the assumption that all sorts of things have functional explanations; and conversely, it is just because we can’t work out what they were *for* that the stones at Stonehenge and the Easter Island giant statues puzzle us so thoroughly.)

Why does functionalism refuse to die gracefully?

Functionalism is endlessly abused, but somehow survives. It’s not obvious why. One explanation is that we are intrigued by ‘invisible hand’ explanations; somehow the right outcome is achieved behind our backs – markets clear, pathologies are cured by witchcraft rituals, the balance of power is preserved among nations, but at no point does anyone or any formal institution aim to achieve it. The existence of equilibria of this sort inspires the thought that the system functions to achieve these outcomes ‘behind our backs.’ There are so many instances that they inspire **both** a taste for quasi-economic rational choice theorising **and** a taste for functionalism.

Is functionalism intrinsically conservative?

It is commonly said that functionalism is conservative; the plausibility of the charge is obvious: if we are looking for ‘good consequences’ or ‘misunderstood purposes’ of institutions and practices, we are reasonably accused of praising the practices we ascribe good consequences to. In the 1950s, sociology was full of articles on the ‘function of x’ that were interesting descriptions of the benign effects of x. The function of class inequality was a universal favourite of the disciples of Talcott Parsons – it was a recruitment system for the performance of the assorted functions of maintaining order, managing industry, and providing ideological coherence. But, Cohen’s *Karl Marx’s Theory of History* is adequate refutation of the thought that functionalism *must* be conservative. ‘The task of capitalism is to create its grave-diggers’ is not obviously conservative.

Problems about ‘functions as’ and ‘functions to’

In the literature there are many casual quasi-explanations that talk about events, practices and institutions that ‘function as’ or ‘function to’ whatever it might be. There is invariably a problem: does the phrase carry an explanatory load or not? The Merton story about the boss system in essence said it ‘functioned as’ a substitute for a welfare system that hadn’t been invented yet. It sort of did: but does that explain its existence? If not, the functional story is non-explanatory.

One story that won’t do

Why Merton won’t do: manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are fine, but collapse into the purposes of the persons who made something happen; latent functions are nice – but non-explanatory and undercut by something like a quasi-market story.

And another – but better

One nice quasi-functional explanation is that of the guided missile; the most compendious laws of its behaviour really are teleological/functional – it ‘does whatever it takes to pursue the target.’ Its behaviour can be predicted. And its ‘law’ of functioning has the right properties – it aims at a result that it may not achieve. (Think of a central heating system on a very cold night.) It won’t do – if it won’t – because it tells you *what* but not *how*; and *how* needs a wiring diagram, not a refinement of functional stories. This becomes clearer when analysing Cohen on consequence

explanation – of which the guided missile’s behaviour is a very good instance, and one unmatched in social science.

And one that gets close

The nearest social science version is Cohen’s elegant analysis of consequence explanations. Cohen defends – defended – the Marxian thought that relations of production function ‘so as to’ promote the development of forces of production. (In effect, that social structure functions to maximise the productivity of existing technology and skills in its employment.) This is in some ways more like Spencer than Marx, but Marx certainly was in some ways a functionalist – since he could not have been such an admirer of Hegel otherwise. The elegance of Cohen’s account lies in the analysis of what are called consequence explanations: $[A \rightarrow B] \rightarrow A$ or ‘if A will bring about B, then A’ or ‘the fact that A causes B causes A.’

But still won’t do

It won’t do i) because it is a very unnerving sort of causal explanation; and ii) it is undercut by situational logic plus unintended consequences. Hence, we can resort to visual aid 2 – Situation at T1 gives agent A overwhelming reason to do X; this brings about Situation at T2 which gives agent A.... and so on. Agent A does not intend to bring about situation at T2, but predictably will do so; temporary equilibria will be established, and in the end the general collapse of capitalism will supervene.

The pleasures of evolutionary theory

Cohen thinks evolutionary theory *justifies* functional explanation; Elster thinks it *replaces* functional explanation. The point is simply that it *justifies* functional explanation by showing *why* consequence explanations hold in cases where there is no suggestion that the other reason for their holding – human intention – can or does hold. (Nature is not the Great Designer, but evolution ensures that only those entities that the Great Designer *would have* designed remain alive long enough to establish their genetic lineage.) But at the same time, it *undercuts* functional explanation because we are even happier offering a historical narrative about the efficiency with which creatures constituted in thus and such a way will survive.

And its limited purchase

In any case evolutionary theory has a weak purchase on social life as distinct from speciation and the like. The reasons are obvious: evolutionary theory relies on there

being a fierce selection mechanism that eliminates the unfit. There is no such mechanism with societies. There may be weak selection in that some institutions and practices fall beside the wayside until something stable emerges. But humans can survive with an extraordinary range of false beliefs and dysfunctional habits – and do. So, although we can dream up endless stories of how evolution might have favoured some form of behaviour that we now see around us, we have no reason to believe that it did.