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Part IV. Sociology without the Will

# 1. Functionalism

## Introduction

I have traced the science of the Will from the invention of the concept by Augustine of Hippo in 386 up to Hegel's interdisciplinary concept of the Will stretching from the natural will of any living creature up to the universal Will of a human community. But this was speculative. The detailed study of human behaviour that was needed to give this concept a scientific basis could not be carried out by a single philosopher living in early 19th century.

L.S. Vygotsky, working in the 1920s and '30s in the Soviet Union, basing himself on all the psychological research available at the time and doing his own experimental research, bequeathed us a psychology of the Will. Vygotsky died before he was able to complete this work, so I have drawn on the work of his followers, including A.N. Leontyev and the Activity Theorists. Vygotsky's Psychology was potentially interdisciplinary, and that of the Activity Theorists even more so, but under conditions in the Soviet Union, it was not possible to even to talk about, let alone develop, a scientific Social Theory, beyond the mindless repetition of the maxims of Soviet Marxism. Nevertheless, Leontyev did venture into the domain of Social Theory with his concepts of actions and activities.

It is impossible to produce a concept of the Will suitable for deployment in Social Theory without first conducting immanent critiques of the main currents of twentieth-century Social Theory. Y. Engeström has 'expanded' Vygotsky's and Leontyev's psychology to study the idioculture of organisations and has now expanded his theory into a full-blown social theory, but without an immanent critique of existing social theories. The result is unconvincing.

I will begin with Leontyev, even though, as a social theory, it is inept. Leontyev's extension of his psychology into the domain of Social Theory turned out to be a variety of Functionalism. After a treatment of Leontyev's social theory, I will briefly review the Functionalism of Talcott Parsons.

In the second chapter of Part IV, I will examine Structuralism through the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Pierre Bourdieu. In the third chapter of this Part, I will examine Anthony Giddens's critique of Structuralism. It was Giddens who popularised the term 'agency'. Through a critique of Giddens and Bourdieu, and drawing on my own critique of Activity Theory (2023), I will propose an adequate theory of the Will and a viable concept of 'agency'.

## A.N. Leontyev's Activity Theory as a Social Theory

I reviewed A.N. Leontyev's theory of the personality earlier. While this theory has some problems, I believe it remains the best approach to the problem of the personality, especially in the form given to it by his student, Fedor Vasilyuk. I also count myself an Activity Theorist in Social Theory, but there are problems with A.N. Leontyev's initial elaboration of the theory.

A.N. Leontyev's social theory reflects life in the Soviet Union and the fables its upper strata told themselves. However, its problems also reflect conditions in the twentieth century on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

## Leontyev's conception of an activity

Vygotsky had determined that the units of the Will – the simplest manifestations of volition – were *artefact-mediated actions*. But an artefact-mediated action cannot be understood in isolation from its motive, which comes from elsewhere. Actions make sense only in the context of a whole series of actions by an individual and the interrelated actions of other individuals – activities, which provide not only the motivation for the action but also a normative representation of the object and the norms of collaboration required to realise the motive. The psychological investigation of *activities* was Leontyev's central project.

Leontyev's psychology thus led directly to an approach to social theory because activities were explicitly *social* entities. Leontyev always remained a psychologist, and despite the great potential of the framework he provided, his contributions to social theory were fatuous.

Activity Theory is defined as follows:

> Activity Theory is the science which takes social life to be an aggregate of activities. This is what it means to say that it takes activities as 'units of analysis'.
>
> Blunden, 2023

Actions belong to an activity insofar as they are all motivated by the same motive, which thus characterises that activity. The problems that immediately arose from Leontyev's implementation of this perfectly good thesis include:

> (1) This definition makes no distinction between activities according to their stage of development and integration into everyday life; a state, a business enterprise or political party, a social movement, a street gang, middle-class etiquette, a passing fashion style or sexual mores. All must be theorised in the same way, without the requirement for a 'unit of analysis' characterising the particular *type* of social practice in question or its stage of development.
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> (2) Leontyev *in fact* took as the unit not an activity but a *type* of activity, such as 'work' or 'play'.
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> (3) In explaining his theory to non-Russian speakers, Russian speakers invariably made no distinction between 'activity' (as in "there's a lot of *activity* in the street today") and 'an activity' (as in "mastering calculus proved to be a difficult *activity* for me").

## Actions and Activities

It is not immediately obvious what the distinction between an action and an activity is. An activity is made up of many actions, usually carried out by different people, and an action is made up of many *operations* that are executed without conscious awareness according to conditions (like stepping over the kerb when you cross the road or the *routine* actions of employees). So there is a

*nesting* relationship between activities, actions, and operations. An activity, such as a surgical procedure, can be part of a larger activity, such as a hospital, which in turn is part of the health service, and so on. And anaesthesia is an activity that is part of a surgical procedure. More elaborate forms of behaviour entail a whole series of actions, each achieved by accomplishing an intermediate *goal* and motivated to attain the same object.

What is the difference between an action and an activity?

Leontyev answered: the goal of an *action differs* from its motive. So this is the definition of an action – *a form of behaviour the motive for which is not identical to its goal.* An action is done for an external reason, not for its own sake. This is a very profound and important insight. In a research project, there is generally an activity whose motive is taken as given, such as the surgery, while all the subordinate actions have intermediate goals directed towards a successful surgery. By this means, one can make an activity-theory-based study of the work of the surgical team. On the contrary, one could take the whole hospital as 'an activity'. There is always some unquestioned 'master' activity defining the 'object'.

## Motivation

'Motive' is a *psychological* category, and so is usually not an appropriate term to apply to a whole activity, which is properly a concept belonging to *social theory*. Not everyone engaged in an activity (such as the production of tyres) is motivated by a need for the outcome (tyres); in fact, probably none of them are. Most of the workers in a tyre factory are motivated by the wage they expect to receive at the end of the week. Their interest in tyres is highly mediated and questionable. Leontyev distinguished between the 'really effective motive' (the wage or the profit, depending on who you are) and the 'merely known motive' (the efficient production of tyres for the market). It is the business of supervisors, administrators, leaders, and bosses of all kinds to *arrange* that participants have some effective motive and understand the already-known motive and their role in achieving it, and that they are duly remunerated.

Leontyev's Activity Theory provides an effective theory for examining motivation, *given* the 'motive' of the activity. However, the theory of motivation that he actually developed was monochrome. Workers were motivated by their wage. The 'really understood motive' of the activity was determined by the Political Committee in its five-year plan or was simply taken as given. For social theorists, these questions are the *whole point* of having a social theory. *Is there* really a need for motorcars, for example, or a need for heroin? And why? Who is doing something about it? And can we really presume that a worker's only motivation for working – if for example, they are a social worker or teacher – is it just their wage? Can it be otherwise? *How* does a leader motivate their employees? *How* is the already-understood motive determined? Will it change? None of these questions are even broached in Leontyev's Activity Theory.

## Objects and Ideals

One of the casualties of the theory is the concept of 'object'. Leontyev put it this way:

> In reality, however, we have to deal with *concrete, specific activities,* each of which satisfies a definite need of the subject, is oriented towards the object of this need, disappears as a result of its satisfaction and is reproduced perhaps in different conditions and in relation to a changed object.
>
> Leontyev, 1978, p. 5

In Activity Theory, 'object' refers to the material worked upon (in German, *das Arbeitsgegenstand*) *and* the aim of the activity. In the section above on Hegel, I elaborated the rather long list of concepts that are needed to clearly express all the distinctions entailed here. It is taken for granted by Activity Theorists that it is in the nature of the *Arbeitsgegenstand* what the motive is – namely, the *ideal* or socially normative condition of the object. So if the object of the activity is a patient, the motive is to produce a normatively healthy person who is no longer a 'patient'. But there is little recognition in Activity Theory of the problematic nature of this ideal. This distinction, that is, between the object worked upon and the ideal form of the object that is the hoped-for outcome, is mystified in Activity Theory.

Leontyev seems to have in mind a society in which industrial production was the norm for all aspects of social life and the five-year plan was a given.

## Objectivism

For Leontyev, objects in the lifeworld *stimulate* and *determine* activities. This places activities in a subordinate role in a lifeworld in which objects are primary. My response to this is to advocate, with Vasilyuk, for a more *thoroughgoing* activity theory, one in which *activities* rather than objects are primary, given to subject and researcher alike. It is *activities* that create objects, are the source of a person's concepts of objects, and orient the person's actions, as opposed to a theory of objective needs 'stimulating' activities. Leontyev agrees that objects are not simply given to human beings; activities and their objects evolve together, historically. But which is the 'independent variable' here?

Leontyev is a dualist. According to Vasilyuk:

> An object is not simply a thing lying outside the life-circuit of the subject, but a thing already absorbed into the subject's being, which has become an essential feature of that being, has been subjectivised by life process even before any special ideal appropriation (cognitive, exploratory, informational, etc.) takes place.
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> Vasilyuk, 1984, p. 89

So, according to Vasilyuk, what Leontyev would call the 'personal sense' of the object does not derive from psychic reflection upon the object, as Leontyev says, but arises unreflectively in the subject's upbringing and life experience. If a crisis arises in pursuit of this object, this might be an occasion for reflection on the part of the individual. A person forms a concept of the object of an activity through participation in activities. It is activities that are the units of life, and both the subjects and the objects of activities are products of those activities.

I believe that we should not have a dualism of units – one unit for life and another unit for the world – but just one unit, *otnosheniya*, for the lifeworld.

Here, Leontyev recognises the fact that one and the same activity reproduces itself despite changes in its object. However, because Leontyev has blurred the distinction between an activity and a type of activity, the significance of this important nuance is lost.

The distinction between the motivations behind an activity and an action is illustrated by Leontyev through a well-known scenario involving a primeval group of hunters, in which some chase the game and others beat the bushes, and the resulting meat is shared by all (see Leontyev, 1981, p. 187).

In a modern economy, however, a person's needs are always met by a highly mediated process of distribution and exchange, so this may turn out to be more complex than it appears at first sight – it cannot be taken for granted that a person knows what tribe they belong to, so to speak, nor that they will, in fact, receive a fair share of the object. Nor is it guaranteed that the subject has any need at all for what is produced, even indirectly. There is more to social life than a division of labour, even in the Soviet Union.

## Personal Sense

For Leontyev, 'meaning' is something objective for the individual:

> Meaning is the generalisation of reality that is crystallised and fixed in its sensuous vehicle, i.e. normally in a word or a word combination. ... Meaning thus belongs primarily to the world of objective, historical phenomena.
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> Leontyev, 1978, p. 202

According to Leontyev, the psyche develops through two sources – the immediacy of an individual's own sense interactions with the world and their interactions with the system of signs used in communication. By means of sense-images constructed through participation in social practices people get to know about their own world, and by means of the meanings carried by language (and other cultural artefacts), they get to know about the world beyond their immediate horizons. Both figure together in the *formative processes* of an individual's consciousness. In this way, the abstract meanings contained in words, for example, are filled with sensual content by means of their association with the individual's concrete experiences, and socially developed modes of action are introduced into the individual's interactions with Nature. The constellation of meanings encoded in words, which Leontyev calls 'social consciousness', he characterised as '*objective*'. Social consciousness is a social and *not* a psychological category, and, alongside the practical activity of individuals, is one of the *formative components* of their psyche.

Personal sense and therefore consciousness, differs from one person to another simply because of incidental differences from one individual to another. With the introduction of *class* and other social divisions, people's experiences are conditioned by their social position, so personal senses express social positions. Social consciousness enters into the formation of the consciousness of every individual, but *systematic* differences in consciousness arise because of the divergences in people's class position. With the growth of inequality, and in particular the emergence of wage labour and capital, alienation arises, and personal sense may find itself not merely divergent from but in *opposition* to social consciousness.

For example, the worker knows intimately how a commodity is made, but relates to it only as work. On the other hand, the capitalist owner knows nothing of the production process but sees in the product a thing that can be sold for a profit. As Leontyev saw it, at both ends of this scale, the personal sense of the activity is divorced from its objective meaning – that is, from the social process in its entirety. This rupture is manifested as *alienation*.

The social formation has to reproduce itself, and consequently, arrangements are formed (by whom?) that motivate capitalists to hire workers to produce what is needed for the social formation to reproduce itself. These arrangements include the profit motive and wages.

The functionalist fallacy must be noted here: one can deduce from the fact of the continued reproduction of the social formation that there must be some reason for these various institutions, but this does not, in itself, constitute an *explanation* for how *this* practice and not some other comes into being and sustains itself, unless one postulates the entire social formation as a self-conscious agent. This is rarely the case.

Leontyev claimed that people cannot resolve the problem of this alienation by producing a 'personal language' of their own, having access only to the ready-made 'objective meanings' encoded in social consciousness. If social consciousness is unable to express personal senses a fundamental contradiction is created in the person's consciousness.

## Ideology

Leontyev says that people acquire words and concepts via interaction with their circle of associates, and these may include 'ideological' notions that are at odds with social consciousness and enter into the conflict between personal senses and social consciousness. He talks of the ideological struggle in society, in which people strive to acquire concepts and words to interpret and express their experiences and personal sense of things.

Leontyev formulates this problem as follows: on the one hand, personal senses arising from a person's unique experiences in their world, which are concrete, personal, and *subjective*; and on the other hand, *objective* abstract meanings, encoded in words, which, as we have seen, can be *more or less adequate* to a person's life experiences. As opposed to differences in consciousness arising from incidental differences in experience or personal development, differences in meaning borne by ideology express systematic differences in social position. In seeking to resolve conflicts in their comprehension of the world, people *effectively* choose not between meanings but between social positions, expressed and comprehended through concepts and their associated meanings. Leontyev said that ideologies obey socio-historical laws and, at the same time, obey the inner logic of their own development. He says that all the meanings expressed by ideologies are *objective* but are *more or less adequate* to the lives of individuals.

This 'more or less adequate' approach to handling the problem of the objectivity of systems of concepts or ideologies has some virtues. It is never useful to claim that such-and-such a theory or concept is simply objectively true or false. It is always a question of *how adequate* a theory is for someone faced with certain tasks and problems, or, to put it somewhat differently, *how much of a basis* the

theory has in the reality of a particular life: a substantial basis or a very slight one?

So, although some meanings are more adequate than others, whether those of 'social consciousness' or those of 'ideologies', all meanings are *objective*, he says. They have *some* social basis. Objective meanings interact with personal senses (tied up with a person's individual life experiences) in the formation of a person's consciousness, which is *psychological*, subjective, and personal. Perception is *both* immediate and mediated.

The relation between the individual and the universal is thus rendered by Leontyev onto the axis of the subjective and the objective, and in the deployment of Leontyev's theory in psychology, the idea of an objective meaning being *more or less adequate* is, in fact, rarely utilised among his followers. Writers in this tradition pose problems of learning and behaviour in terms of personal, subjective meaning versus objective, 'societally agreed' meaning. The difference in power between, for example, teacher and pupil easily leads to meanings being cast as simply objective or subjective.

Consider the following illustration offered by Leontyev himself:

> For example, all older schoolchildren know the meaning of an examination mark and the consequences it will have. Nonetheless, a mark may appear in the consciousness of each individual pupil in essentially different ways; it may, for example, appear as a step forward (or obstacle) on the path to his chosen profession, or as a means of asserting himself in the eyes of the people around him, or perhaps in some other way. This is what compels psychology to distinguish between the conscious objective meaning and its meaning *for the subject,* or what I prefer to call the 'personal sense'. In other words, an examination mark may acquire different personal senses in the consciousness of different pupils.
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> 1977, p. 19

It corresponds to the consciousness of some teachers and psychologists to neglect the fact that what Leontyev calls 'objective meaning' is also determined by ideologies corresponding to social positions and may be *more or less* adequate to the needs of someone according to *their* social position. Differences in 'personal sense' are taken to be just that: personal. For Leontyev, conflicts between the individual and the universal are rendered along the axis of subjective or objective, and teachers and psychologists are to take themselves to be guardians of the objective.

This is a false dichotomy, and, in fact, throughout Leontyev's theory we find many distinctions wrongly rendered into dichotomies rather than relations of mediation. Rather than introducing 'degrees of adequacy' to the concept of objectivity, the relation between the *individual* and the *universal* must be seen as mediated by the *particular* and not confused with the subjective/objective relation. We could think of this as a scale: on the one end is the universal – what is true for everyone; in the middle is the particular – what is true for this or that social group or class only; and on the other end, is the individual – what is true for this person alone. The relation of individual, particular and universal is both simpler and more rational than subjective and more-or-less objective.

What is more, it is Activity Theory that is, in fact, best placed of all to represent this mediated relationship.

Leontyev did not fully work out the necessary relations in terms of an *activity theory*. His treatment of ideology in terms of objective meanings that are more or less adequate – that is to say, particular rather than general – suggests that the relation between the individual and the universal is mediated by activity. But there is, in fact, a pervasive dualism in Leontyev's writing.

Consider this dichotomy:

> … mental reflection occurs owing to the bifurcation of the subject's vital processes into the processes that realise his direct biotic relations, and the 'signal' processes that mediate them.
>
> 1977, p. 410

I would say that mental reflection is not just 'caused' by the introduction of sign use in the self-regulation of the organism. Rather, mental reflection facilitates self-regulation by *mediating between* the physiology of the organism and its behaviour.

Later, he refers to:

> This is the problem of the specific nature of the functioning of knowledge, concepts, conceptual models, etc., in the system of social relations, in the social consciousness, on the one hand, and, on the other, in the individual's activity that realises his social relations, in the individual consciousness.
>
> 1977, p. 410

Here Leontyev mystifies this relation, reducing it to a dichotomy of the individual versus 'society', neglecting an important distinction in the constitution of social consciousness, i.e., on he one hand the *material conditions* including the technical means of production, land, built environment, and the literature, language, and human material, and on the other the *activities* by means of which these material conditions (artefacts) are put into motion and penetrate individual consciousness. In other words, this is actually a *three*-sided relation: material conditions, activities and actions.

Leontyev takes 'social consciousness' to be an objective, material category, and in doing so he is consistent with Soviet Marxism. On the other hand, individual consciousness is a subjective, psychological category. The process that 'bridges' or mediates between these two is activity, and activity is both social and psychological. This observation is important for social theory because, if activities are to be units for social theory, there must be no ambiguity as to whether activities are psychological or social entities. They are *both*, and this is given concrete content by the fact that activities mediate between material conditions, including the ideal (i.e., social) properties of artefacts, and human consciousness, just as consciousness mediates between material conditions and human activity, and material conditions mediate between consciousness and activity.

As a result of Leontyev's failure to grasp these mediated relationships and his persistent rendering of these dialectical relations as dichotomies, a number of weaknesses have developed in his theory.

## Dogmatism

It is generally recognised that there may be a number of legitimate opinions on any given question arising in social life, and if our interlocutor has a different opinion, we do not normally recommend that they visit a psychologist or go back to school. We understand that one's life experience, social position, commitments, and the activities in which one is engaged will give a person a different angle on things, and sometimes it is quite impossible to find an answer to some question that is genuinely satisfactory to everyone regardless of their social position. To deny this and, on the contrary, suggest that there is only one 'objective' meaning to something and cast other views as biased and partial, as Leontyev does, is dogmatism. Science always seeks objective truth, but this is never final.

Within the context of a specific activity or institution, such as a certain branch of science, such an insistence may be justified to an extent. Nevertheless, to equate the universal and the objective is a category mistake. What is universally known may turn out to be objectively wrong.

Further, an activity may be oriented to a certain object at one moment, but contradictions and problems will emerge and the concept of the object will change. The concept that participants have of the object of an activity (which will differ from person to person) develops over time. *Activities are learning processes*. To insist at the outset on a certain definition of the object, which is continuously consumed and produced, would be misplaced dogmatism.

## Productivism

In common with all social theory in the Soviet era, human 'activity' is rendered as 'labour', with the strong implication that a certain kind of labour – industrial labour – is the archetype and has a determining function. The genetic derivation of Leontyev's theory, beginning from micro-organisms and working its way up through early humans to class society, justifies a productivist explanation. As useful as this Marxist approach might be for historical analysis, this by no means justifies its place in psychology or even in social theory in a 'post-industrial society'. Language co-evolved with the production of tools, so there is no reason to privilege labour over communication in the foundations of psychology. Developing a foundation for social theory from a psychology that has surreptitiously introduced a productivist theory of history into its foundations risks misleading social theory.

Further, although signs do figure throughout as mediating communication and artefacts in general remain the mediators of all actions, Leontyev seems to have put a distance between himself and Vygotsky by emphasising labour – *i.e.*, *tool*-mediated activity – rather than *sign*-mediation – *i.e.*, communicative activity. Leontyev's productivism is an upshot of this marginalisation of sign mediation. In today's world, it is difficult to draw a line between communication and production, especially in the most dominant economies. In any case, Leontyev never had anything to say about the *actual* labour process in the USSR, where he lived.

## Functionalism

The social theory that flows from Leontyev's theory, in which *needs* are given and activities are *derivative*, is a variety of Functionalism. Functionalism sees the society as an *organism* in which all the constituent parts have 'functions', i.e., answer to the question, "What is this *for*? What is its *role*?" Like biological organisms, social formations *evolve* and exhibit an inherent tendency towards stability; disturbances to their functioning stimulate new processes which restore the status quo. It is descriptive to an extent, but it is *not explanatory*.

This is called 'the teleological fallacy'.

Leontyev sees social activity in terms of various objects, each of which represents some social need and every social formation has evolved social arrangements such that these objects "command the activity of the subject" (1978) and thereby determine the actions of everyone in the community.

But *who* determines the needs of a society? How does that subject gain the authority and resources to act on their determination? 'The needs of society' is not even a coherent notion. In Leontyev's world, which had supposedly surpassed the class differences, 'anarchy of production' and alienation of capitalism, it was the Political Committee that determined all the needs of society and set goals and objects for the various industries in five-year plans. But it is widely accepted now that such a view was always a fantasy. The real subject was always a certain stratum of administrators, usually basing their judgments on lies from their subordinates and wildly out of touch with the realities of life in the Soviet Union. In the case of a liberal capitalist society, the situation is just as bad, if more mysterious: consideration of the needs of the whole community is a truly marginal activity. Anarchy of production reigns.

Since every existing activity is by Leontyev's *definition* directed at a definite social need, we evidently have among those needs war, drugs of addiction, advertising, cigarettes, and obesity-producing foods. The theory may be descriptive, but it simply *fails as an explanatory tool*. The market is not a process for determining and balancing the needs of the community, any more than nature is 'for' human enjoyment. Certainly, *demand* regulates the economy, but 'demand' is conceptually quite distant from 'need'. Need places limits on human behaviour, but these are very elastic limits. Further, the object of every capitalist firm is the accumulation of capital. Any collateral social benefit is purely accidental.

Priority is given to *needs* that stimulate activities, as opposed to a consistent theory of activities which generate needs. But beyond the most basic life-needs of *Homs sapiens*, needs are what are called for by an activity; activities are the 'independent variable', whose motivation is usually obscure.

Implicit in this claim is a categorical definition of 'Functionalism' in which the function of an activity in ensuring the ongoing stability and reproduction of the system is deemed to be *explanatory*. There have been a number of attempts to build functionalist theories of society, and not all are as simplistic as Leonytev's Functionalism. Leontyev was a Psychologist and made no claim to be a Social Theorist. How could he? Such a theory was already known: Soviet Marxism. Leonytev's psychology was explanatory so long as it was restricted to problems of Psychology, and Leontyev knew better than to propose a 'phenomenological'

theory of society, that is, a social theory for which the explanatory principle is individual consciousness.

Any attempt to set out from a good theory of psychology and *adapt* or *extend* it to a theory that is explanatory of modern society is doomed. Before the insights of Soviet Psychology can inform Social Theory, we must first conduct an *immanent critique* of existing social theory, social theories that are the product of countless minds which have jointly addressed themselves to determining a scientific theory of social life.

## Functionalist Sociology

Sociology originated in the work of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim, and from the beginning these writers took societies as organic wholes whose parts could only be understood in terms of the whole. These writers and many who followed saw societies as the products of social evolution. It is common to enquire into any feature of a plant or animal species by asking, "what is it for?" on the understanding that any particular feature of a species must have some 'evolutionary value' for the species in the context of Darwin's theory of evolution. In the same way, the Functionalist tendency in social theory is marked by the question: "What is it for?"

For this discourse, the problem which I have posed as the problem of the freedom of the Will was posed by Sociology as the *structure/agency problem*. Sociology was taken to be a discipline distinct from Psychology as a science of consciousness whereas Sociology was a science of social action. As with Behaviourism, action could be understood without reference to consciousness.

The most prominent figure associated with Functionalism in twentieth-century Sociology is the American Talcott Parsons. Parsons intervened in a wide range of subjects and issues through the middle third of the twentieth century and advocated diverse positions at different times. He did however push the functionalist principle to an extreme which has led to him being widely regarded as the archetype of Functionalism.

Robert K. Merton later corrected some of the overstatements of Parsons' Functionalism. Societies are conflictual, not harmonious; not every component is useful, some are dysfunctional or have no function at all; existing functions are not necessary, there are alternatives, and so on. But the basic method of explanation by function remains the same, simply moderating Parsons' universal Functionalism with a measure of empiricism. Because it still responds to the question: how does the social system reproduce itself and maintain its stability, Functionalism expresses an essentially conservative standpoint.

Functionalism is fundamentally tautological, mistaking need for cause; need cannot in itself function as an explanation. There has to be some real history behind an institution wherein its explanation could be found. Institutions sometimes create the very need they fulfil, and are responding to a multiplicity of conditions, but in any case only exist because people *acted* to bring them about.

Parsons founded the Department of Social Relations at Harvard where he brought psychologists like Gordon Allport together with systems theorists like

Norbert Wiener and sociologists like George Homans together with a clear aim to produce an interdisciplinary theory.

Parsons coined the acronym, AGIL, to represent the four requirements for system continuity; the system must *adapt* to its environment and transform the environment to meet its needs (e.g. an economy); define and achieve its primary *goals* (e.g., a government); *integrate* its components so as to maintain cohesion; and *latency*, maintain and renew the motivations of individuals and cultural patterns.

Parsons denied that his theory had a "system/agency problem" because in his theory of social action, subjects occupied a *situation* created by the system while subjects' actions were regulated by system *norms*, and the subjects' *goals* were also rooted in the system which had arisen to meet those needs. Thus, via subject position, norms and needs the subjects' actions were fully encompassed within the system theorised by Functionalism. Every element of the subject's action is produced by the system.

This product of mid-century American Sociology was in perfect agreement with the Dean of the Faculty of Psychology at the Moscow State University. The anxiety of a generation that had experienced the Great Depression and two World Wars, was expressed in the need for stability and the conformism of McCarthyism and Stalinism.

Although Functionalism played an important role in the development of social theory, the dominant social theory of the twentieth century was Structuralism to which I shall now turn.

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