

1973-03-13b: [CLASS] Functionalist Argument.

In functionalist argument, if it is important how a given person got into a given position in the strata of society, then the argument is not per se applicable to any society; for then an elected president and a hereditary monarch if equivalents in a functional sense, are so different as to make the functional equivalence trivial. The reverse must happen. To be useful the functionalist must relegate the question of the precise character and origin of who has the power, and how he got there, must be relegated to the *n'importe pas*. That is to say, the element of social class is a counterpoise to functionalist description of society. It speaks of consolidation of strata, and their class action; of discreet individuals and how they arrive in class; of mobility within classes seen over time.

In the latter respect the difference between functionalist and class analyses are most evident. Discussing function, the most that can be said is how rigid the stratifications are according to potential mobility, at a given moment. Class analyses describes over time past what does take place in a given society, and explains the various reasons for such movement. There must be a correlation between the functionalists' mobility potential and the long-term class analysts' demonstration of it. But the correspondence of the two is basically of a different genre: The one is hypothetical and ahistorical; the other concrete and historical. Their relationship might seem to be that of theoretical science to applied science: theoretical social science gives the obvious generalization applicable everywhere, by definition, and the applied social scientist finds the unique application of it in a given society. The analogy breaks down, of course, in the power of the theoretical paradigm: in the natural sciences it must be absolute and controlling. Any exception to it in practice is intolerable and leads to breakdown of the paradigm. In social sciences, the theoretical paradigm is perforce very tentative, subject constantly to adjustment but never in peril of destruction. For who can deny that a functionalist description of society has always been and always will be a way of describing society. It is obviously true to everyone, and cannot be otherwise. The only question is how useful it is. It does not really assist much to get an understanding of the dynamics of a given society to say that that society, the same as all societies, can be described in functionalist terms at any given moment.

Perhaps, one could say, that successive functionalist descriptions say 10 years apart, with mobility quotients measured anew, when graphed over time, would give an abstract picture of that society on a mathematical scale which would be useful in any comparative history. Still, however, it would not give any explanation of the forces that operated to make the mobility quotient change over time. The information would be enlightening, and might help direct applied research in classes in a given direction, but all the techniques and explanations of that research would still be outside the abstract mathematical description of what happened. The paradigm would still only be controlling if one found that the course of change in all societies struck the same shape over time. One would have something then akin to what Pareto thought was the universal law of distribution of income in all societies, or what Spengler and Toynbee imagined were the courses of all societies according to their respectively organic and mechanical metaphors of historical change. Theoretical sociologists might do well to try to develop such theories of successive mobility quotients--It is done already in random cases in contemporary societies at a given instant, but not over successive decadal instances in a given modern society let alone been extended to distant historical times. Indeed, one can see the enormous difficulties of doing the latter--although there is a great deal of work done on social mobility in terms of the particular historical forces that account for its occurrence in chosen times and places for certain levels of society. This kind of work cannot be rendered precisely quantitative now, and perhaps

ever. So, the individual qualitative accounts of social change over time in a given society can be added up and a general statement about social mobility there and then can be made; but this remains far from the precise mathematical stratification and mobility quotients that one would like to have--ones which would suddenly control the analysts' chosen problems for investigation. Whatever precise Mathematical-Theoretical paradigm is developed derives from the applied social scientists work, and in theory it seems unimaginable that this derivative nature of the theory could ever be transformed into a controlling paradigm.

In short, the functionalist approach is an obvious theoretical description of how every society in all times past, present and future is divided into strata, but gives no hint of the forces that operate to alter the specific functionalist description of a given society over time. Applied class analysis, on the other hand, concerns itself with the forces that give stability or create mobility to the various strata over time. The latter is the certain domain of historical sociology, or of social historiography, and it includes elements of values held by different groups as well as the material nexus that defines or limits them.

There is, perhaps, sometimes a penchant for those who exalt the functionalist description of society to avoid the valuative element that enters into social change. For, if every society must at any given moment be susceptible to a functionalist description, else it would not be a society at all, then function becomes the most important element, not the values. No matter the values, this is what is at a given moment and what must be, in some way or another, true in any moment. So, the status quo is subtly justified. It is as if the change in the functionalist arrangement of a given moment is tantamount to undermining society's basic definition. What is now, functionally, works; change can thus imply chaos; so, the status quo is to be defended. The fallacy lies in transferring to the functionalist description a valuational basis which it shall never, by definition, ever allow to enter. A proper functionalist argument never states that the values implicit in any description of a given society at a given time have any relevance, or that a short time later another description might vary considerably but the implied difference in values is any concern of his. As soon as he enters into the realm of values, he must suspend the functionalist description as being at all significant, for there is no inherent reason why class structure cannot be drastically changed and the functionalist's abstract formula be equally applicable to the new society. The earlier and the later functionalist descriptions must be equally valid no matter what revolutions in social class, in material as well as ideological basis, has taken place between times.

Now it is the mistake of many social theorists not to keep functionalist and applied analysis separate which introduces unnecessary problems of ideological nature into the study of historical sociology or social history. The functionalist's description should never be part of this. The argument should be waged in terms of the dynamic forces that operate in a given society, in general it will be between those who argue for universally applicable forms--Marxist class struggle, e.g.,--and those who see discreet and spontaneously arising factors as the most important in social dynamics. They deal with values, and rightly they should.