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The Concept of Social Change

A critique of the functionalist theory of social change

Anthony D. Smith

Routledge Revivals

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Anthony Smith's important work on the concept of social change, first published in 1973, puts forward the paradigm of *historical* change as an alternative to the functionalist theory of *evolutionary* change. He shows that, in attempting to provide a theory of social change, functionalism reveals itself as a species of 'frozen' evolutionism.

Functionalism, he argues, is unable to cope with the mechanisms of historical transitions or account for novelty and emergence; it confuses classification of variations with explanation of processes; and its endogenous view of change prevents it from coming to grips with the real events and transformations of the historical record. In his assessment of functionalism, Dr Smith traces its explanatory failures in its accounts of the developments of civilisation, modernisation and revolution. He concludes that the study of 'evolution' is largely irrelevant to the investigation of social change. He proposes instead an exogenous paradigm of social change, which places the study of contingent historical events at its centre.

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Preface

My purpose in this book is to evaluate a recent attempt to achieve an overall sociological theory of social change. This is not, therefore, yet another general work on 'social change', but a study of one perspective on change. For this reason, I have made scant reference to other rival approaches like Marxism or 'conflict theory'. My reasons for choosing the particular perspective known as 'neo-evolutionism' are twofold: if America remains the most dynamic and influential centre of sociological activity, neo-evolutionism, or the functionalist theory of social change, represents the single most pervasive and dominant approach to change in America today. Secondly, neo-evolutionism expresses in modern terms and contemporary idiom a long tradition which lays emphasis upon the immanence of change in social life, a tradition by no means unchallenged, yet still vital. By analysing neo-evolutionism, I hope therefore to illuminate the nature and difficulties of this wider tradition, to which the functionalist theory of change is heir.

The emphasis throughout this work is on the validity and usefulness of the neo-evolutionary perspective for the understanding of problems of social change. Accordingly, I have tried to avoid the temptation to write a treatise on the sociology of knowledge, despite some suggestions about the backgrounds of recent functionalist concerns in the first chapter. Nor have I attempted to be comprehensive in my treatment. I have concentrated instead upon those theorists and works which seemed most 'paradigmatic' for an understanding of the basic logic of neo-evolutionism. This explains why I have largely neglected all those political scientists who have adopted in one or other measure the neo-evolutionary framework, and have omitted all reference to the purely political ramifications of the outlook. From the standpoint of neo-evolutionism conceived as a theoretical framework, their task of application appears essentially derivative.

Nor am I concerned to offer an alternative 'theory of social change' to that which I criticise, again despite some suggestions to that effect in the final chapter. I do not believe a meaningful 'theory of change' in the sense of that term which has summed up a long-standing goal of sociology, to be either desirable or feasible. The dimensions and types of historical change are so various, that any overall theory must become too generalised to be relevant for the explanation of more specific changes. This is not, of course, to say that all general approaches are therefore equally valueless. On the contrary, I advance here some arguments on behalf of one such very general approach, insisting strongly upon the essentially historical, i.e. temporal, nature of social change, and on the role of patterns of events in initiating processes of change. At the same time, I regard such an approach as providing merely a methodological framework, no more; and certainly not as a general 'theory of social change'.

The plan of my argument is tripartite. Section one (chapters 1 and 2) is expository: it depicts the background and outlines the main principles of neo-evolutionism, or the functionalist theory of change. Section three (chapters 6 and 7) balances this exposition

by providing an assessment and evaluation of this whole perspective, in the light of the preceding criticisms; it also suggests some arguments in favour of an alternative perspective. Section two (chapters 3, 4 and 5) is the main part, and also the longest, being devoted to a critical analysis of neo-evolutionist theories of three problems—civilisatioin and its development, modernisation, and revolution. Modernisation in many ways is the pivot of the whole work, as its central position in the text (flanked by the two chapters on evolution and revolution) indicates. The reason is that as concept and process 'modernisation' has become the central neo-evolutionist empirical concern, and provides so effective a test of the validity and utility of this perspective.

Throughout I am deeply indebted to the work of Professor Nisbet, particularly on the wider historical tradition of social growth, even where I do not share his opinions. His work is one of the few in recent sociology (Teggart, Boas and others belong to an older school of thought) to accept the need for an exogenous *approach* to social change—even though others have stressed the *fact* of exogeneity. I am also grateful for the stimulation provided by my colleagues in the Sociology Department of Reading University, as well as by the graduate seminar. I should like to record an especial debt of gratitude to Mr Arthur Brittan, both for asking me to write on this subject, and for his help and encouragement Responsibility for errors and omissions, as well as for the views expressed, is of course mine alone.

chapter 1
Functionalism and social change

To succeed where historians have failed and provide a theory of social change, has long been an overriding ambition of sociologists. Ever since Comte divided the field into social statics and social dynamics, we find a long line of social theorists who advanced schemes purporting to account for the varied phenomena of social change and history. However much a particular theorist may have avoided or neglected social change, each and every one was conscious that no theory of society could claim to be adequate if it failed to explain movement, variation, transformation and change in social life. It is as if the theory of social change appears as the crown and ultimate justification of all social theory.

Along with this tacit importance assigned to the fact of change, went a deep conviction that it was possible to order the kaleidoscope of observable changes in history into a single, coherent framework; and more, to provide a unified theory of all social change. Of course, this belief was central to the various schemes of world-evolution proposed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In less obvious forms, however, this belief reappears also in Durkheim, among the diffusionists, among the later Marxists (as well as Marx), in the cyclical schemes of historians and elite theorists; and even Weber did not altogether escape its influence.

The latest and most influential of the theoretical schools to manifest this deep-seated conviction in the possibility and desirability of a single theory of change, is functionalism. In this respect, as in many others, functionalism is the heir of a long tradition of perspectives on social change. As the approach of functionalists has broadened and developed, it has revealed with growing clarity its real intent: to provide a unified theory of change and order, which will encompass in one framework the varied and changing structures of history.

THE ATTACK ON FUNCTIONALISM (1)
STATICS AND DYNAMICS

To argue that functionalism is fundamentally a theory of change, is to challenge a very common opinion among sociologists: namely, that functionalism is a perspective on society which is unable to cope with social change. In certain quarters, indeed, this view is simply doctrinal; but we find it repeated even by writers who are in sympathy with the functionalist approach. Perhaps this opinion is less common among the noncommitted and the sympathisers today, but throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the idea that functionalism was a theory of social stability and not change, was accepted by the majority of sociologists.

Roughly, their argument ran as follows: functionalism cannot come to grips with ‘the problem of social change’, because it is a doctrine of normative consensus. But normative consensus is a state of affairs which rarely obtains in the world of concrete, historical phenomena; hence as a model of society, it is singularly inapposite for illuminating

empirical processes of change. Furthermore, the history and inner structure of functionalism preclude it from any concern with, or utility for, the construction of a theory of change. A doctrine built on the assumption that the parts of a system are interdependent and mutually compatible, or at least in continual process of readjustment to each other, leaves little room for the incorporation of just those historical and structural forces to which a plausible theory of change must address itself. Of course, individual functionalists may well adduce explanations of particular changes; but these remain *ad hoc* explanations, unrelated to the functionalist conceptual framework, whose overall static bias and generality prevents it from making any lasting contribution to the study of social change, beyond a few very high-level platitudes.[1]

More specifically, this argument was supported by a number of objections to the adequacy and objectivity of the whole functionalist framework. Since these critiques contributed to the subsequent reorientation of functionalist interests and methods, I think it useful to set out the major lines of attack, whether they originated within the functionalist camp or from critics outside its orbit.

Static bias

First, it was claimed that functionalism was necessarily static. Its origins and development precluded it from offering a 'dynamic analysis'. Because of its original polemic against the classical evolutionists, functionalism had to emphasise integration and stability. After all, the early functionalism of the anthropologists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown had been developed because of opposition to the sweeping claims of the nineteenth-century evolutionists, with their laws of the various stages of civilisation through which, it was thought, every society must pass. There was also a second functionalist polemic against the rival diffusionists, who sought to explain the various similarities in the cultural make-up of primitive societies as a product of cultural borrowings from neighbouring societies. Both polemics turned the analysis of the functionalist inward, to the institutional workings and relations of single societies—especially primitive ones.[2]

Against the evolutionists, the functionalists held that we must first discover the network of relations which sustain the institutions of a given social system, before we can be in a position to ascertain the laws by which one state of the social system succeeds another. In addition, we need to know much more about the institutional functioning of single cultures than the evolutionists allow; and this knowledge will prevent us from abusing the comparative method, through disregard of the cultural context of a given trait. As against the diffusionists, Malinowski and his followers rejected their explanation of the coexistence of similar cultural elements in different primitive societies, and stressed instead the contribution or function performed by each item for the maintenance of the cultural ensemble. The upshot of both polemics, therefore, was to underline the equal interdependence and mutual reinforcement of all the parts, however curious at first sight, of a system.[3]

Anthropological functionalism of the 1920s and 1930s was succeeded by what we may term 'normative functionalism'. This was largely an American phenomenon, and its underlying aim was to harmonise the structural-functional approach of the anthropologists with *(a)* Durkheim's notion of normative integration of societies, and *(b)* an action frame

of reference which was derived from Weber. Normative functionalism accomplished this difficult feat of synthesis, by putting the main emphasis on the stabilising effect of norms (and institutions) which in an action frame of reference are held to govern role-expectations between interacting individuals. A society in which norms produced this stability and equilibrium, was one able to fulfil its major functional imperatives—socialisation, reproduction, education, integration and so on. But norms in turn 'specify' more basic symbols, attitudes and beliefs; and this central system of 'values' (as these attitudes, etc., were termed) is a prerequisite of any ongoing social system. A central 'value system' underlies the norms of each institutional sphere into which all societies are divided, and it unites each of these spheres or sectors, enabling each of them to reinforce the others.

Critics were not slow to point out that a model of normative integration of societies, which this type of functionalism was propounding, was inevitably static. A theorist whose self-appointed task is to reveal the way in which each institutional sector reinforces all the others, and contributes to the maintenance of the whole system, is likely to neglect those factors or forces which prevent a sector or part from performing its allotted role. Likewise, a theory which builds up a model of the social system from that of the stable interaction of individuals in their role-relationships, by emphasising the binding and stabilising effect of the norms governing roles, is prevented from grasping the way in which time alters role-relationships and erodes norms, so changing the nature of all social systems.

But even more important than this was the methodological criticism. This was quite simply that to stress functions or consequences was to deflect analysis from causes and initiating factors; and since the burden of functionalist analysis was, by its very history and development, bound to the study of the contribution or function of parts to the relevant whole, it was inevitable that a diachronic investigation demanding a study of processes and causes over time would be passed over. What really interested functionalists was how societies survive and cohere in the face of external pressure and internal strain, not how they change.

This is perhaps the most forceful and convincing of the many criticisms of functionalism in the form which it assumed in mid-century America, because it argued the case for functionalism's static bias from the very structure of its assumptions as these developed out of its original polemics. This 'historical' argument, in other words, claimed that functionalism by its origins and development was condemned to neglect change and confine itself to the explanation of stability.[4]

THE ATTACK ON FUNCTIONALISM (2) SYSTEM AND CONFLICT

Interdependence

A second group of criticisms emanated from those who were not completely unsympathetic to the functionalist cause. These attacks concentrated on such central functionalist assumptions as the normative integration of the system and the interdependence of parts. Gouldner, for example, attacked the validity and utility of the idea of an equal interdependence of parts, developing further Merton's notion of the dysfunction of certain items or institutions for a given system. A scheme of perfect functional harmony cannot be found anywhere, even in approximation. On the contrary, social systems are normally characterised by a high degree of institutional autonomy; and the parts of a system do not