CHAPTER 2

The Emergence of Functionalism

Even today, I think it is fair to conclude that classical economic ideas dominate sociological theory and social thought in general.[1] From this economic perspective, humans are seen as rational beings who try to maximize their gains and minimize their losses. And I suspect that many still view social life as a kind of marketplace where people buy and sell their qualities in hopes of making a psychic profit. Indeed, social life is a competitive game of people rationally pursuing their interests, with social order somehow emerging out of these clashes of self-interest.

This view of humans is frequently termed *utilitarianism* because there is the assumption that actors are rational and that they try to maximize their "utilities" or rewards and gratifications. Adam Smith is most commonly associated with this perspective because he was the first to conceptualize analytically the dynamics of competitive markets and because he postulated an "invisible hand of order" as emerging from open competition in free markets.[2] Although utilitarianism pervades much of our thinking today, it was even more dominant in the last century. And just as sociology today must overcome the limitations of this narrow view of humans and social organization, so it had to confront utilitarianism in the last century. In fact, I do not think it an exaggeration to say that

[1] As I will outline later, exchange theory typically begins with these assumptions. It also penetrates other perspectives

sociology's first theoretical perspective—functionalism—emerged as a reaction against utilitarianism. In questioning utilitarianism, sociology pursued an alternative, organicism.

FUNCTIONALISM AND THE ORGANISMIC ANALOGY

In early 19th-century sociology, humans no longer were viewed as rational and calculating entrepreneurs in a free, open, unregulated, and competitive marketplace. Nor was the doctrine of the "invisible hand of order" considered a very adequate explanation of how social organization could emerge out of free and unbridled competition among individuals. Although utilitarianism remained a prominent social doctrine for the entire 19th century, the first generation of French sociologists had ceased to accept the assumption that social order would automatically be forthcoming if only free competition among individuals was left intact.

The disenchantment with utilitarianism was aided in France, and to a lesser extent in all of continental Europe, by the disruptive social changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization. Coupled with the political instability of the late 18th century, as revealed most dramatically by the violent French Revolution, early 19th-century social thinkers in France displayed a profound concern with the problems of maintaining the social order. Although each phrased the question somewhat differently, I think it fair to conclude that all social thinkers asked similar questions: Why and how is society possible? What holds society together? What makes societies change?[3]

Whether in France or elsewhere in Europe, the answers to these fundamental questions were shaped by events occurring in the biological sciences. It was in the 19th century that biological discoveries were to alter significantly the social and intellectual climate of the times. For example, as many of the mysteries of the human body were being discovered, the last vestiges of mysticism surrounding the body's functioning were being laid to rest. The diversity of the animal species was finally being systematically recorded under the long-standing classification procedures outlined by the Swedish biologist Carolus Linnaeus. And most importantly, conceptions of evolution, culminating in the theories of Wallace and Darwin, were stimulating great intellectual and social controversy. Since it was in this social and intellectual milieu that sociology as a self-conscious discipline was born, it is not surprising that conceptions of social order were influenced by a preoccupation with biology.

[3]In fact, Adam Smith, had originally posed the question that all French [illegible] were to ask: as societies become more complex and differentiated, and as actors live in different worlds, what "force" can hold the social fabric together?

The Organicism of Auguste Comte (1798–1857)

Auguste Comte is usually credited as being the *founder* of sociology. Philosophizing about humans and society had, of course, long been a preoccupation of lay people and scholars alike, but it was Comte who advocated a "science of society" and coined the term *sociology*. And although Comte's work was soon to fall into neglect and obscurity and he was to live out his later years in frustration and bitterness, his work profoundly influenced social thought. I think it regrettable that few recognize this influence, even today. Yet, despite Comte's current obscurity, I mark the emergence of the functionalist perspective with his work.[4]

Like most French thinkers of his time, Comte was preoccupied with propagating order and harmony out of the chaos created by the French Revolution. He attacked the individualism of utilitarian doctrines so prominent in England and carried forward Rousseau's and Saint-Simon's desire to develop a "collective philosophy"—one that would provide the principles for creating social consensus. In so doing, however, he articulated the principles of science as they should be applied to society.

Comte felt that human evolution in the 19th century had reached the "positive stage" in which empirical knowledge could be used to understand the social world and to create a better society. Comte thus became an advocate of the application of the scientific method to the study of society—a strategy that, in deference to Comte, is still termed *positivism* in the social sciences. This application of the scientific method was to give birth to a new science, sociology.

Comte's entire intellectual life represented an attempt to legitimate sociology. His efforts on this score went so far as to construct a "hierarchy of the sciences," with sociology as the "queen" of the sciences. Although this hierarchy allowed Comte to assert the importance of sociology and thereby separate it from social philosophy, his most important tactic for legitimating sociology was to borrow terms and concepts from the highly respected biological sciences.[5] Sociology was thus initiated and justified by appeals to the biological sciences—a fact that will help explain why functionalism was sociology's first and, until the 1970s, most dominant theoretical orientation.

Comte saw the affinity between sociology and biology to reside in their common concern with organic bodies. This affinity led him to divide sociology into social "statics," or morphology, and "dynamics," or social growth and progress.[6] But Comte was convinced that although "Biology has hitherto been the guide and preparation for Sociology . . . Sociology will in the future . . . (provide) the ultimate systematization of Biology."

(1830–1842). References are to the

What was such theory to look like? His answer is, I think, very important because he warned against the very functional analysis that he helped initiate in his later works, while he cautioned against excessive concern with the causal modeling so prominent in contemporary sociology. As he stressed:

> The first characteristic of Positive Philosophy is that it regards all phenomena as subject to invariable natural *laws*. Our business is,—seeing how vain any research into what are called *causes*, whether first or final,—to pursue an accurate discovery of these laws, with a view to reducing them to the smallest possible number.[10]

In this passage, "final causes" is Comte's term for functions. We should not, he argued, analyze processes in terms of their consequences, nor should we search for their origins, as "first causes." Rather,

> Our real business is to analyze accurately the circumstances of phenomena, and to connect them by the natural relations of succession and resemblance. The best illustration of this is the case of the doctrine of Gravitation.[11]

Thus, I think it fair to say that Comte's view of positivism rejected the functionalism and the more extreme organicism that was to emerge in the later decades of the 19th century. Indeed, Émile Durkheim was to "turn Comte on his head" and stress that the very essence of adequate scientific explanation was causal and functional analysis.[12] I can only imagine how Comte would turn over in his grave if he had known what Durkheim did to his views. Yet, despite his eloquent advocacy for a social physics modeled after the natural sciences, Comte did reintroduce organic analogies into sociological inquiry, and he did see sociology as closely allied with the biological sciences.[13] And so, we must conclude that it was with Comte that functional theory begins.

In the period between Comte's decline and Durkheim's ascendance as the most forceful advocate of functionalism, Herbert Spencer was to codify functional analysis into a more explicit theoretical strategy. Let me now turn to a brief review of Spencer's contribution.

The Analytical Functionalism of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

an unacknowledged debt to Spencer.[14] Moreover, analyses of Spencer's work tend to focus on the weakest portion of his sociology, its functionalism. But unlike Durkheim two decades later, the anthropological functionalists of the early decades of this century, or the modern functionalists of the contemporary era, Spencer's functional analysis was comparatively recessive. Yet, in what may seem like a contradiction, Spencer anticipated in those few pages devoted to functional analysis all of the main features of modern functionalism.

Like many contemporary functionalists, Spencer saw the universe as divided into realms or domains. For Spencer, these basic realms are the inorganic (physical, chemical), the organic (biological, psychological), and superorganic (sociological).[15] His great philosophical project was to generate a series of abstract principles or laws—what he termed *the first or cardinal principles*—that could explain all of these realms.[16] Needless to say, he was a bit over-ambitious on this score, but the general idea was to explain social processes with abstract laws or principles. The content of these principles borrows from the physics of his time, not the biology. Yet, it is his biological analogizing for which we most remember Spencer; and when making these analogies, he introduced analytical functionalism. But I emphasize again that Spencer saw both the organic and superorganic realms as obeying the same abstract laws, or first principles. Indeed, his organicism is secondary to his effort at making deductions from his abstract first principles.[17]

Spencer published his monumental *Principles of Biology* before his first sociological works.[18] As a consequence, I think, he wanted to demonstrate that both organic and superorganic bodies reveal "parallels in principles of organization" that could be deduced from the first principles. And so, it is not surprising that he compared societies and organisms in terms of their similarity and dissimilarity. Among the points of similarity he emphasized:[19]

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[14] See my *Herbert Spencer: Toward a Renewed Appreciation* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1985) for a more detailed presentation of this line of argument.

[15] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology* (1874–1896). This work has been reissued in varying volume numbers. References in this chapter are to the three-volume ... third edition) issued by D. Appleton and Company, New York ... work, it is much more critical to note the ... since pagination can ...

1. As organic and superorganic bodies increase in size, they increase in structure. That is, they become more complex and differentiated.
2. Such differentiation of structures is accompanied by differentiation of functions. Each differentiated structure comes to serve distinctive functions for sustaining the "life" of the systemic whole.
3. Differentiated structures and functions require in both organic and superorganic bodies integration through mutual dependence. Each structure can be sustained only through its dependence upon others for vital substances.
4. Each differentiated structure in both organic and super-organic bodies is, to a degree, a systemic whole by itself (i.e., organs are composed of cells and societies of groupings of individuals), and thus, the larger whole is always influenced by the systemic processes of its constituent parts.
5. The structures of organic and superorganic bodies can "live on" for a while after the destruction of the systemic whole.

These points of similarity between organism and society, Spencer argued, must be qualified for their points of "extreme unlikeness."[20]

1. There are great differences in the degree of connectedness of the parts, or structures, in organic and social wholes. In superorganic wholes, there is less direct and continuous physical contact and more dispersion of parts than in organic bodies.
2. There are differences in the modes of contact between organic and superorganic systems. In the superorganic, there is much more reliance upon symbols than in the organic.[21]
3. There are differences in the levels of consciousness and voluntarism of parts in organic and superorganic bodies. All units in society are conscious, goal seeking, and reflective, whereas only one unit can potentially be so in organic bodies.

As Spencer continued to analogize the points of similarity between organicism and societies, he began to develop what I call *requisite functionalism*. That is, organic and superorganic bodies reveal certain universal requisites that must be fulfilled in order for them to adapt to an environment. Moreover, these same requisites exist for all organic and superorganic systems. Let me quote Spencer on this point:

> Close study of the facts shows us another striking parallelism. . . . societies have internal arrangements framed on the

> Differing from one another as the viscera of a living creature do in many respects, they have several traits in common. Each viscus contains appliances for conveying nutriment to its parts, for bringing it materials on which to operate, for carrying away the product, for draining off waste matters; as also for regulating its activity.[22]

It is not hard to see the seeds of an argument for universal functional requisites in this passage. Indeed, on the next page from this quote, Spencer argued that "it is the same for society" and proceeded to list the basic functional requisites of societies. For example, each superorganic body

> has a set of agencies which bring the raw material . . .; it has an apparatus of major and minor channels through which the necessities of life are drafted out of the general stocks circulating through the kingdom . . .; it has appliances . . . for bringing those impulses by which the industry of the place is excited or checked; it has local controlling powers, political and ecclesiastical, by which order is maintained and healthful action furthered.

Even though these universal requisites are not as clearly separated as they were to become in modern functional approaches, the logic of the analysis is clear. First, there are certain universal needs or requisites that structures function to meet. These revolve around (*a*) securing and circulating resources, (*b*) producing usable substances, and (*c*) regulating and integrating internal activities through power and symbols. Second, each system level—group, community, region, or whole society—reveals a similar set of needs. Third, the important dynamics of any empirical system revolve around processes that function to meet these universal requisites. Fourth, the level of adaptation of a social unit to its environment is determined by the extent to which it meets these functional requisites.

Thus, by recognizing that certain basic or universal needs must be met, analysis of organic and superorganic systems is simplified. One examines processes with respect to needs for integrating differentiated parts, needs for sustaining the parts of the system, needs for producing and distributing information and substances, and needs for political regulation and control. In simple systems, these needs are met by each element of the system; but when structures begin to grow and become more complex, they are met by distinctive types of structures that specialize in meeting one of these general classes of functions. And as societies become highly complex, then structures become even more specialized and meet only specific subclasses of these general functional needs.

The logic behind this form of requisite functionalism guided much of Spencer's substantive analysis. And it is the essence of functional analysis today. The list of basic needs to be met varies among theorists, but the mode of the analysis remains the same: examine specific types of social

[22] *Principles of Sociology*, p. 477.

processes and structures in terms of the needs or requisites that they meet.

FUNCTIONALISM AND ÉMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)

As the inheritor of a long French tradition of social thought, especially Comte's organicism, we should not be surprised that Émile Durkheim's early works were heavily infused with organismic terminology. Although his major work, *The Division of Labor in Society*, was sharply critical of Herbert Spencer, many of Durkheim's formulations were clearly influenced by the 19th-century intellectual preoccupation with biology.[23] Aside from the extensive use of biologically inspired terms, Durkheim's basic assumptions reflected those of the organicists: (1) Society was to be viewed as an entity in itself that could be distinguished from and was not reducible to its constituent parts. In conceiving of society as a reality, *sui generis*, Durkheim in effect gave analytical priority to the social whole. (2) Although such an emphasis by itself did not necessarily reflect organismic inclinations, Durkheim, in giving causal priority to the whole, viewed system parts as fulfilling basic functions, needs, or requisites of that whole. (3) The frequent use of the notion "functional needs" is buttressed by Durkheim's conceptualization of social systems in terms of "normal" and "pathological" states. Such formulations, at the very least, connote the view that social systems have needs that must be fulfilled if "abnormal" states are to be avoided. (4) In viewing systems as normal and pathological, as well as in terms of functions, there is the additional implication that systems have equilibrium points around which normal functioning occurs.

Durkheim recognized all of these dangers and explicitly tried to deal with several of them. First, he was clearly aware of the dangers of teleological analysis—of implying that some future consequence of an event causes that very event to occur. Thus, he warned that the causes of a phenomenon must be distinguished from the ends it serves:

> When, then, the explanation of a social phenomenon is undertaken, we must seek separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills. We use the word "function" in preference to "end" or "purpose," precisely because social phenomena do not generally exist for the useful results they produce.[24]

[23] Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Macmillan, [illegible]). Durkheim tended to ignore the fact that Spencer wore several [illegible] of utilitarianism, seemingly ignoring the