

Structural– Functional Analysis

The structural– functional analysis is one of the primary system-derivatives in political science and a major framework for political research. As a result of the works of anthropologists of the early 20th century, particularly that of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, structural functionalism emerged a political science through sociology. It has been adopted as a field of comparative politics by Gabriel Almond. This mode of analysis is primarily concerned with the phenomena of system-maintenance and regulation. The basic theoretical proposition is that in all social systems, certain basic functions have to be performed. The central question is: ‘ What structures fulfil what basic functions and what conditions govern any given system?’ According to this approach, a political system is composed of several structures that are ‘ patterns of action and resultant institutions.’ These institutions and patterns of action have certain functions that are defined as ‘ objective consequences for the system’ . A function is a regularly recurring pattern of action and behaviour that is carried on for preservation and advancement of the system. Dysfunction is the opposite of function, which means an action detrimental to the existence and growth of the system. In the words of Robert Merton, ‘ Functions are those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of a system.’ A certain level of dysfunction is unavoidable in

the operation of any pattern of action. From time to time, it is possible to identify actions

or decisions that are functional for the political system, as a whole, or for some of its

components.

Merton has advanced an additional distinction between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions refer to those patterns of action, whose outcomes are

intended and recognized by the participants. In latent functions, consequences are neither

intended nor recognized and understood initially. The concept of structure is vital in

structural– functional analysis. Structures refer to those arrangements within the system

which perform the function. Merton has developed the idea that a given function can be

fulfilled by many diverse structural arrangements. Likewise, any given structural arrangement may perform functions that might have different kinds of outcomes for the

structure. Almond and Powell refer to the same phenomenon when they observe in a

highly distinguished system, such as that of the United States. Political functions may be

performed by a large number of highly specialized structures and those political structures,

in turn, have a propensity to be multifunctional.

The advocates of the structural– functional analysis draw attention to certain ‘ conditions of survival’ , or certain functions that are vital for the maintenance and

preservation of fundamental characteristics of a political system so that it stays recognizable over a length of time. Marion Levy, Jr., for example, has tried to identify

the functional requisites of any social system on a theoretical basis and has

compiled a list of required functions. Following the lead of Talcott Parsons, sociologists attempted to identify four such functions, namely goal-attainment, adaptation, integration and pattern-maintenance. Gabriel Almond, in applying this analysis to political science, developed a