STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM

Structural-functionalist theory (including here Parsonian theory and those influenced by it, and structural-functionalist versions of Marxism), is characterized by a number of important features; and there are some questions which need to be answered.

1. Structural-functionalisists assume that society is a system. What is the system comprised of: Candidates include: social structures (variously theorized), institutions, or roles (as on the usual reading of Parsons).

2. Since the elements are characterized functionally, we need to know what they do and how they relate to other parts of the system. This is established empirically.

3. We can ask if these functions are 'latent' or 'manifest.' Merton (1948) defines manifest functions as 'those objective consequences contributing the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by participants in the system.' Latent functions are 'neither intended or recognized.'

4. It is often assumed that there is some condition which defines the ends or goals of the system. E.g., Durkheim held that societies have 'a normal development.' Parsons defines a 'stable or moving equilibrium' as the goal of the system. But it is hard to see how societies can have goal states? What, e.g., counts as a breakdown of the system? (Compare here 'dumb systems,' e.g., an automobile engine and 'smart systems,' e.g., a thermostatically controlled heating system or living organism.) Similarly, while it may be essential for continued reproduction of (say) capitalism that (say) surplus be realized, it may be that agents fail to do what is necessary to accomplish this. That is, there is nothing automatic about 'system' reproduction. See 6.

5. As regards social systems, there is a problem of what counts as 'internal' to the system and what counts as 'external' to it. (As the term implies, for 'world system' theorists, no single society is an isolated system.)

6. A functionalist explains by showing that some element is functionally necessary for the system to be in its goal-state. The form of explanation is this: System S is functioning appropriately.
   S functions appropriately only if R (is doing what it is supposed to do).
   Hence R.
   This 'explanation' does not involve mention of (a) how R does what it does or (b) how R came to be in the system. These are further questions. Parsonians make gestures at answers to these questions. Structural functionalist Marxist writers usually do better in this.