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Q2(b)

Describe the functional prerequisites of social system as given by Talcott Parsons. Examined in the context of a university as a social system.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- Describe the functional prerequisites of social system as given by Talcott Parsons. Examined in the context of a university as a social system
- Keep the examination within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

- **Parsons's AGIL:** adaptation, goal attainment, integration, latency.
- **University:** money and staff; degrees and rankings; exams and unions; curriculum and ritual.

Mead, **Weber**, and **Durkheim** sit inside socialisation, office, and moral codes.

Conflict over caste, gender, and class shows functions without harmony.

AGIL inventories tasks; it does not settle whose interests they serve.

Introduction

Talcott Parsons listed four functional prerequisites of a social system, remembered as **AGIL**. A university can be read as a social system of roles, norms, and values. The fit is instructive. It also hides conflict over caste, gender, and what counts as knowledge.

Body

The four prerequisites

- **Adaptation:** securing resources from the environment. For a university: funds, buildings, fees, grants, and staff labour.
- **Goal attainment:** defining and pursuing collective goals. For a university: degrees, research output, rankings, and public service as politically set.
- **Integration:** coordinating units and managing conflict. Examinations, boards, unions, and discipline codes.
- **Latency:** **pattern maintenance** and tension management. Curriculum as culture, hostels, counselling, convocation ritual, and the "idea" of the university.

University as illustration

- **George Herbert Mead's socialisation of the student self is a latency task:** generalised other of the discipline.
- **Max Weber's** bureaucratic office organises registry and evaluation, the legal-rational staff.
- **Emile Durkheim's** moral education sits in codes of academic honesty, often weakly.

Examination of the fit

- Adaptation can subordinate teaching to grant markets and fee dependence.
- **Goals conflict:** teaching versus ranking, inclusion versus "merit" as cultural capital.
- Integration fails visibly in campus caste violence and gendered harassment; **AGIL** then names strain, not harmony.
- **Karl Marx:** the university also reproduces class labour-power and ideology, which Parsons folds into latency.
- **Robert K. Merton:** latent functions include credential inflation and elite closure.
- **Ann Oakley-type questions:** whose unpaid care lets a student sit the exam?

Verdict on the exercise

- **AGIL** is a useful inventory of what any university must somehow do.
- It is a poor theory of whose university it is.

Flow diagram

Adaptation funds -> University system
 Goals degrees research -> University system
 Integration exams boards -> University system
 Latency culture ritual -> University system

Conclusion

Parsons's prerequisites are adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. A university shows all four in funds, goals, rules, and culture. **Marx**, **Merton**, **Weber**, and feminist critique show that the same functions can reproduce inequality. Use **AGIL** as a checklist, not as a proof of equilibrium.

Facts & figures

AGIL

Parsons's four functional prerequisites of a social system.

Pattern maintenance

Latency: transmitting values and managing motivational tension.

Merton

Latent functions of education include closure and credential inflation.

Weberian registry

Files, hierarchy, and impersonality as the university's legal-rational staff.

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