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Q2(a)

What are the reactions of R.K. Merton to the functionalism of social anthropologists ? Bring out the limitations of latent functions.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 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

- What are the reactions of R. K. **Merton** to the functionalism of social anthropologists? Bring out the limitations of latent functions
- Keep the discussion within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Anthropological functionalism treated customs as serving a unified whole.

Merton rejected unity, universal function, and indispensability.

He offered manifest/latent, dysfunction, and alternatives.

Latent functions fail when unfalsifiable, when they hide whose order is served, and when they freeze change.

Gendered unpaid labour can be misread as latent family stability.

Use as hypothesis, not as a blessing of every custom.

Introduction

Social anthropologists such as Bronislaw **Malinowski** and A. R. **Radcliffe-Brown** treated items of culture as serving the whole of a small society. Robert K. **Merton** reacted by cutting that grand functionalism down. He kept function as a tool and named its overclaims, including the limits of latent functions.

Body

Anthropological functionalism as **Merton met it**

- **Malinowski** tied customs to individual needs. **Radcliffe-Brown** tied them to the persistence of the social structure.
- **Both leaned toward a postulate of universal functionalism:** every item serves the system.
- Small-scale, relatively bounded societies made the whole look obvious.

****Merton's** reactions**

- **He rejected three postulates:** functional unity of the whole, universal functionalism, and functional indispensability.
- Complex, conflictual societies, which **Karl Marx** had already stressed, cannot be read as one clan.
- He introduced manifest and latent functions, dysfunctions, and **functional alternatives**.
- Middle-range theory replaced a theory of everything. The Hopi rain dance could bind without making rain.

What he kept

- The question "what does this practice do?" remains. Veblen's conspicuous consumption is a latent-status function.

Limitations of latent functions

- The observer may invent a hidden use. Latent function can become an unfalsifiable story.
- Unanticipated consequences are not automatically functions. A leak may only harm.
- **Conflict:** whose system is served? Caste ritual may integrate the dominant and exclude others.
- **Gender:** latent "stability" of the family can be unpaid female labour, which Ann Oakley made visible.
- **Static bias:** explaining persistence underplays change and power, which later conflict theory pressed.

Balance

- Use latent functions as hypotheses about hidden contributions.
- **Demand evidence, name dysfunctions, and specify the unit:** group, class, or society.

Flow diagram

Malinowski Radcliffe-Brown -> Item serves whole
Merton -> No unity no indispensability
Merton -> Latent function
Latent function -> Invented use domination stasis

Conclusion

Merton reacted to anthropological functionalism by dropping unity, universality, and indispensability, and by splitting manifest from latent. Latent functions are limited when they excuse domination, invent uses, or freeze conflict. Keep the tool; bind it with dysfunction, alternatives, and a named beneficiary.

Facts & figures

Malinowski

Function as meeting biological and derived needs in a cultural response.

Radcliffe-Brown

Function as contribution to structural continuity of the society.

Merton

Codified the critique in Social Theory and Social Structure.

Functional alternatives

Merton: an item is not indispensable if another can meet the same need.

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