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Q5(e)

Do you think Talcott Parsons gave an adequate theory of social change? Justify your answer

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 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

- Does Talcott Parsons offer an adequate theory of social change? Critically examine
- Keep the examination within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **Parsons:** change as differentiation, inclusion, and rising adaptive capacity.

AGIL and **evolutionary universals** explain ordered modernisation.

Mills, **Marx**, and dependency theories show missing power and rupture.

Lockdown and caste-gender conflict are not mere strain.

Adequate for system order; not for history as struggle.

Introduction

Talcott Parsons treated society as a social system that maintains equilibrium through **AGIL** functions. Change, for him, is mainly differentiation, inclusion, and upgrading of adaptive capacity. That is a theory of ordered modernisation. It is not adequate as a full theory of rupture.

Body

What he offers

- **Pattern variables** describe a shift toward achievement, universalism, and affective neutrality in industrial society.
- **Evolutionary universals** (bureaucracy, money, law, democratic association) raise adaptive capacity.
- Social change is system adjustment, not a heap of accidents.

Why it is not adequate alone

- C. Wright **Mills** criticised grand theory for missing history and power.
- **Karl Marx's** dialectics of modes of production, and class struggle, are reduced to strain that the system absorbs.
- Dependency and world-system writers showed that "differentiation" in the periphery can be underdevelopment, not upgrading.

- Gender and caste conflict, and shocks such as COVID-19 lockdown, are poorly read as smooth inclusion.

What to keep

- Differentiation of law, market, and office is a real modern process, as **Weber** also saw.
- Use Parsons for stability and institutional specialisation. Pair him with conflict and historical sociology for change.

Flow diagram

Parsons -> System functions

Parsons -> Differentiation inclusion

Differentiation inclusion -> Ordered change

Marx conflict empire shock -> Not adequate alone

Conclusion

Parsons offers a coherent theory of systemic modernisation and differentiation. It is inadequate as a general theory of social change because it underplays contradiction, empire, and rupture. Keep **AGIL** for order; do not use it as the whole story of history.

Facts & figures

AGIL

Adaptation, goal attainment, integration, latency: functional problems of a social system.

Evolutionary universals

Parsons: institutional inventions that raise a society's adaptive capacity.

Pattern variables

Dilemmas of orientation, such as ascription versus achievement, used to contrast traditional and modern roles.

Mills

Criticised Parsons's grand theory as abstract and politically quiet.