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Q7(a)

Critically analyse Parsons views on society as a social system.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · 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

- Critically analyse Parsons views on society as a social system
- Keep the analysis within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Parsons:** society is a self-maintaining system of roles meeting **AGIL** functions.

Pattern variables describe modern role choices.

The gain is interdependence of economy, polity, integration, and socialisation.

Mills, Merton, Dahrendorf, Habermas, and feminists name power, dysfunction, conflict, and unpaid latency.

Indian movements and caste conflict overflow equilibrium talk.

Introduction

- **Talcott Parsons treated society as a social system:** a bounded set of roles and institutions that maintains itself by meeting functional problems. The view is the high point of mid-century functionalism. It is powerful as a map of interdependence and weak as a map of conflict, history, and meaning from below.

Body**Society as system**

- A social system is patterned interaction of actors, guided by shared norms and values, distinct from the personality and cultural systems but interpenetrating them.
- **The AGIL scheme:** adaptation (economy), goal attainment (polity), integration (community and law), latency or pattern maintenance (family, school, religion).
- **Pattern variables**, such as ascription versus achievement, describe the modern shift of role expectations.
- Equilibrium is not a frozen peace. The system adjusts through differentiation, as in the isolated nuclear family serving the occupational system.

What the view achieves

- It shows why economy, state, law, and socialisation must be thought together, which **Durkheim** also wanted in another language.

- It supplies a vocabulary for medical, educational, and organisational sociology.
- It treats values as constitutive, not as froth, against a thin materialism.

Critique

- **C. Wright Mills:** grand theory floats above power and biography. The power elite is not an AGIL box.
- **Robert Merton:** functional unity, universality, and indispensability are over-claimed. Manifest and latent functions, and dysfunctions, cut Parsons down to middle range.
- **Ralf Dahrendorf and Marx:** authority and surplus produce conflict as the normal state, not a disturbance of equilibrium.
- **Jurgen Habermas:** the lifeworld of communication is colonised by system steering through money and power; Parsons over-integrates.
- **Alvin Gouldner:** the system's harmony is a conservative comfort.
- **Gender:** Ann Oakley and later feminists showed that latency in the family is unpaid female labour, not a neutral function.
- **India:** caste and Mandal conflict, Chipko and Narmada movements, and communal rupture are poor as mere "tensions" of a self-maintaining whole.
- George Herbert Mead's self is more open than Parsons's socialised need-dispositions.

Balanced analysis

- Keep AGIL as a checklist of problems any large society must face.
- Drop the implication that existing institutions are the only, or the just, solutions.
- Read change as struggle and as differentiation, not only as system learning.

Flow diagram

Social system -> Adaptation economy
Social system -> Goal attainment polity
Social system -> Integration law community
Social system -> Latency family school
Mills Merton Marx Habermas -> Social system

Conclusion

- **Parsons's social system is a map of functional interdependence:** AGIL, values, and equilibrium through differentiation. Mills, Merton, Marx, Habermas, and feminist work show missing power, dysfunction, class, communication, and gender. Use the map; do not treat society as a contented organism.

Facts & figures

AGIL

Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, Latency: Parsons's four functional problems.

Pattern variables

Dichotomies such as ascription/achievement that characterise role expectations.

Merton

Rejected functional unity and indispensability; added latent functions and dysfunction.

Mills

The Sociological Imagination attacked Parsons as grand theory detached from power.

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