
UNIT 31 CRITIQUE OF PARSONS AND MERTON

Structure

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31.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you will be able to give a critique of Parsons and Merton on such themes as their

- perspective on sociology
- functional approach of social analysis
- understanding of social system and social structure
- sociological theory and social change.

31.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous four units you have learnt about the contributions of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. You learnt about the concept of social systems and about functionalism and social change as enunciated by Parsons in Units 27 and 28. In Units 29 and 30 you learnt about Merton's concept of latent and manifest function and of his theory of reference group.

In this unit you will be presented with a comparative critique of Parsons and Merton on some selected areas, in their functional approach. The varying perspective of Parsons and Merton in their study of sociology is discussed in sub-section 31.2.0. The similarities and differences between Parsons and Merton in respect of their approach to functionalism are discussed in sub-section 31.2.1. The sub-section 31.2.2 explains their views regarding the concept of social system and social structure. Finally, sub-section 31.2.3 gives a general perspective on how Parsons and Merton understand sociological theory and social change.

31.2 PARSONS AND MERTON: A CRITIQUE

You have read about some important sociological contributions made by Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. Both of them are considered to be the two most outstanding American sociologists who have left a lasting mark on our understanding of concepts, theories and methods of sociology. Both of them give us an insight, through their contributions, into the mainstream concerns of American sociology during the decades 1940s to 1960s. It was a historical stage in the developments in sociology when American contributions held a sway over most of the traditions of sociology in Europe, Latin America and the Asian countries. Though Parsons and Merton were contemporaries and shared many common concerns in sociology, they were drawn into this discipline from different traditions and backgrounds. Moreover, their styles were different as also the scope of their concerns with social problems and social theory. Their views, too, on the role and relevance of sociology in contemporary world were quite divergent.

In order to have an understanding of some of these commonalities and differences in the contributions of the two sociologists, especially in the context of what you have studied in the previous four units (i.e., Units 27, 28, 29 and 30), the discussion has been organised around selected themes. The themes selected are perspective on sociology, functional approach, social system and social structure, and the sociological theory and social change. Let us now discuss each of these themes separately.

31.2.0 Perspective on Sociology

The common elements in the perspective on sociology in the writings of Parsons and Merton are that both considered sociology to be a scientific discipline. This meant that sociologists not only had a set of concepts and hypotheses about social structure and change but that these hypotheses were also subjected to continual tests. Subjected to, in order to establish their validity through objective empirical studies. For this sociology used its own specialised methods. Sociological studies were therefore explanatory and also diagnostic, i.e., they could also identify problems. The emphasis in the writings of Parsons and Merton on the scientific character of sociology has been criticised by many later sociologists as 'positivism'. These later authors accuse the two sociologists of neglecting the unique historical and symbolic features of social reality which require entirely different methods of study than what is available through empirical methods of science. In particular, they attack the implicit assumption in Parsons and Merton that there exists a similarity between a biological system and a social system.

Activity 1

Read the newspapers of the past one week. Keeping in mind the various socio-political events taking place in the country, write a note of about two pages on 'The Role of Consensus or Agreement and Role of Conflict in the Contemporary Indian Society'. Keep in mind Parsons' and Merton's functionalist approach of social analysis and state in this note whether you agree or disagree with this approach.

Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

Apart from these elements in the perspective on sociology which are common in the writings of the two sociologists you will also notice differences in their vision, of sociology. Parsons has a universal and general approach to theory in sociology. His conceptual schemes are more abstract and relatively free from the limitations of space and time. Merton, on the other hand, takes a more modest view of sociological theory. His emphasis is on specific and not universal questions of theory and methodology. For instance, Merton illustrates his application of sociological theory to such specific issues as “reference group”, “anomie” or “nature of science”. Parsons on the other hand talks of a “general theory of action”.

31.2.1 Functional Approach

Both Parsons and Merton have followed a functional approach of analysis in their sociology. But functionalism as dealt with by Merton is located in time and space. It deals with empirical reality. He particularly draws our attention to the reasons why functional theories of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski which were formulated to deal with the realities of a simpler tribal society, isolated from rest of the world, could not be applied to contemporary societies of our own time which are complex and where historical traditions have overlapped on social institutions over several centuries. Therefore, Merton says that an institution such as religion, which is universally integrative in simpler tribal societies, may cause disharmony in our own society where there are many religions, which often compete against one another. So religion instead of being functional (integrative), may become dysfunctional (disintegrative) in society. Similarly his concepts of latent and manifest functions are also based on the historical experience of modern society. Parsons on the other hand does not take such a specific or historical view on the issues of functionalism. His concepts of functional prerequisites such as “adaptation”, “goal-orientation”, “integration” and “latency” which you have studied in Unit 27 are independent of time or place. They are general and a historical, that is, they are found in all societies at any point of time.

Functionalism of Parsons and Merton have been criticised by many sociologists for their various limitations. One of the major limitations pointed out by critics is the over-dependence of functionalism on the assumption that a social system is based on principles of agreement or consensus. Functionalism thus assumes that all institutions largely reflect values and goals, which are commonly accepted by most of the members of the society. It thus neglects aspects of dissent and conflict in the social system. Marxist sociologists criticise functionalism for its neglect of class conflict or class antagonism that exist in society. Political sociologists have criticised it for neglecting the role of power and domination in the structure and function of social institutions. But the main drawback in functionalism is not of total omission of these issues because both Merton, and also Parsons, deal with aspects of dissent and conflict in society. What is neglected perhaps is the balance in the role played by both consensus and conflict in society. This is a question, which remains largely unresolved in their sociological theory.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Fill in the blanks.
 - a) Both Parsons and Merton considered sociology to be a discipline.
 - b) Their emphasis on scientific character of sociology has been criticised as
 - c) In their vision of sociology, Parsons has a much more and approach to theory while Merton has emphasised the questions of theory and methodology.
 - d) The Marxist sociologists have criticised Parsons' and Merton's functionalism for its neglect of the class in society.

ii) Compare and contrast Parsons' and Merton's functional approach of analysis. Use about seven lines.

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31.2.2 Social System and Social Structure

Both Parsons and Merton have dealt with the concepts of "role", "status", "social structure", "social system", "group" and so on. These are the basic units for understanding the nature of society. But you will notice behind this commonality there lies a subtle difference between the approaches of the two sociologists. This difference is probably due to the difference in their vision of sociology. For Merton the basic problem in sociology is to utilise the conceptual packages of sociology and its methods for the understanding of social problems. These problems can be more clearly resolved given the existing state of theory in sociology. Therefore, he is more modest and specific in his analysis of social structures, as we found in his theory of "reference group". Like Parsons, Merton takes not only social but also psychological factors into account in defining social structure, status and role. Particularly you may have noticed his emphasis on the psychological element in the membership of a group (marginality and centrality), or again in his concept of "anticipatory socialisation". Parsons also places a lot of emphasis on motivational orientation in his understanding of social action.

But unlike Parsons' general and highly abstract approach to the understanding of social system, Merton talks of theories of the "middle

range”. In middle range theories conceptual abstractions emerge from the need to understand certain concrete empirical situations. There is no presumption in this case of providing an overall theoretical scheme for societies in general.

31.2.3 Sociological Theory and Social Change

Considerable importance is given, both by Parsons and Merton, to the role of theory in sociology and what should be the nature of such theories. Merton approaches the problem more cautiously emphasising the need for limitations of empirical verification of hypotheses. He cautions sociologists not to indulge in too general or abstract constructions of theory. Such a view of theory neither has a clearly defined sets of hypotheses nor the tools for their empirical verification. For this reason Merton does not favour a general theory in sociology but prefers the “middle range theory” instead, which is of a limited but well-defined nature and covers a specific problem of study. The “reference group theory” that you have studied in Unit 30 is a good example of this kind of theory. According to Merton, tools of logical classification called paradigms are necessary steps in constructing such theories of the middle range.

Parsons on the other hand treats theory in a very general and abstract manner. He favours a rigorous logical method of classification of concepts such as you studied in his formulation of “pattern variables” or “types of orientations” in Unit 27. He considers a general and universally applicable theory possible in sociology, which can be applied to any society at any period of time. This is particularly so in the understanding and analysis of social system. However, in the analysis of social change, and especially when he discusses the evolutionary universals he is talking about specific societies at different evolutionary stages in history. Also when he is talking about types of social systems he is referring to specific societies. Yet these specificities do not stand on their own but are part of a broader and more general scheme. Evolutionary universal, for instance, tells us of the stately progression of stages through which all societies must necessarily pass at different points of time. His delineation of different types of social systems also rests on his abstract and general formulations of pattern variables.

The explanatory sweep in Parsons’ general theory of action is indeed very vast ranging from the study of personality systems to the examination of social systems and cultural systems. This indeed covers the total gamut of social reality. Parsons’ view of theory is also cross-disciplinary with relevance not only for sociology but also for psychology, political science, economics, cultural anthropology and other social science disciplines. His perspective on theory therefore is much wider than that of Merton.

This is also true in respect of the analysis of social change. Parsons makes a distinction between “changes in systems” and “changes of systems”. He puts forward his analysis of both these aspects of change, as you have already studied in Unit 28.

Merton on the other hand takes into account mainly the changes in social structure. He does not, like Parsons, propose a direction of “evolutionary universals” in the process of systemic social transformation. However, in the analysis of changes within social systems on which both Parsons and

Merton focus, there is much commonality of approach. Both sociologists explain changes within the social system as arising out of “strain” or pressure on members of groups in society to constantly relocate their roles and statuses. Role and status mobility arises out of tension of redefinition of aspirations, which Merton called “anticipatory socialisation”. According to Parsons strain arises because of conflicting motivational orientations in the context of a plurality of interests. Thus essentially both Parsons and Merton share a common view of why there is a continual tendency in social systems or social structures for internal differentiation and social change. Parsons, however, also brings in the forces of social movement and mobilisation of interest groups to bear upon the processes of social change. He in addition attempts to advance a general evolutionary direction of social change through a set of stages of transformation as you studied in Unit 28. Merton has largely ignored such aspects in his study of social change

Check Your Progress 2

i) Discuss the main similarities and differences between Parsons and Merton in their study of social system and social structure Use about seven lines

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ii) Fill in the blanks

- a) According to Merton constructing too general and abstract theories neither has clearly defined sets of hypotheses nor the tools for their verification
- b) He feels that testing a single hypothesis does not lead to of theory in sociology
- c) Tools of logical classification called are necessary steps in constructing theories of the middle range, according to Merton
- d) Parsons favours a rigorous method of classification of concepts, such as his concept of
- e) Parsons’ general and abstract theory is best illustrated by his general theory of
- f) Unlike Merton, Parsons has also discussed changes of social systems through his universals

31.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have read the critique of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton on such selected themes as

- i) their perspective on sociology
- ii) their functional approach
- iii) their understanding of the concept of social system and social structure and finally
- iv) their sociological theory and social change.

Both Parsons and Merton considered sociology to be a scientific discipline. But both of them had a different vision of sociology. Parsons' approach is much more universal and general than Merton's is. Merton's approach is much more empirical and application oriented than Parsons' formulations. In their functional analysis too they had a lot of similarity. Yet, Merton's approach is time and space bound while Parsons' is universal and can be applied to any social system at any point of time.

In this unit you have learnt about the common ways in which both Parsons and Merton have studied social systems and social structure. Both studied concepts of role, status, social structure, etc. However, Parsons gives a general abstract theory while Merton provides a theory of the "middle range". Finally, both of them have a theory of social change. Parsons described social change within the social system as well as change of social systems. Merton however, has given theory of social change within the system and has largely ignored the changes of social systems

31.4 KEYWORDS

Ahistorical	It refers to any aspect of knowledge, which is not rooted in time or place and therefore has no history.
Diagnostic	The process of deciding the nature of a diseased condition by examining the symptoms. In this context the reference is made to social diseases or problems.
Hypothesis	A theory or a proposition, which is tentatively accepted to explain certain facts and which is not yet verified.
Methodology	It refers to the study of methods, such as the tools and techniques of conducting research in sociology.
Positivism	A term originally used by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) refers to two facts. First that it takes natural sciences, such as Physics, Chemistry, Biology etc. as the paradigm of human knowledge. Second that it involves taking a particular view of natural sciences.
Vision	It refers to the mental image that Parsons and Merton had of sociology, which includes their perspective on sociology and also what they expected from it.

31.5 FURTHER READING

Hamilton, Peter, 1983. *Talcott Parsons*. Routledge: London and New York

Turner, J.H., 1987. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Rawat Publications, 4th Edition Jaipur

31.6 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) a) scientific
b) positivism
c) universal, general, specific
d) antagonism
- ii) In both Parsons and Merton functionalism assumes that there is similarity between a biological system and social system. But while Merton deals with functionalism in a more specific way, which is both time and space bound or rooted in empirical reality Parsons' functionalism is highly abstract and general. For instance, his functional prerequisites of a social system, namely, Adaptation, goal-orientation, integration and latency are not time and place bound. They are found in all social systems at all points of time.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Parsons' and Merton's concepts of social system and social structure have certain similarities. They both use concepts like role, status, groups etc. and considered psychological factors in their analysis of social behaviour. For example, Parsons used "motivational orientations" and Merton used "anticipatory socialisation". However, they differ in their approach to the study of social system and social structure. Parsons is general and highly abstract, while Merton is modest and specific in the development of his theory.
- ii) a) empirical
b) verification
c) paradigm
d) logical, pattern-variables
e) action
f) evolutionary

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