

Social Dysfunctions (1976)

The study of social problems requires sociologists to consider the dysfunctions of patterns of behavior, belief, and organization rather than to focus primarily on their functions. A social dysfunction¹ is any process that undermines the stability or survival of a social system. The presence of this concept in sociology curbs any tendency toward adopting the doctrine that everything in society works for "harmony" and "the good."

We can briefly state the theoretical connection of social dysfunctions to social disorganization. *Social disorganization* refers to the whole composite of defects in the operation of a social system. A *social dysfunction* is a specific inadequacy of a particular part of the system for meeting a particular functional requirement. Social disorganization can thus be thought of as the resultant of various social dysfunctions.

Four general points will serve to keep our thinking straight about the concept of social dysfunction as a tool for analyzing social problems.

Specifying Dysfunctions

Social dysfunctions need to be specified. A full analysis of a social dysfunction provides a *designated* set of consequences of a *designated*

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1. It will be noticed that I have adopted the etymological barbarism, *dysfunction*, rather than the pure Latinism, *difunction*. I do so, of course, since I am borrowing the Greek-and-Latin hybrid, *dysfunction*, from the fields of medicine and biology where it has long since become thoroughly domesticated. I note that W. J. H. ("Sebastian") Sprott, the friend and lover of Maynard Keynes and E. M. Forster, who was surely the only psychologist and autodidactic sociologist in the Bloomsbury set, welcomed not only the SS&A paradigm but the concept of social *dysfunction* as well, but faithful to his Oxbridge education and associates, quietly transcribed it as *difunction*. See his *Science and Social Action* (London: Watts and Co., 1954), 60, 113–16.

pattern of behavior, belief, or organization that interferes with a *designated* functional requirement of a *designated* social system. Otherwise, the term becomes little more than an epithet of disparagement or a vacuous expression of attitude. To say, for example, that a high rate of social mobility is "dysfunctional" (or, for that matter, "functional") without specifying its consequences for a social system is to say little. But it is quite another thing to propose, as such ideologically contrasting theorists as Karl Marx and Vilfredo Pareto did propose, that a high rate of upward social mobility from the working class is dysfunctional for maintaining its solidarity and attaining its goals, since such mobility exports talent from the class and depletes its potential leadership.² More recently, a related ambivalence toward upward mobility has been observed among "the masses of lower-class Negroes [who] regard this movement up the ladder with mixed feelings, both proud and resentful of the success of 'one of their own.'"³ In the same ambivalent fashion, the collective efforts to have many more black scholars appointed to the faculties of major universities and colleges has been described as "the black brain-drain to white colleges."

Composite Functions-and-Dysfunctions: Different Groups

The same social pattern can be dysfunctional for some segments of a social system and functional for others. This arises from a basic characteristic of social structure: *in a differentiated society, the consequences of social patterns tend to differ for individuals, groups, and social strata variously located in the structure.*

If a social pattern persists, it is unlikely that it is uniformly dysfunctional for all groups. Thus, comparatively free access to higher education, irrespective of racial, ethnic, or other status, is dysfunctional for maintaining a relatively fixed system of caste. At the same time, it is functional for the attainment of higher education, a culturally induced goal, by people formerly excluded from it.

Various groups and strata in the structure of a society have *conflicting* interests and values as well as *shared* interests and values, and this

2. For essentially the same hypothesis about the dysfunctions of rapid, large-scale mobility see Karl Marx, *Capital* (1867; reprint, Chicago: Kerr, 1906), 648–49 and Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (1916; reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935), 3:1419–32; 4:1836–46. For analysis of the pattern of "cognitive agreement and value disagreement" evident in this case, see Robert K. Merton, *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, ed. N. W. Storer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) 65–66.

3. Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 57–58.

means that one group's problem sometimes becomes another group's solution. This structural condition is one reason why the periodically popular notion of a society in which everything works together for good is literally utopian. But abandoning this image of a perfect society does not mean that nothing can be done to reduce social disorganization. Quite the contrary: it is by discovering and disclosing dysfunctional social formations that sociology links up with critical morality as opposed to conventional reality.⁴

Composite Functions-and-Dysfunctions: Same Group

Not only is the same pattern sometimes functional for some groups and dysfunctional for others, it can also serve some and defeat other functional requirements of the *same* group. The reason for this resembles the reasons for a pattern having different consequences for different groups. A group has diverse functional requirements.

One example of composite function-and-dysfunction aptly illustrates the general idea. A group requires enough social cohesion to provide a sense of group identity, but prime attention to this need can conflict with the need to work effectively toward collective goals. Activities functional for one requirement can become dysfunctional for the other.⁵ Sociologists have found that up to a certain point, social cohesion facilitates the productivity of a group. People feel at one with each other and so are more willing to work together for joint objectives. But this mutually reinforcing relation between the two sets of activities holds only within certain limits. Beyond those limits, a dysfunctional imbalance develops between activity that serves chiefly to maintain social cohesion and activity that results chiefly in getting work done. There can be too much of a good thing. Members of an exceedingly cohesive group become reciprocally indulgent and fail to hold one another to effective standards of performance; or they devote too much of their social interaction to expressing solidarity, at the expense of time and energy for getting the job done. Correlatively, a group may become so exacting in its demands for instrumental activity that it fails to maintain a sufficient degree of cohesion.

This is a prototype of the functional decisions that must be made in social systems of all kinds. Morale and productivity, compassion and efficiency, personal ties and impersonal tasks—these are familiar

4. Ralph Ross, *Obligation: A Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), esp. chap. 5, "Critical Morality," and chaps. 8 and 9.

5. The classic experimental work on instrumental and expressive interaction in groups is Robert F. Bales, *Interaction Process Analysis* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1951).

ough pairs of values not simultaneously realizable to the fullest extent. This way of thinking is a sociological equivalent to the economist's concept of opportunity costs, which means in effect, that under certain conditions one commitment reduces the opportunities for making other commitments. By recognizing the composite pattern of function and dysfunction, we guard ourselves against the utopian thinking which neglects the social constraints that result from prior commitment to other objectives. Neglecting these constraints leads to the false assumption that all values can be totally fulfilled simultaneously in society. But cost-free social action is a sociological fantasy.

A Sociological, not Moral, Concept

Above all else, it must be emphasized that the concept of social dysfunction does not harbor a concealed moral judgment.⁶ Social dysfunction is not equivalent to immorality, unethical practice, or social disrepute. It is a concept referring to an objective state of affairs. Whether one judges a particular social dysfunction as ethically good or bad, as desirable or undesirable, depends upon an entirely individual judgment of the moral worth of that system, not upon sociological analysis. When we observed, for example, that extending opportunities for higher education to all is dysfunctional for the maintenance of a caste system, we surely were not suggesting that this dysfunction was undesirable or evil. Or when it is observed that the extremely authoritarian character of the Nazi bureaucracy was dysfunctional for its effective operation by excessively restricting lines of communication among its several echelons, this is surely not to deplore the breakdown of Nazism. Correlatively, when sociologists specify the functions of social conflict in general and of racial conflict in particular, they are engaged in sociological analysis, not in making moral judgments.⁷ Sociological analyses of function and dysfunction are in a different universe of discourse from that of moral judgments; they are not merely different expressions of the same thing.

All this would not require emphasis except for the widespread assumption that nonconforming behavior is necessarily dysfunctional to

6. Dorothy Emmet, *Function, Purpose, and Powers* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 78–82.

7. Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956) and *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1967); Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1974), esp. chap. 6, "Dialectical Conflict Theory: Ralf Dahrendorf" and chap. 7, "Conflict Functionalism: Lewis A. Coser;" Robert A. Dentler and Kai T. Erikson, "The Functions of Racial Conflict," *Social Problems* 7 (1959): 98–107.

a social system and that social dysfunctions, in turn, necessarily violate ethical codes. Yet frequently the nonconforming minority in a society represents its ultimate values and interests more fully than the conforming majority. This is not a moral but a functional judgment, not a statement in ethical theory but a statement in sociological theory. In the history of many societies, one supposes, some of its culture heroes became heroes partly because they had the courage and vision to challenge the beliefs and routines of their society. The rebel, revolutionary, nonconformist, heretic, or renegade of an earlier day is often the culture hero of today. The distinction between nonconforming and aberrant behavior is designed to capture basic *functional* differences in forms of deviant behavior. For the accumulation of dysfunctions in a social system is often the prelude to concerted social change toward a system that better serves the ultimate values of the society.

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Paradigm for a Structural Analysis in Sociology (1975)

[. . .] Structural analysis in sociology has generated a problematic I find interesting and a way of thinking about problems I find more effective than any other I know. Moreover, it connects with other sociological paradigms that, the polemics notwithstanding, are anything but contradictory in much of what they suppose or assert. This is no doubt an unbecoming pacifist position to adopt at a time when the arena of sociology echoes with the claims of gladiators championing rival doctrines. Still, recent work in structural analysis leads me to spheres of agreement and of complementarity rather than to the alleged basic contradictions between various sociological paradigms. This is nothing strange. For it is not easy to achieve even mildly plausible sociological doctrines (paradigms, theories, conceptual schemes, models) that contradict one another in basic assumptions, concepts, and ideas. Many ideas in structural analysis and symbolic interactionism, for example, are opposed to one another in about the same sense as ham is opposed to eggs: they are perceptibly different but mutually enriching. [. . .]

The following paradigm sketches out basic components of a variant of structural analysis in the form of a series of stipulations. Although the term "stipulation" is taken from the adversary culture of the law, I use it here only to indicate provisional agreement on one kind of structural analysis. With such agreement, I can proceed to the rest of my subject: the place of that mode of theorizing in the cognitive and social structure of sociology.

Fourteen Stipulations for Structural Analysis

Here, then, are stipulations of this one variant of structural analysis. *It is stipulated*

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