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Systems Theory and Structural Functionalism

John R. Fisher

Northwest Missouri State University

Although structural functionalism finds its roots much earlier than systems does theory, as researchers use it today, it is based on systems theory. Structural functionalism traces its beginnings back to the ancient Greeks and the writings of Aristotle (Susser, 1992). Systems theory emerged much later. Although the discussion of systems began with biologists in the 19th century, systems theory was not fully articulated until the 1920s. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1956, 1962), who developed *general systems theory,* was a principal in establishing it as a field of study. Although systems theory originated later than functionalism, when researchers study functions within their structures, they do it within the scope of systems. The study of political systems came into its own with the adoption of a structural-functional approach.

The systems approach of David Easton (1965a, 1965b) and Karl W. Deutsch (1963) grew out of sociological and communication theory and a "move toward the theory and data of politics" (Almond & Powell, 1966, p. 12). Easton and Deutsch followed a communication, or cybernetic, model to study politics. Gabriel A. Almond's study of political systems grew out of a tradition of political theory and draws from sociological and communications theories. While Easton and Deutsch adopted a purely systems approach, Almond applied structural functionalism to systems theory. Both have value in the study of political systems.

Systems Theory

A system, according to Anatol Rapoport (1966, 1968), is a set of interrelated entities connected by behavior and history. Specifically, he stated that a system must satisfy the following criteria:

1. One can specify a set of identifiable elements.
2. Among at least some of the elements, one can specify identifiable relations.
3. Certain relations imply others.
4. A certain complex of relations at a given time implies a certain complex (or one of several possible complexes) at a later time. (Rapoport, 1966, pp. 129 130)

This definition is broad enough to include systems as different as the solar system and language. Social systems, including economics and politics, fit within the definition. Social systems might be described as a class of entities (individuals, families, institutions) with relations among them (communication channels, influence, obligations). Systems are classified by the "nature of their relation to their environments" and the "search for laws governing the

behavior of each class" (Rapoport, 1968, p. 453). Systems appear to have "a will" of their own and a "purpose" to maintain a steady state. Living systems do this through homeostasis mechanisms that restore equilibrium. Social systems have similar mechanisms (Rapoport, 1968).

While systems in the physical sciences (like the solar system, chemical reactions, and ecological systems) are extremely rigorous, social systems are less precise. In social systems, the elements and relations are vague and hard to define. As the basic unit of social systems, roles are commonly difficult to identify and classify. For the "hard" sciences, this ambiguity would be regarded as problematic, but with the social sciences, it would be commonplace (Rapoport, 1966).

The Political System

A long-standing problem of political science has been to describe and account for the internal structure of the political system. According to William Mitchell (1968), *structure* is generally applied to patterns of power and authority that characterize the relationships between the rulers and the ruled. These relationships are enduring and thus predictable.

In systems theory, the unit of analysis for these power relations is *role,* a concept developed in social psychology and applied to sociology. Political roles deal with decision making on behalf of society and with performing actions that implement the decisions and allocate scarce resources. In analyzing the political system, the researcher typically describes these roles and the people performing them. Traditionally, the main approach to classification has been "the distribution of power" (Mitchell, 1968, p. 474) among the members of the system. Because the one dimension of roles has inadequately described political systems, systems analysts have developed more inclusive variables that lend themselves better to measurement (Mitchell, 1968). Talcott Parsons (1951) put forth a set of variables that he called *pattern variables.* Gabriel Almond (1956; Almond & Coleman, 1960) suggested classifying structures based on (a) the degree of differentiation between structures, (b) the extent to which the system is "manifest" or "visible,"(c) the stability of the functions of the various roles, and (d) the distribution of power. Mitchell (1968) added a fifth dimension, concerning the "sustainability of roles."

A system is generally thought of as being self-contained and distinct from its environment, with observable boundaries. In the process of determining formal members (or citizens) and their actions, boundaries are arbitrarily assigned to the political system. However, most systems are subject to external influences. Thus, analysis must also be concerned with "detecting relationships across boundaries" as inputs and outputs (Mitchell, 1968, p. 475). Yet no common language exists to describe these boundary exchanges of inputs and outputs. Easton (1957, 1965a) saw inputs as consisting of *demands* and *support* while Almond and James Coleman (1960) used the terms *political socialization, recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation,* and *political communication.* Easton called the outputs *decisions,* and Almond and Coleman describe outputs as *rule making, rule application,* and *rule adjudication.* Mitchell (1962) used the terms *expectations and demands, resources,* and *support* for inputs and *social goals, values and costs,* and *controls* to express political outputs.

While boundary exchanges play an important part in the analysis of political systems, the main concern is with the internal processes of a system. An early area of inquiry dealt with the question of how politics would allocate scarce resources (Easton, 1953; Mitchell, 1968). Other areas of process investigation concerned the stability of systems, political socialization, and other support inputs. A third area of examination surrounded the means of ensuring loyalty and stimulating public participation. A fourth area looked at the means of achieving collective goals "from diverse individual demands" (Mitchell, 1968, p. 475). Finally, the process of dealing with problems within the political system became a matter of inspection. Mitchell (1962) viewed the internal processes of the polity as parallel to those of the larger social system. He suggested focusing on goal attainment, adaptation, system maintenance and tension management, and integration.

Applying Systems Analysis

Easton (1966) proposed to define political systems more broadly than did Rapoport. Easton defined a system as "any set of variables regardless of the degree, of interrelationship among them" (p. 147). He preferred this definition because it freed the researcher from the need to prove that a political system is really a system. The only question of importance became whether the system was interesting and thus worth studying. The analysis need only provide understanding and an explanation of the human behavior that was of concern to the researcher.

Easton (1953, 1966) suggested that a political system was distinct from other systems because it concerned itself with "the interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society" (1966, p. 147). He divided the political environment into two parts: the *intrasocietal* and the *extrasocietal.* The first comprises those systems in the same society as the political system that are not political systems because they do not have political interactions. Intrasocietal systems form the segments of society of which the political system is a component, including the economy, culture, social structure, and personalities. These systems create and shape the conditions in which the political system operates. A changing economy, culture, or social structure all have impact on political life.

The extrasocietal environment includes all the systems that are outside the given society. They may form a *suprasystem* of which the political system may be a part. An example of an extrasocietal system is the international cultural system.

From the intra- and extrasocietal systems come influences that may cause possible stress on the political system. Internal or external disturbances to the intra- and extrasocietal systems may cause stress on the political system and thus change it. However, it is also possible that some disturbances may aid in the persistence of the system while others may be neutral with regard to stress. If political systems are to continue, they must fulfill two functions. They must be able to allocate values to society and get most members of society to accept the values. The allocation of values for a society and compliance with them are essential variables of political life and distinguish political systems from other systems. By identifying these essential variables, researchers can determine when and how disturbances can cause stress to the system.

Easton (1966) provides examples of defeat at the hands of an enemy or of a severe economic crisis causing widespread disorganization and disaffection. When authorities are unable to make decisions or decisions are no longer accepted by societal members, system allocations of values are no longer possible, and the society collapses. More likely, the disruption of a political system is not that complete, and the system continues in some form. As long as the system can keep these essential variables operating, the system will persist. The capacity to counter stress is crucial to the survival of the system. The system's history of response to stress allows analysts to determine whether it is able to survive disturbances. Easton (1966) claimed that systems analysis is especially suited "for interpreting the behavior of the members in a system in the light of the consequences this behavior has for alleviating or aggravating stress upon the essential variables" (p. 149).

According to Easton (1966), systems analysis provides a way of determining the impact of the many diverse environmental influences on a system. In this way, it is possible to reduce the blow of stresses on the system and recommend appropriate action. Through the use of the concepts of inputs and outputs, the enormous variety of influences can be reduced into a manageable number of indicators. The distinction between a political system and other systems allows for interpretation of behaviors in the environment as exchanges or transactions that cross the boundaries of the political system. Easton used the term *exchanges* to refer to "the mutuality of the relationships between the political system and the other systems in the environment" (p. 150). The term *transactions* was used "to emphasize the movement of an effect in one direction, from an environmental system to the political system, or the reverse, without being concerned at the time about the reactive behavior of the other system" (p. 150).

Inputs and Outputs

Because systems are coupled together, all behavior in society is interdependent. To trace the complex exchanges and reduce them to manageable proportions, Easton condensed the main environmental influences into a few indicators. He designated the effects that are transmitted across the boundary of a system toward some other system as the *outputs* of the first system and the *inputs* of the second system. A transaction or an exchange between systems can be viewed as a linkage between them in the form of an input–output relationship.

Inputs serve as a powerful analytic tool because they summarize variables that "concentrate and mirror everything in the environment that is relevant to political stress" (Easton, 1966, p. 150). The extent to which inputs can be used as summary variables depends on how they are defined. In their broadest sense, they include "any event external to the system that alters, modifies, or affects the system in any way" (p. 150). However, by focusing on boundary-crossing inputs dealing with the most important effects contributing to stress, one can simplify the task of analyzing the impact of the environment. Analysts no longer need "to deal with and trace out separately the consequences of each type of environmental event" (p. 150). For this purpose, Easton (1966) recommends focusing on two major inputs: demands and support. "Through them, a wide range of activities in the environment can be channeled, mirrored, summarized, and brought to bear upon political life," he wrote, and "Hence, they are key indicators of the way in which environmental influences and conditions modify and shape the operations of the political system" (p. 151). As inputs to a system, demands and supports can be of different types: material and political demands, as well as material and political supports. Easton (1965b) cites expressions of opinion and calls for a decision as examples of demands. A flood may create grievances that lead to demands for building a dam. The conventional way of making demands is to make individual requests, write letters, and carry out other forms of lobbying. More unconventional approaches to making political demands would be to demonstrate or picket. As citizens, through letters, polls, or voting, voice agreement with a decision to build the dam, they provide political support. The willingness to pay taxes to build the dam is also a form of support. Demands and supports are closely interrelated. Easton states that "by the very act of voicing a demand or proposing it for serious discussion, a member will imply that he supports it in some measure" (p. 51). By examining the changes in the inputs of demands and support, analysts can determine the effects of the environmental systems transmitted to the political system.

Similarly, outputs help interpret "the consequences flowing from the behavior of the members of the system rather than from actions in the environment" (Easton, 1966, p. 151). Since the activities of members of the system have an impact on their own subsequent actions or conditions, those actions that flow out of a system into its environment cannot be ignored. Because a great amount of activity takes place within a political system, it is useful to isolate those elements that are important in understanding the system. One way of doing this is to examine the impact of inputs (reflected as demands and support) on political

outputs. Easton defines political outputs as the decisions and actions of the authorities. A government's decision to build a dam would be a political output; the actual building of the dam would be a material output.

This approach was a departure from previous research that examined the complex political processes internal to a system in terms of who controls whom in the various decision-making processes. While the pattern of power relationships helps to determine the nature of the outputs, the outcomes of internal political processes are most useful in tracing the consequences of behavior within a political system for its environment.

Easton (1966) claimed that "outputs not only help to influence events in the broader society of which the system is a part, but also, in doing so, they help to determine each succeeding round of inputs that finds its way into the political system" (p. 152). By identifying this "feedback loop," analysts can explain the processes the system can use to cope with stress and make recommendations that alter the system's future behavior. Easton describes the feedback loop as consisting of "the production of outputs by the authorities, a response by the members of the society to these outputs, the communication of information about this response to the authorities, and finally, possible succeeding actions by the authorities" (p. 152). For actions to be taken to satisfy demands or create conditions that will do so, information must be provided to authorities (those people who speak on behalf of the system) about the effects of each round of outputs. Since a drop in support is an important source of stress, information feedback to these authorities is crucial so that they can "bolster the input of support for themselves or for the system as a whole" (p. 152). Information about the consequences of each round of outputs and about the changing conditions that impact members is essential because it enables authorities to take action to keep support at a minimal level. Appropriate response to the feedback process can have "a profound influence on the capacity of a system to cope with stress and persist" (p. 152).

Criticisms of Systems Analysis

Criticisms of systems analysis have focused mainly on three areas: methodological weaknesses of the approach, the lack of suitability for empirical research, and strong political bias (Mitchell, 1968; Susser, 1992). Some critics claim systems analysis is misleading because it assumes that "reality 'really' consists of systems." This view suggests that "societies consist of far more individual and isolated events than systems [analysis] is capable of handling" (Mitchell, 1968, p. 477). Another aspect of the criticism is that identifying boundaries and variables in the system is difficult, thus making it hard to formulate operational definitions and perform empirical research. Furthermore, critics claim that the concept of equilibrium cannot be operationally defined except perhaps in terms of economic behavior. Finally, although the inputs and outputs can be readily identified, they may not have been adequately studied.

Bernard Susser (1992) indicated that Easton's brand of "input-output" analysis is used very little in actual research, and when it is used, "its contribution turns out to be more terminological than real" (p. 185). The problem is that it is practically impossible to study a system without looking at the past. Without understanding the system's development and its historical strengths and weaknesses, it would be difficult to tell whether an event is a crisis or a normal situation.

While systems theory generally is regarded as being supportive of the status quo and thus conservative in its nature, it is interesting to note that at the time Easton proposed systems analysis for politics, many people considered it as having a liberal bent. The 1960s was a time when behavioralists made great contributions to research in many fields. Conservatives looked at systems analysis as value-laden based on strong conceptualizations as opposed to neutral impassionate science. In addition, looking at political systems as equilibrium seeking, self-balancing entities also suggested clear ideological biases. However, systems analysis had none of the "stress, contradiction, conflict, and imbalance [that] characterize the 'normal' condition of the modern state" (Susser, 1992, p. 186) proposed by Marxists. Easton's system's "normal" state was one of "adaptive dynamic stability" (Susser, 1992, p. 186).

Structural Functionalism

The terms *functional analysis* and *structural analysis* have been applied to a great variety of approaches (Cancian, 1968; Merton, 1968). With their broad use in the social sciences has come discussion of the appropriateness of the use of structure and function and the type of analysis associated with the concepts (Levy, 1968). The functional approach is used more often than any other method in the study of Western political science (Susser, 1992). The professional literature is full of references to the "functions" of political systems and to the relation between structure and function. Sometimes the terms are used without a clear understanding of the meaning of the functionalist position, more as linguistic fashion. This section deals with the theoretical implications of structural functionalism and its relationship to political science.

Although structural functionalism predated systems theory, it still presupposes a "systems" view of the political world. Similarities link functionalism to systems analysis. Susser (1992) writes that both focus on input–output analysis, both see political systems as striving for homeostasis or equilibrium, and both consider feedback in their analysis. Yet functionalism is significantly different.

History of Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism has a lengthy history in both the social sciences (Merton, 1968) and the biological

sciences (Woodger, 1948). Functionalism's history goes back to Aristotle's study of ultimate causes in nature or of actions in relation to their ends, or utility. Developed in 17th-century France, Montesquieu's doctrine of separation of powers is based on the notion of functions that are best undertaken separate from each other as a means of ensuring stability and security.

Functionalism became important when Darwin's evolutionary theories began to influence thinking about human behavior. Darwin conceived of the idea of survival in functional terms. Each function was important to the survival of the whole system. Systems that could not adapt their functions ceased to exists. Other students of human behavior borrowed these ideas, applying them to social affairs. Thus, social Darwinism imported these same functionalist categories into social analysis. Social Darwinists claimed that society benefited from unrestrained competition between units, that functional adaptability was required for survival, and that attempts to protect the weak hampered the functioning of society as a whole. These ideas first influenced anthropology and then sociology. Implicitly through the works of Émile Durkheim and explicitly through Parsons (1951) and Robert Merton (1968), these ideas became central to the social sciences. Almond's "Introduction" to *The Politics of Developing Areas* (Almond & Coleman, 1960), applied functionalist ideas to political life.

Susser (1992) indicates that the analogy of human social life is organic, not mechanical. Mechanical analogies imply a certain "looseness of association" (p. 203) between the parts. While the parts of a motor function as a unit, parts can be easily removed and replaced, making their union less essential and the ability to exist autonomously less likely. In the organic analogy, "Individual elements depend on the whole for their maintenance" (p. 204). Functionalists tend to view social and political units in more holistic, organic terms. "Social practices are said to have a functional role in sustaining the system as a whole" (p. 204). Functionalists equate structure to anatomy and functions to the physiology of organisms.

When only structural categories are used to make political comparisons, "The comparative analysis of political systems breaks down as the difference between compared structures increases" (Susser, 1992, p. 205). For example, the structures between a Western democracy and an African tribe are so very different as to make comparison difficult. However, functions are much more comparable. Although a prime minister and tribal chief are difficult to compare institutionally, they nevertheless serve many similar functions. Although the structures of political rule may be very dissimilar, the functions that political systems perform are universal. Although undeveloped political systems assign numerous functions to a single person or institution, in more developed political systems, the same functions may be performed by many individuals or institutions. One of the primary areas of study in functionalism is the "interplay" between the dynamic functions of a system and the more static structures it designs for itself.

Varieties of Functional Analysis

Most functional approaches share one common element: "an interest in relating one part of a society or social system to another part or to some aspect of the whole" (Cancian, 1968, p. 29). Three types of functionalism exist within this approach, and most functional analysis contains all three. The first is based on the concepts and assumptions of sociology; the second, on the supposition that social patterns maintain the larger social system; and the third, on "a model of self-regulating and equilibrating systems" (p. 29).

Francesca M. Cancian (1968) describes two distinctive types of functional analysis: traditional and formal. *Traditional functional analysis* is the most commonly used. It is based on the premise that all social patterns work to maintain the integration and adaptation of the larger system. Two attributes further distinguish traditional functional analysis from other forms of analysis. First, a social pattern is explained by the effects or consequences of that pattern, and, second, these results must be beneficial and necessary to the proper functioning of society. Researchers take one of two tacks when using traditional functional analysis. They may examine only a few aspects of society at a time and attempt to link one social pattern with one need and thus explain the pattern. Alternatively, they may deal with more complex systems, trying to show how these elements are interrelated so as to form an adaptive and consistent system.

Formal functional analysis is called *formal* because it does not include a theoretical orientation or a substantive hypothesis about events. Rather it examines the relationships between elements. It contrasts with the traditional type of analysis in that its proponents reject the attributes of "integration" and "adaptation" in favor of an examination of the equilibrating or feedback functions in systems. The effects of a trait are used to explain the system rather than the trait. No restrictions exist on the kinds of consequences that are considered. Consequences may or may not be beneficial or necessary for society.

Cancian (1968) provides an example to contrast the two types of analysis with the nonfunctionalist approach. A nonfunctionalist would explain adolescent rebellion by examining the causes of the rebellion. A traditional functionalist would explain the effects or functions of the rebellion. A formal functionalist would focus on the equilibrating or feedback systems and not on the relationships of one-way effect or cause. In practice, Cancian noted, these approaches are usually combined. Almond and Coleman (1960) rejected traditional analysis, adopting a more formal approach.

Applying Functional Analysis to the Study of Politics

According to Michael G. Smith (1966), four approaches are useful in the comparative study of political systems: process, content, function, and form. Studies based on

process and content face huge obstacles. In developed countries, the processes of government are "elaborately differentiated, discrete and easy to identify," but in simpler societies, the same processes are "rarely differentiated and discrete" (p. 114). They occur within the context of institutional activities that are difficult to analyze for political processes. The more "differentiated and complex" the government processes, the "greater the range and complexity" (p. 114) of content. Since content and process are "interdependent and derivative," they require independent criteria for studying government (p. 114).

The functional approach does not have the same limitations as process and content. It defines government as all those activities that influence "the way in which authoritative decisions are formulated and executed for a society" (Easton, 1957, p. 384). From this definition, various schemata were developed to study the functions of government. Easton listed five modes of action as elements of all political systems: legislation, administration, adjudication, the development of demands, and the development of support and solidarity. These were grouped as input and output requirements of political systems. According to Almond and Coleman (1960), the required inputs are political socialization and recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation, and political communication. As outputs, he identified rule making, rule application, and rule adjudication.

In 1960, Almond and Coleman were the first to compare the political systems of "developing" areas systematically according to a common set of categories. To do this, they felt, they could no longer rely on the comparative approaches used to study governments in Western Europe. To find concepts and categories appropriate for use in comparing developing countries, they turned to sociological and anthropological theory (Almond & Coleman, 1960). Rather than adding new terms, they adopted and adapted an old vocabulary to a new situation. Instead of the concept of *state,* which would be limited by legal and institutional meanings, they used *political system;* instead of *powers,* with its legal connotations, they preferred *functions;* instead of *offices,* they used *roles;* instead of *institutions,* which directs thinking toward formal norms, they used *structures;* and instead of *public opinion* and *citizenship training,* they preferred *political culture* and *political socialization.*

In order to develop a system of categorization for all societies, regardless of size and culture, Almond and Coleman (1960) had to modify their definitions of politics and political systems. They felt the definitions of politics that identified societal functions as integration and adaptation were inadequate in describing their concept of political systems. Instead, they borrowed from Max Weber's concept of state and Easton's view of power. Easton (1953) offered a definition with three components: "The political system allocates values by means of policies; the allocations are authoritative; and its authoritative allocations are binding on society as a whole" (p. 130). Almond and Coleman (1960) sharpened Easton's definition of authority by building in Weber's notion of *legitimate physical compulsion.* They viewed the political system as "the legitimate, order-maintaining or transforming system in society" (p. 7).

With the concepts of input and output, Almond and Coleman (1960) moved from a definition of *political* to that of *system.* They saw in the notion of *system* properties that interpret interactions of society, whereas *political* separated out the interactions in order to relate them to other concepts. Among the properties were comprehensiveness, interdependence, and the existence of boundaries. Systems analysis was comprehensive because it included all interactions, both inputs and outputs. It was interdependent because change in one subset of interactions would change others. The political system has boundaries in that there are points where it begins and points where it ends and other systems take over.

Political systems have common properties, according to Almond and Coleman (1960). First, all political systems, even the simplest, have political structure. Second, the same functions are performed in all political systems. Third, all political structure is multifunctional, whether in primitive or in modern societies. Finally, all political systems are "mixed" systems in the cultural sense. No society is strictly modern or only primitive.

As stated previously, Almond and Coleman (1960) listed seven functions of all political systems: political socialization, interest articulation, interest aggregation, political communication, rule making, rule application, and rule adjudication. The first four belong to the input side of a system's functioning, and the last three to its policy outputs. Political communication links inputs to outputs in a way that provides the function of a feedback loop. Whereas Easton's systems analysis deals primarily with "demands and supports," Almond and Coleman's categorization of inputs and outputs in the political system is much more extensive and in fact has led to a multifaceted approach to the study of politics.

In their study of political systems, Almond and Powell (1966) considered the activities or functions from three points of view: the conversion functions of interest articulation, interest aggregation, political communication, rule making, rule application, and rule adjudication; the operation and capabilities of the political system in its environments; and the way in which political systems maintain or adapt themselves to pressures for change over the long term. These latter functions referred to the maintenance and adaptation functions of political recruitment and political socialization.

An Example of the Functional Approach

Many of Almond and Coleman's (1960) categories have become unique fields of study. For example, Fisher's

research on mass media's effect on political decision making drew on Almond and Coleman's categories and mass media functions to develop a taxonomy of media functions in policy making (Fisher, 1991; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008). Whereas the systems view often refers to the "nondescript conversion process" (Susser, 1992, p. 206), the functionalist approach deals explicitly with the steps involved from articulating requirements to fulfilling political outputs.

To show how structural functionalism fits within systems theory, Fisher's studies of mass media functions in policy making are examined (Fisher, 1991; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008). Those studies found 14 media functions within six policy stages (Almond & Powell, 1966; Dunn, 1981; Jones, 1977; Wirt & Mitchell, 1982). To arrive at the 14 media functions in the policy process, Fisher adapted Lambeth's (1978; see also Fico, 1984) 10 media functions. Within Stage 1, problem identification and articulation, were found two media functions: (1) identification of problems by media and (2) relaying of problems to the public. Within Stage 2, policy recommendation and aggregation, the media were found to function in three ways: (3) identification of groups and proposals, (4) identification of policymaker proposals, and (5) media suggestions of content. In Stage 3, policy decision and adoption, the media functioned by (6) setting the tempo of decision making, (7) recommending how to vote, and (8) informing the public of content. Within Stage 4, policy implementation, the media functioned by (9) describing administration and (10) alerting the public to problems. Within Stage 5, policy evaluation, were found the media functions of (11) evaluating effectiveness and (12) reacting to policy. Finally, within Stage 6, policy resolution or change, were found the media functions of (13) stimulating review and (14) proposing change or termination.

In his study of lawmakers' use of reporters, Lambeth found that reporters were more influential in the five functions involving their potential impact in transmitting information to the public than in the functions involving personal or professional influence in the legislative setting. Fisher (1991; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008) used content analysis in his study of mass media functions to determine the role of the media in informing or persuading the public and policymakers. Fisher confirmed Lambeth's finding that reporters are more influential in functions involving transmittal of information to the public and less important in functions involving personal and professional influence in the legislative setting. In addition, the study seemed to bear out Lambeth's conclusions that the impact of the press on elected officials is low to moderate.

Fisher (1991) provides an example of the relationship among systems, structures, and functions. While the policy stages are functions in the political system, they also provide structure for the media functions. The first two provide input functions in the political system. The next is a process function. The last three serve as output functions.

Terminology Used in Structural-Functional Analysis

Structural-functional analysis is made more difficult because of the confusion of terms. The difficulty in speaking about structural functionalism comes from five sources, according to Levy (1968). First, the feeling exists that structural-functional analysis is something new, when in fact it is as old as the scientific method. Second, definitions are messy because terms are unclear and refer to more than one thing. Third, many researchers make the mistake of believing that final causes can be found from their work. They assume that it is possible to find the purpose and design of the phenomena they study. This is a fallacy called *teleology.* Fourth, researchers assume that the methodology is tried and proven, when in fact models of analysis are often misunderstood and misconstrued. Finally, researchers have allowed bias to seep into their work. Unintentionally they have written evaluative approaches into their analysis, thus raising questions about objectivity.

Structural functionalism is a synonym for *scientific analysis* in general and as such has existed long before the adoption of the name *structural functionalism* in the social sciences. In the biological sciences, for example, the study of structure and function has a long history. Structural functionalism analysis consists of nothing more than stating empirical questions in one of the following forms or some combination of them: (a) What observable uniformities (or patterns) exist in the phenomenon under study? (b) What conditions result because of the phenomenon? (c) What processes occur as a result of the conditions? The first question asks: What structures are involved? The second: What functions have resulted because of the structures? Asked in the opposite direction, different results could occur: What functions exist? What structures result from the functions?

Function and Structure

Another problem, according to Levy (1968), is that the general concept of structure has many different referents, in both the biological and the social sciences. Joseph Woodger (1948) in biology and Merton (1968) in the social sciences have pointed to the abundance of referents given to the term *function.* This has led to a lot of confusion. Much of the literature is preoccupied with function, whereas structure has been discussed less. *Function* may be defined as any condition or state of affairs resulting from an operation of a unit of the type under consideration in terms of structure. In the biological sense, the unit is an organism or subsystem of an organism. In the social sciences, the unit is usually a set of one or more persons (actors). *Structure* may be defined as pattern or observable uniformity in terms of the action or operation taking place. In the social sciences, the focus of analysis has been on the

structure of societies and other social systems or the structures (patterns) of actions in general.

Classification of functions or structures depends partly on point of view. What is function from one point of view may be structure from another. Levy (1968) gave examples of this confusion. The manufacture of automobiles is production from the point of view of the automobile user but consumption from the point of view of the steelmaker. Functions in this sense are patterns or structures or have important structured (patterned) aspects, and all structures are the results of operations in terms of other structures, so they are in fact functions. The politeness of children may be considered a structure of their behavior or a function in terms of the structures (patterns) of parenting.

Requisites and Prerequisites

Functional and structural requisites are useful in the analysis of any unit. A *functional requisite* may be defined as "a generalized condition necessary for the maintenance of the type of unit under consideration" (Levy, 1968, p. 23). Functional requisites respond to the question: What must be done to maintain the system at the level under consideration? A functional requisite exists if its removal (or absence) results in the dissolution of the unit or the change of one of its structural elements.

A *structural requisite* may be defined as a pattern of action (or operation) necessary for the continued existence of the unit (Levy, 1968). To discover structural requisites, ask: What structures must be present so that operations will result in the functional requisites for the unit? Functional requisites answer the question: What must be done? Structural requisites are answers to the question: How must what must be done be done?

According to Levy (1968), *structural functional requisite analysis* includes the following steps: (a) Define the unit of phenomena to be studied, (b) discover the setting, (c) discover the general conditions (or functional requisites) that must be met if the unit is to persist in its setting with change or alteration of structures, and (d) discover what structures must be present to maintain the system.

Functional and structural prerequisites must preexist if a unit is to come into existence. Sometimes the requisites and prerequisites may be similar or identical. On the other hand, the requisites and prerequisites may not coincide. For example, the structures that must be maintained in order for the United States to continue as a highly modernized society are not the same as those that have to preexist for Nigeria to become highly modernized. However, the structures may be similar if one looks at the United States at the beginning of the 19th century (Levy, 1968).

Concrete and Analytic Structures

Failure to distinguish between concrete and analytic structures may result in the *fallacy of reification* (or misplaced concreteness). For example, the terms *economy* and *polity* cannot occupy the same position in system analysis as the term *family.* Family is an example of a concrete structure, as are business firms, governments, and societies. In *concrete structures,* the units are capable of physical separation from other units of the same sort, and membership is easily defined. In *analytic structures,* no concrete separation of units is possible. For example, no social system is without economic and political structures (Levy, 1968).

Institutions, Traditional Structures, and Utopian Structures

Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they refer to different types of structures. Institutions are structures with normative patterns with which conformity is expected, and failure to conform is sanctioned or met with indignation. The structure becomes a requisite of the system. The structure does not change without destroying the structural requisite. For example, age and role are tied together in all societies. If the requisite age changes for certain roles or functions, the structure would also change.

Traditions are *institutionalized* as the structure is perpetuated to the extent that changes in functions do not have an effect on the structure. Tradition is a *double institution,* according to Levy (1968): "The structure concerned is an institution and the perpetuation of the structure is also an institution" (p. 27). Important traditions may vary in conformity and sanctions. The tradition of driving on the right-hand side of the road would not have the same level of sanctions as the tradition against incest.

Utopian structures, although they may not be institutionalized, still require adherence as institutional ideals (Levy, 1968). The principle "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is an ideal that is institutionalized in some social contexts. Its perpetuation is also institutionalized. Utopian structures allow the teaching of societal norms and the perpetuation of structures.

Ideal and Actual Structures

Members of a society establish ideal structures to determine how they should behave, whereas actual structures are patterns of how they do behave. Although sometimes the ideal and the actual coincide, more often they do not fit perfectly. This difference in fit causes stress in the social system. Only with perfect knowledge and perfect motivation would there be a perfect fit between the ideal and the actual structures.

Criticisms of Structural Functionalism

Critics of structural functionalism view it as "a translation of Anglo-American political norms in methodological

terminology" (Susser, 1992, p. 207). Structural functionalism may be in decline as a methodological approach for the study of politics; however, it leaves a set of terms that are still used in political jargon. Some of those in the functionalist camp (Merton among them) rejected the notion of this decline. "Much of what was best in the political research of an entire generation was couched in its terms" (Susser, 1992, p. 207).

One of the main criticisms of structural functionalism is that its categories were "too undifferentiated to be of real help in actual research" (Susser, 1992, p. 206). Although Almond's functional taxonomy has greater specificity and serviceability than the systems approach, it is seen as not much more than a translation of familiar and known phenomena into blandly broad categories. As such it promotes "a terminological rather than an essential transformation in the discipline" (Susser, 1992, p. 206).

Another criticism is related to the methodological approach used in functionalism. A list of functions is created deductively and then appropriate structures are identified. In some cases, this approach leads to "empirical contortions" to satisfy the framework. This criticism applies to much academic research, leaving the researcher, rather than the approach, responsible for assuring research validity.

A final criticism, according to Susser (1992), is that functionalism "harbors an ideological slant" (p. 207) that sustains existing structures. It describes what exists rather than what ought to be, thus maintaining the status quo.

As if anticipating this criticism, Almond and Powell (1966) responded to the criticism that functional-systems theories imply "an equilibrium or harmony of parts" and "that they have a static or conservative bias" (p. 12). Political systems are not necessarily harmonious or stable, they wrote, but interdependent. The task of political science research is "to ascertain how change in any one of the parts of a political system affects other parts and the whole" (p. 13). They built political development into their approach to the study of systems. They look at political systems "as whole entities shaping and being shaped by their environments" (p. 14). To understand the processes of political development, they examine the interaction of the political system with its domestic and international environments.

Conclusion

The study of structural functionalism and systems theory had its heyday with the works of Easton (who examined political systems), Merton (noted for his study of social structure), and Almond and Coleman (who developed a taxonomy of political functions within political systems). A majority of political studies from that period used systems theory and structural functionalism as their framework (Susser, 1992). While few researchers today claim a framework based on these theories, the approach is still alive and well (Charnock, 2009; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008; Fisk & Malamud, 2009; Mohamed, 2007; Scheuerell, 2008). Understanding politics requires political syntax, much of which continues to be based on structural functionalism and systems theory.

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