

Rise and Decline of Functionalism and Current Problems of Methodology in the Social Sciences¹

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Historical Starting Point

The rise and decline of functionalism is widely regarded as a sort of historical fact that we can observe from a temporal distance of about half a century. In the course of the preparation of my talk, I did what many students and scholars nowadays see as a kind of royal road to scientific knowledge, namely to check with google and Wikipedia respectively on the topic of inquiry. What we find there is the undoubted conviction – as shared by large parts of the scientific community – that sociological functionalism was a phenomenon of the forties and fifties, associated primarily with the work of Talcott Parsons. It came under attack because it allegedly could not deal adequately with social conflict and with societal change, it was held as politically conservative or affirmative towards established power structures; in short, the period of functionalism is depicted as an “embarrassment in ... theoretical sociology” (1, p321) as one of the renowned exponents of functionalism Wilbert E. Moore had complained in a programmatic essay.

Some decades later, Jeffrey C. Alexander coined the term neo-functionalism but it remained a label for the promotion of a couple of books under this title (2,3) and soon thereafter the traces of neo-functionalism vanished. Jeffrey C. Alexander found new theoretical grounds in what he calls “the strong program of cultural sociology.” (4)

¹ I want to thank Victor M. Lidz for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

One of the most prominent students of Parsons, Niklas Luhmann, made use of the concept of function in a somewhat modified way. (5,6) Expressed in personal terms, he had declared it as one of his main goals to synthesize Parsons and Husserl, or expressed in conceptual terms, function and meaning. (7) With his typical irony he had predicted that his highly abstract social systems theory would need a while to trickle down to common sociology; instead, it occurs to me, that in recent years we can see his influence trickling away. The chapter of functionalism seems to be closed.

For the sociology of knowledge it is crucial to discern two approaches to the history of ideas. One consists in the explanation of historical currents of thought by recourse to social, cultural, ideological or political circumstances, their dependence on power and other social forces. The decline of functionalism is explained in this way by the socio-cultural transformations of the sixties with its concomitant rise of political movements, of Neo-Marxism and Critical Theory. Provided that this view is correct, all of these factors are in a way exterior to the respective systems of ideas themselves. In line with this, Luhmann once suspected that Parsonian action theory disappeared simply because his followers could not establish themselves sufficiently in academic institutions.²

The other approach for an understanding of the development of ideas involves the reconstruction of their inner logic and an understanding of their inherent meaning. The unfolding of ideas clearly requires exterior prerequisites of all sorts; however, it follows a logic of its own that is not determined by these factors.

A look into the history of ideas through the lenses of the two approaches soon makes clear that the promotion or obstruction of ideas through exterior factors is by no means sufficient for a historical understanding of their career, as it were, and even less for a judgment on the quality of the ideas themselves. This also holds true for functionalism. The undisputable simple fact of the short period of time in which functionalism was regarded as the dominating current of epistemological thought in the social sciences, and its nearly complete disappearance in contemporary social thought does not *per se* provide sufficient evidence for its shortcomings. The question of

² Some of Parsons' students became highly influential figures in American and international sociology. But at some point they distanced themselves from their teacher and greatly understated their relation to his work. What Luhmann refers to is certainly true for those scholars who openly acknowledged their Parsonian background.

whether or not functionalism still can be of help in resolving current problems in the methodology of the social sciences requires a substantial look into its basic assumptions and conclusions and certainly into the different forms it attained.

Metaphysical Prelude

In order to get attuned to some of the quite complex and tricky issues of functionalism, I want to start with two preliminary remarks. The first one is a sort of philosophical or metaphysical prelude with which I want to provide a basic orientation or framing for the following arguments, the second one will lead us to a detour on artistic creativity.

The Vienna Circle-philosopher Moritz Schlick noted in his book *Allgemeine Erkenntnislehre (General Theory of Knowledge)* that in whatever way the basic assumptions of an epistemology are to be construed, “they need to leave space for the truth that there is an infinite number of modes of qualities; for the world is not cold and monotonous but polymorphous and full of eternal change.”³ (8, p. 372) Polymorphous is a translation of the German word *vielgestaltig* which Schlick had used. The expression *Gestalt* had entered the English vocabulary through a psychological theory of perception. *Gestalt* in this context means the capability of perceiving things as a whole, as a totality, or in later terminology one could say as a system with emergent qualities, not reducible to the parts it consists of. On the contrary, the parts are only understandable within the frame of the whole, an idea famously formulated already in ancient Greek philosophy and associated with the name of Aristotle. Throughout the history of epistemology there is a line of thinking that – in historically different formulations – holds on to the very idea that the world can be conceived of as a configuration of qualitatively different totalities that at times emerge and disappear and that cannot be reduced to its parts or to one another.

We would not deal with human reasoning if there wouldn't be a counter position maintaining the complete opposite. And again, from the ancient search for elementary parts, the atoms, to the materialism of the 18th and 19th century and to strong contemporary positions in the philosophy of the social sciences, we find a more or less overt commitment to the metaphys-

³ My own translation.

ical assumption that real knowledge is a deciphering of the multitude of phenomena as a mere appearance of an ultimate matter. In the humanities and social sciences this takes on the form of all sorts of reductionism: psychologism, biologism, rationalism, or economism are probably the most prominent examples. In post-modern terms it is a matter of “deconstructing” something as an appearance of something completely different: religion as a superstructure to an economic basis, aesthetic judgments as an expression of class interests, altruism as a sort of egoism in disguise, obvious irrational behavior as the deceptive effect of an unescapable rationality inherent in human action – to name just a few examples. In a different context, Jürgen Habermas once said that his theory of communicative action rests on the intuition that truth, morality and beauty are in the last instance of one and the same essence.

The dividing line of these two metaphysical attitudes is conceptually captured by two pairs of opposites: holism versus reductionism and “polymorphism”⁴ versus monism. It is in the context of these opposites that I want to locate the potential for the concept of function. (9,10) It is connected to systemic views or organic holism and opposed to all sorts of monistic reductionism. This is the basic thesis that I will try to highlight by elaborating a few of its implications for the epistemology of contemporary social science.

A Detour with Ernst Gombrich’s Hobby Horse

After this metaphysical grounding, I want to make one further preliminary remark. Georg Simmel once said that he had gained some of his basic insights for sociology “by the detour of reflections on the essence of art”. (11, p101) Such a detour might also provide a suitable bridging passage to my subsequent arguments.

At a symposium on form in nature and art, the art historian Ernst Gombrich presented a paper entitled “Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form.” There he argues that naturalistic art theories – “ghosts which still haunt the language of art criticism” (12, p210) as he calls them – that see exterior reality as the root of artistic forms are simply untenable. The forms we find in art are not the product of imitations of nature with

⁴ Pluralism might be another terminological option. However, I prefer the expression polymorphism since it has a more specific epistemological meaning.

variations based on abstraction or imperfection nor are they symbols of ideas. If external objects and their forms play a role, they provide an occasion for an artist to initiate a process of artistic creativity. Conclusively, the resulting artwork is not to be characterized as a representation of a real object but as a “substitution” – as Gombrich calls it – in terms of art and so there is absolutely no need for formal correspondence. A hobby horse, therefore, must not resemble a real horse at all; instead it substitutes its *function*. “The first hobby horse,” Gombrich writes, “was probably no image at all. Just a stick which qualified as a horse because one could ride on it. The ... common factor was function rather than form.” (12, p213) Gombrich furthermore suggests that this idea also applies to biological, psychological, as well as social processes.

By making a little detour with Ernst Gombrich’s hobby horse we arrive at the conclusion that an understanding of art and more generally of socio-cultural phenomena is not a matter of formal correspondence or substantial equivalence or – expressed in the terminology introduced above – of homomorphy but of functional relations. The opposite of function as the concept is used here is not malfunction or dysfunction, as it was held by those who attacked functionalism as an affirmative ideology; the antonym in terms of Gombrich’s art theory is, somewhat awkwardly formulated, “naturalistic exterior formal homomorphy” or, packed in a concept congruently used, of “substance”.

Substance and Function

What I will call the “code” of substance and function was employed in key works of philosophy and sociology at the beginning of the 20th century. There are three examples that I see of special importance: in chronological order these were works of Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, and Alfred North Whitehead.

What Gombrich had vividly presented at the example of a hobby horse can be found nearly identically worded in Georg Simmel’s theory of art. In his late and mature work on Rembrandt, Simmel describes as “the most basic error of historicism and psychologism that is repeated in the naturalistic theory of art” that they bind the specific quality and essence of an attained result, a being or work ... to the quality and essence that are specific to the conditions ... of these achievements. Those theories are ultimately op-

posed to the notion that there might be contents, categories and worlds ... that are not deducible from each other. ... And to construct ... a culture out of economic circumstances, an idea out of experiences, a work of art out of impressions from nature, is no more sensible than developing the fully formed bodily figure out of foodstuffs..." (13, p148-9)

Art in this sense attains a functional autonomy and needs to be understood within its own criteria.

Substance and function is a basic conceptual distinction Simmel uses throughout his work. In his first *opus magnum*, *The Philosophy of Money* (14), he reconstructs the development of money out of a barter economy with certain goods and materials used for exchange based on substantial values to the intrinsically value-less pure functionality of money in the modern economy. Sociocultural evolution in general is characterized as a development from substance to function. (As a side note, Durkheim's shift from solidarity based on "similarity" in pre-modern societies to what he calls organic solidarity in modernity implies the same idea.) Money thereby is a symbol or an expression of a fundamental societal shift from a traditional – in Simmel's words – "absolutistic world view" (14, p716) to a modern world view of processual relativity. In an analogous way, Simmel speaks in his sociology of religion of substantial and functional religiosity. (15) And as a last example, of which sociology hardly took notice, I want to mention his view on what is called *verstehen* in Weberian tradition. For Simmel, *verstehen* is a functional version of which the substantial version is a "you", which in turn is a primordially given capability of humans to perceive other humans as distinct from natural objects. *Verstehen* as a function does not require sameness of meaning as Simmel argues in his famous essay on "historical understanding." (16)

While Simmel extensively used the concept of function as opposed to substance for a description of socio-cultural evolution, he nowhere elaborated his respective methodological ideas in an explicit way. But there is one implication that seems quite obvious to me: a function is closely associated to what Simmel ambiguously calls relativity. What is meant is that functionally defined objects attain their meaning and existence through a process of complementary interactional relationships – "interactions," in German: *Wechselwirkungen*, literally meaning mutuality of cause and effect – as in the case of a monetary value constituted through processes of exchange.

It is exactly this idea we find in the masterwork written on the topic by Ernst Cassirer. In his book *Substance and Function*, first published in German in 1910 (17), Cassirer reconstructs the development of modern science, of mathematics and natural sciences respectively, out of ancient thinking as a development from early substantially conceived objects (*Dingbegriffe*, literally translated: thing concepts) to relational concepts (*Relationsbegriffe*). The object of knowledge in modern science is a product of a web of conceptual relations, the objectivity of which is created by the concept. In analogy to Simmel's and Gombrich's theory of art, science does not provide a representational image (*Abbild*) of an exterior reality but a description and ordering of empirical perceptions on the basis of functional-relational conceptual systems. Modern science would be impossible in terms of archaic substance thinking.

A similar topic and somewhat similar answers are to be found in the book *Science and the Modern World* (18), published some fifteen years later and authored by the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. In this book, as in his later *Process and Reality* (19) and *Adventures of Ideas* (20) Whitehead stands for a counter-position to what he calls substance ontology and the concomitant materialism, atomism, and empiricism, and replaces it by an organic-relational process philosophy. The concept of matter, basic for traditional thinking, gets replaced by the idea of an organic synthesis (18, p184).

Whitehead uses William James as a sort of key witness for a functional understanding of consciousness and of knowledge. "James denies", Whitehead writes, "that consciousness is an entity, but admits that it is a function. The discrimination between an entity and a function is therefore vital to the understanding of the challenge which James is advancing against the older modes of thought" (18, p143-4) and Whitehead continues with a quote "... there is a function in experience which thoughts perform... That function is *knowing*." Epistemology in terms of substance and quality, in contrast, results in a "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (18, p68), a famous Whiteheadian formulation frequently quoted by Talcott Parsons as a call for the necessity of a general frame of reference for the analysis of human action (21).

Cassirer as well as Whitehead had developed their views by dealing with contemporary advances in the natural sciences and in mathematics – which I would characterize as a post-mechanistic phase – and both came to the steadfast conclusion that their analyses describe an irreversible philosoph-

ical and epistemological shift. Both were convinced that this shift would not be confined to the natural sciences but were of general validity, applying also to cultural and social sciences and more generally to profound changes in human life.

This intellectual atmosphere of a paradigmatic shift in the first part of the 20th century was also manifest in the social sciences. The period of what we now call classical sociology is characterized by the search for a new identity for sociology. Talcott Parsons, who was confronted with these developments in European thought during his study years at the London School of Economics and at Heidelberg University and who came into contact with Whitehead at Harvard University, bundled the developments in social and economic theories (22), the above described epistemological advances, and other major intellectual developments like systems theory and cybernetics. Soon the label of structural-functionalism was born for his syntheses⁵ and we already know its short-lived fate.

Functional Differentiation of Social Sciences versus Neo-Empiristic “Interdisciplinarity”

The great achievement of classical sociology and of Parsons’ synthesis consisted in what I would call a functional differentiation of the social sciences with their concomitant disciplinary conceptual frames. This differentiation had to be established against strong empiricist and reductionist traditions. The strength of these traditions rested on their close relationship with life-world experiences and thinking. Whereas the success of natural sciences had backed the acceptance of what Alfred Schütz called the “meaning province” (*Sinnprovinz*) of science (23) completely detached from life-world concepts, this differentiation turned out to be historically much more difficult for social and cultural sciences.

It is my conviction that it was not so much opposing theoretical paradigms like conflict theory or critical theory that led to the decline of functionalism, as maintained in the common historiography, but the praxis of empiricist research based on life-world concepts and fused with political and economic influences.

⁵ Parsons himself regarded the linking of structure and function in one concept as inappropriate and preferred the simple expression “functionalism”. (27, p 100-1)

In contemporary social and cultural sciences we find a nearly unanimous postulate of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity, as the term suggests, presumes disciplines. In the praxis of social and cultural research, however, this presents itself simply as a sort of life-world based pre-disciplinarity. It is not a matter of a cooperation of disciplines, but there is an assumption to get along precisely without the *a priori*s of theoretically structured perspectives. The endeavors towards a disciplinary identity of pure sociology, characteristic of its classical period and Parsons' attempts of integrating the differentiated disciplines into a general frame of reference, have survived mostly as historical relics, as theoretical fragments, about which students get instructed in specialized university courses on the history of social ideas. An expression of this situation is the success of widely used introductory sociology textbooks that divide the social world into substantially defined segments like migration, urbanity, religion, family, gender, deviant behavior and some further similar phenomena conceived of as social. In sum these add up to what is supposedly the overall subject area of sociology. A final chapter is then entitled sociological theory and deals with structuralism, functionalism, or Marxism without any recognizable connection to the chapters that went before. The result is the establishment of a new version of an epistemological position that was for long considered to be obsolete: empiricism or naturalism on the one hand and theory by and large separated from the research matter in question.

Substantial and Functional-Relational Object Formation in Sociology

This has consequences with respect to the conception of the objects of sociological research. Objects of life-world are not identical with objects of science as we have argued so far. Emile Durkheim in his *The Rules of Sociological Method* formulated the necessity to leave life-world concepts behind in a trenchant and unvarnished way: "The sociologist ... has to free himself/herself from the false taken-for-granted concepts which dominate the naïve person and has to get rid of the burden of these empirical categories which ... turn into a tyrannical power." (24, p129)

An example of long-standing relevance for sociological discourse is the notion of "the individual" whose in-divisibility is beyond dispute in the life-world context. A partition would unacceptably damage an individu-

al. For the world of science, however, this is by no means the case. For science everything is divisible or better formulated: differentiable so that what is regarded in life-world as an in-dividual can turn into a medical, a psychological, or a social object without getting fragmented, with each of these attaining a holistic meaning in a completely different sense than in the pre-scientific life-world. From this perspective, the conflict between methodological individualism and collectivism is a leftover of thinking in terms of life-world substances.

The problem gets all the more visible if one imagines a corresponding conflict in the natural sciences where physicists and chemists would fight over the question whether a certain life-world object is in the last instance of a chemical or physical character and whether therefore only chemical or physical explanations would be legitimate. In life-world experiences one might be dealing with one and the same object, e.g. a table, but it is something totally different as a physical object than as a chemical object, and this is also valid for the same table as an aesthetic, an economic, or a religious object. An altar is not to be mixed up with a bar counter although the life-world naturalist might be unable to notice a difference. The difference clearly is a functional one.

In short: functional concept formation is constitutive of the objects of scientific inquiry. Scientific subject areas are not entities of experience that are substantially discernable but are functionally constituted out of epistemological a priori's (without thereby being a product of a subjective construction and thus "unreal", as Luhmann held against Parsons' analytically conceived systems of action). Analytical realism, to which Parsons adhered throughout his lifework, is not a conceptual contradiction but an indispensable unity.

Causality and Function

Life-world based empiricism has another crucial problem. Pure empirical description does not attain the status of a science. It represents a preliminary stage that only crosses the threshold to factual science by confrontation with why-questions. Research on cause and effect relations belongs to the definition of science. Empiricist research, however, is confined to description, which only allows for the detection of correlations and has no theoretical or methodological control of a distinction between correlation and causality. Causal misinterpretations of correlations are often grounded

in ideological views. Some of those who recognize the problem quickly end up in what one can call post-modern skepticism towards causality, because based on empiricist assumptions, causality cannot be observed. But functionalism, as I tried to show by recourse on Cassirer and Whitehead, takes an alternative route with different premises.

Causality and Functional Object Constitution

The question of causality is closely related to scientific object constitution through theoretical frames. Let me illustrate this with a prominent example. A nexus of sociological object constitution and causality is ideal-typically evident in the work of Emile Durkheim. In his well-known study on the causes of suicide (25) he begins with excluding empirically verified correlations as causal, for example correlations with seasons or religious factors. Starting from his definition of social facts he identifies social factors lying as it were behind these correlations, such as social cohesion or anomy. Thus suicide is from his perspective a genuinely sociological phenomenon with exclusively social causes. In his study on the division of labor (26) Durkheim proceeds in a similar counter-intuitive way. The causes are, according to him, not to be found in motives of striving for self-interest, as argued by the tradition of English utilitarianism, but again in genuinely sociological factors, namely increasing density and volume of societal life. Durkheim's studies provide clear evidence that statements on causality are bound to paradigmatic-conceptual assumptions. The question of the definition of sociology and its subject area and the question of causality are in the last instance identical questions.

"Polymorphy" and the Shift from Mechanistic to Functional Causality

The described differentiation of social science explanations allows for a functionally specific advance of knowledge. Sociology did not find a common, accepted way towards this aim, so we are confronted with a multi-paradigmatic situation. Those paradigms that detached themselves from life-world substance thinking seem to me to suggest matching conclusions for its subject area and for causal analysis. Whether we are dealing with Luhmann's *autopoiesis* and self-organization of social systems or subsystems, or with Parsons' structural independence of action dimensions and

AGIL functions, or with the meaning provinces described in terms of distinct meaning logics by Alfred Schütz, in all these cases I see the common denominator of a post-essentialist theory design in the polymorphous character of its subject area.

For causal analysis, the premise of polymorphy shifts the focus of attention from exterior factors, usually denoted as causes, to the reaction, the elementary processes and structural changes within a respective system. This precludes models of causal explanation that Heinz von Foerster has called “trivial machines”, with a clear stimulus response correspondence as well as the formulation of general laws. Mechanistic explanations, or “factor theorizing” as Parsons has called it, are inadequate for social and cultural sciences. Instead, Parsons wrote on several occasions with reference to the biologist Ernest Mayr that why-questions are functional questions. (27, p102) This means that causal explanation is bound to the functional specific logic of the respective subject areas, of “action systems” or their “subsystems.” This seems to me already the basic idea of the Durkheimian postulate that sociology has to explain the social through the social. Formulated in more general terms functional self-reference is a characteristic of advanced causal analysis in socio-cultural matters.

An immediate conclusion is the qualitative dissimilarity of a cause as an exterior condition and an effect as a process within a qualitatively distinct system. This very idea has concisely been formulated by David Hume: “... every effect is a distinct event from its cause. It could not, therefore, be discovered in the cause...” (cited by 18, p4) Although I completely concur with this view, there is no reason to conclude that causal analysis as such is impossible but it needs to shift from exterior conditions to an understanding of the logic and conditions of the respective object or system.

Seen from the perspective of the history of ideas, mechanistic causality is a constriction of a much broader idea of causality already advanced in ancient Greek philosophy. *Aitia*, which is held as the Greek word for causality, not only meant knowledge of exterior factors in Aristotle’s philosophy but also knowledge about the object in question, its materiality and formal development. In other words, causes need to be searched primarily within the object. Modern functional thought confirms and deepens this epistemological path⁶.

⁶ In the concise formulation of Alfred N. Whitehead it reads: “The laws are the outcome of the character of the behaving things ... This conception should replace the older idea of given things with mutual behavior conditioned by imposed laws” (20, p41)

Epilogue

Just as the natural sciences, the humanities and the social sciences obtain their *raison d'être* only as a form of functionally differentiated reflection. Luhmann once used the metaphor of a flight that lifts us beyond the clouds so that the navigation can no longer rest on the perceptions and concepts on which we rely in our life-worlds. He ended his *Social Systems* with the words: “we can now encourage the owl to no longer sob in the corner and start its night flight. We now have devices to control its flight and we know that it is a matter of an exploration of modern society.”⁷ (28, p661) I hope that following these words, a new unprejudiced generation of social scientists will have the confidence to build on our strong theoretical traditions and have the courage to go ahead for new adventures of ideas.

⁷ My own translation.

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