

## Functionalism and Neofunctionalism: Some Critical Perspectives

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### Abstract

*This article argues that functionalism is a theoretical perspective in sociology, and the social sciences generally, which emphasizes the positive contributions made by any given social arrangement (e.g., institutions, cultural values, norms, rites, and so forth) to the current operation and continued reproduction of society and its cultural pattern. It has rested heavily as a theory on a broad analogy between societies and biological organisms, a tendency especially noted in the work of early functionalists such as Spencer and Durkheim. However, reliance on the organic analogy is already less evident in the work of social anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, who drew selectively on Durkheim's work, and has become muted in more recent forms of functionalism, which draw more frequently on general systems theory and not merely on the analogy with organisms. This article also argues that neofunctionalism is an appropriate place to start in launching a sustained critical interrogation of European integration legitimization discourse, a way of theorizing which emerged, in the words of its most prominent theoretician Ernst B. Haas, in order to give the study of European integration a theoretical basis. Neofunctionalism has historically been, and in several ways remains, the most influential approach to theorizing about European integration. Developed in the 1950s and 1960s, neofunctionalism underwent several ups and downs, often closely related to the stops and starts of the European integration process.*

### Keywords

*European Integration, European Union, Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, Regional Integration, Spillover*

### Introduction

Functionalism is a theory of international relations that arose during the inter-War period principally from the strong concern about the obsolescence of the state as a form of social organization. States had built authority structures upon a principle of territorialism. Functionalism, an approach to the formation of international organizations that advocates international cooperation on scientific, humanitarian, social, and economic issues. Functionalism, in social sciences, theory based on the premise that all aspects of a society; institutions, roles, norms, etc. serve a purpose and that all are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society. Over the last several decades, functional theory in the social sciences has fallen into disfavor. Alleged to be a static form of theory incapable of explaining social change, methodologically impotent and ideologically tainted, functionalism stands accused of being socially and politically reactionary (Faia 1986).

The structure of this article is a variant form of functionalism, known as neofunctionalism, has been applied at a regional level to explain the early stages in the formation of those institutions that later evolved to form the European Union. All sociologists, their actions, ideas, and theories are very important and have helped shape sociology into the science it is today. Perhaps, in developing any general theory, such as functionalism or symbolic interactionism, progress can be made when the theory's causal implications are assessed. Indeed, functionalism and symbolic interactionism are two salient theoretical approaches in sociology today (Isajiw 1968). In my opinion, functionalism is the most impactful theory. Functionalism was first proposed by Herbert Spencer, but then other sociologists started using this idea and expanding it. But the difficulties inherent in a true functional approach remain as a major deterrent to proper cross-cultural analysis of social behavior (Goldschmidt 1966).

Neofunctionalism is the perspective that all integration is the result of past integration. The term may also be used to literally describe a social theory that is 'post' traditional structural functionalism. A revival of interest in Parsons's work, first in Germany and then, the United States of America, led to the emergence of neofunctionalism. The basic aim has been to merge certain aspects of functionalism, those which have withstood the test of time, with other

paradigms that have developed better critical perspectives. Neofunctionalism is a theory of regional integration which downplays globalization and reintroduces territory into its governance. Finally and more implicitly, neofunctionalism often appears in a spectral form, structuring the analyst's treatment of a particular episode of European integration.

### **A Brief History of Functionalism**

From my own perspective, the best point of departure for functionalism is to be found in biology, a discipline that has been profoundly functionalist for over two thousand years. Functionalism in biology harkens back to Aristotle, who more or less single-handedly dislodged the two structuralist schools that had dominated Greek biological thought up to his time (Givón 1995). William James is considered to be the founder of functional psychology. But he would not consider himself as a functionalist, nor did he truly like the way science divided itself into schools. In the functionalist perspective, societies are thought to function like organisms, with various social institutions working together like organs to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work together naturally and automatically to maintain overall social equilibrium. Functionalism emphasizes the consensus and order that exist in society, focusing on social stability and shared public values. From this perspective, disorganization in the system, such as deviant behavior, leads to change because societal components must adjust to achieve stability. In a nutshell, functionalism treats the existence of various institutions in terms of functions these perform in the maintenance of society (Judge 2012).

Functionalism is an important doctrine in twentieth-century philosophy because it provides an answer to deep and timeless questions about the human mind. The early history of functionalism is complex owing to differences in kinds of functionalism (Jeff 2008). The primary concepts within functionalism are collective conscience, value consensus, social order, education, family, crime and deviance and the media. Functionalist sociologists like Parsons and Durkheim have been concerned with the search for functions that institutions may have in society. Functionalists sought to explain the mental processes in a more systematic and accurate manner. Rather than focusing on the elements of consciousness, functionalists focused on the purpose of consciousness and behavior. Functionalism made a bold move: it focused on the causal roles and causal functions that minds of any kind exemplify. Causal roles do not have to be picked out at the level of description of the brain. Functionalism looks for essential functional properties: causal roles and causal functions that all beings with minds possess (Jeff 2008).

Conflict theory's problems are the opposite of functionalist theories. By emphasizing inequality and dissensus in society, conflict theory overlooks the large degree of consensus on many important issues. Functionalism, also called structural-functional theory, sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society. Émile Durkheim, another early sociologist, applied Spencer's theory to explain how societies change and survive over time. Functionalism has been marginalized as simply a pre-scientific precursor to regional integration theory. In fact, functionalism provides a global view of states and international organizations working towards a peaceful and constructive world order through cooperative relationships across borders to satisfy human needs (Ashworth and Long 1999).

Finally, with respect to the notion of "functionalism", we see form and function as complementary rather than contrastive. Functionalism, on the other hand, attempts to trace the intentions of the speaker in the structure produced (Darnell et al. 1999). Functionalism also emphasized individual differences, which had a profound impact on education. In the 1960s, functionalism was criticized for being unable to account for social change, or for structural contradictions and conflict (and thus was often called 'consensus theory'). Also, it ignores inequalities including race, gender, class, which cause tension and conflict. Functionalists also regularly couple the use of analogical reasoning with a claim to the objective analysis of society through the use of scientific methods and have linked their theorizing to one or another form of positivism in philosophy (Nielsen 2007).

### **A Brief History of Neofunctionalism**

In this article, neofunctionalism is one of the most prominent theories of European integration and a core part of the wider debate between supranational and intergovernmental perspectives on integration in Europe. Neofunctionalism describes and explains the process of regional integration with reference to how causal factors interact with one another. Neofunctionalism was an attempt by theorists like Jeffery Alexander among others to revive the stronger tenets of structural functionalism by synthesizing portions of structural functionalism with other theories. Neofunctionalism highlighted the interactional patterning of the elements that constitute society, attended to both

action and order, understood integration as a possibility rather than as fact and traced the process of social change that resulted from differentiation within action systems.

The concept of 'spillover' is perhaps the most important part of the theory of neofunctionalism. Nonetheless, nowadays it seems diplomatically difficult to avoid policy spillovers in the European Union. To date, neofunctionalism seems to have taken its course, with the original economic integration giving rise to the integration of the social and political systems of the European Union (Dunn 2012). As you will see neofunctionalism shares some ideas with functionalism's focus on the impact of technical cooperation. However, it is less prescriptive as a theory than functionalism and more concerned with understanding why and how integration happens in practice. Neofunctionalism, on the other hand, is not able to explain this relatively fast form of integration, but it is – in its new version able to analyze and explain the 'organic' or slow integration processes like those happening in Europe, and other places in the world.

In Europe, the scholarly reputation of Ernst B. Haas is inseparably linked to the vicissitudes of something called neofunctionalism. It is as the founding father of a distinct approach to explaining the dynamics of European integration that he is so well known (Schmitter 2005). Building on the early developments in European integration in the late 1950s, neofunctionalism developed a model to explain the growing level of European integration and the role of supranational bodies in the furtherance of this integration. Neofunctionalism rests on a core number of intellectual pillars. Firstly, it argues that when countries agree to cooperate in a given sector this cooperation creates incentives to cooperate in other similar and/or related areas. Secondly, neofunctionalism holds that economic integration almost always leads to an increase in interaction between actors in the integrating region. Thirdly, the supranational body designed to oversee integration begins to pursue strategies to deepen integration in already integrated sectors and expand integration to other sectors and in doing so further its own interests.

Neofunctionalism is generally associated with the political and economic goals, as well as the integration strategies (Dunn 2012). While neofunctionalism offers a compelling logic of integration, both failings of integration in other parts of the world and stagnating European integration throughout the 1960s and 1970s challenged some of the assumptions of neofunctionalism. Indeed, neofunctionalism was criticized for assuming a degree of automaticity in integration processes and failing to account for increasing protectionism and limitations to integration put up by member states at times (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2006). The most prominent critique of neofunctionalism came from a group of scholars who advanced a view of integration grounded in realist theory of international relations focusing primarily on the interaction between governments. It develops its own distinctive contribution ... integration theory and stressing the continued significance of international theory to the study of the European Union (Rosamond 2000).

Some intergovernmentalist scholars such as Stanley Hoffman argued that neofunctionalists were too optimistic about European integration. Indeed, intergovernmentalists often felt that neofunctionalists placed too much stress on internal European factors and forgot to analyze the broader context that Europe found itself in and how this broader context and European states' relations with third party actors might impact (negatively) on European integration (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2006). Nonetheless, neofunctionalism remains a powerful tool for analysis of the European Union and it could be argued that in the period of enhanced integration since the mid-1980s the theory has again increased in relevance. While it clearly appears that neofunctionalism is better at explaining integration than explaining pauses in integration, it still presents a useful framework for analyzing contemporary European integration.

## Conclusion

The early nineteenth century saw the rise of functional theory and by the 1960s it was at its pinnacle represented by scholars' of outstanding merit of that time. But the approach was also levied with criticisms as the functional approach was inherently teleological, i.e., explanations are given in terms of 'purposes' or 'goals'. The method emphasized more on society here and now 'collectivity' and did not call attention to the 'individual'. Neofunctionalism worked on the aspects that were not considered by the followers of the functional approach. The Neofunctionalism School also has its share of criticisms as it has been termed as conservative and antagonistic to change, as its emphasis is on social order rather than on change. This extract examines neofunctionalist theory, firstly through a description of the neofunctionalist logic of integration, secondly through a discussion of its core notion 'spillover' and finally through an examination of the intergovernmentalist critique of neofunctionalism.

Although neofunctionalism has been widely criticized and even declared obsolescent, it remains an important approach for conceptualizing and explaining the dynamics of European integration. There are several reasons for that: first, as the case illustration has indicated, neofunctionalism (still) has a very useful toolkit for analyzing salient issues, explaining European Union decision processes and policy outcomes. Second, neofunctionalism has inspired subsequent theorizing, and later approaches have drawn extensively (if not always explicitly) on its assumptions and hypotheses. Third, neofunctionalism has proven capable of reformulation, partly owing to the nature of its core assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses, and partly to its authors' propensity for self-reflection and self-criticism. With regard to whether or not neofunctionalism is still a useful approach today, it can be strongly argued that, despite Ernst B. Haas declaring the theory 'obsolescent' in the mid-1970s, it has not been wrong in its predictions thus far (Dunn 2012).

Hence, rather than confining its relevance to the specific conditions prevailing at the time of its formulation in 1950s Europe, the student of regional integration should recognize that neofunctionalism is an evolving theory and one that is no longer confined to Europe. Its academic location between the disciplines of international relations and comparative politics enhances its potential for explaining an unprecedented process of transformation that virtually by definition cannot be captured by either of these sub-disciplines of political science. As such, its research agenda is far from exhausted. There is continued potential for developing the theory, not least in further specifying the conditions under which the pressure of different types of spillover is likely to emerge and affect the subsequent strategic responses for further integration or eventual disintegration. Thus, the approach is open-ended and inconclusive, but that should be taken as a challenge rather than as an excuse for dismissing it out of hand (Niemann et al. 2019). It is my opinion that neofunctionalism will continue to be proven true and that the predictions of further integration over the years will also be proven correct.

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