

# Functionalism

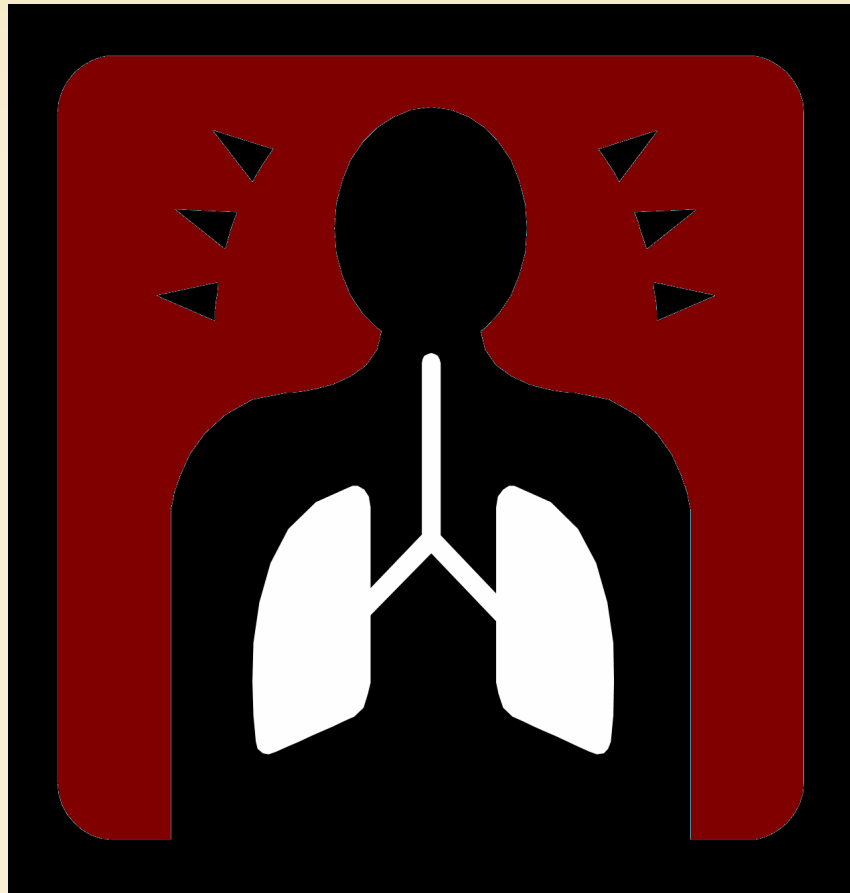
(or “Structural Functionalism”)

# Functionalism

Key people:

- 19<sup>th</sup>C – Europe
  - Emile Durkheim
- Mid 20<sup>th</sup>C – America
  - Talcott Parsons

# Organic



- Parts of society are
  - **Institutions** – family, state, education, economy
- The institutions(parts) together form a whole society
- Institutions work together and are interrelated
  - So functionalists examine the parts in relation to each other

# Structure

- Our behaviour is structured by society
  - Relationships are governed by rules
  - This means that there are recurring patterns in society
  - The rules exist outside of individuals
- Society = sum of institutions
  - **Institutions** = structure created from interconnected roles and norms
    - E.g. – Family = relationships between roles of husband, wife, children

# Function

- The contribution of an institution to the social system
  - Helps society's maintenance and survival
  - Even deviance has a function
    - Punishment of deviance reminds others to keep the rules
- **Functional Prerequisites** – these are the basic needs of society
  - Sociology examines the ways in which institutions' provide society's functional prerequisites

# Consensus

- Functionalism is a Consensus approach
- Functionalists believe there is compatibility and integration between the parts of society
- Social order is necessary to stop society collapsing. We have social order because individuals are integrated into society on the basis of **value consensus**

# Value Consensus

- Is shared agreement on norms & values
  - How does this happen?
    - Socialisation & the **cultural system** help everyone to learn the same norms and values— Parsons (1951)
    - Control of deviants – those who do not conform are punished by society
- **Weak social integration** (ie. People not knowing/obeying the rules) leads to social problems

# Inequality & meritocracy

- Functionalists believe that society is **meritocratic** – your social status is based on your ability and how hard you work – the better you are the more you are rewarded with wealth, power & status
- **Inequality** is therefore necessary and good – some people don't work as hard as others so they don't deserve as much status, wealth & power

# Criticisms of functionalism

- It provides an inadequate explanation of how culture changes
- Is society really meritocratic or is this just an idealistic dream?
- Can there be consensus AND inequality?
  - Functionalists think there can but others disagree
- It fails to deal with effects of conflict – functionalism assumes that society always runs smoothly
- Functionalism presents individuals as “over-socialised” – without any freedom to make their own decisions
  - It Underestimates the complexity of individuals