

Key elements of parsons concept of society sociology essay



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The society is regarded to be the key element of research of such science as history, sociology, philosophy, economics, etc., but there is no one theoretical understanding of this concept yet so far. Since the times of Plato and Aristotle the society was identified with the state and this concept was true up to the New Time (Hobbes Th., Locke J.). Only in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Kant I., Hegel G. there starts the separation of these concepts, when the society is regarded independently and perceived as the idea of mankind and moral-political unity. Gradually within the frames of sociology the definition of the society, that becomes the classical and universal one, is fixed. The key criterion of the concept of society is the presence of people and certain communication between them. In other words, the society is considered as a community or union of people that possesses such features as territory, developed culture, political independence, etc. But this definition is controversial as primitive societies do not have developed culture, and nomadic societies do not have single territory. So the question arises – how is it possible to define the society? There are many attempts and directions in studying and systematizing sociological opinions and outlooks of the concept of society. Modern western sociology is presented by abundance of different schools and trends, and each of them has its own approaches and theoretical views on the concept of society. The school of structural functionalism turned out to be one of the most fruitful in this trend, with the American sociologist Talcott Parsons as its representative. He uses a system approach while analyzing the society and considers the society as a social system which, in its turn, is a subsystem of the system of social act. In the theory of social action, the society is analyzed as a complex system along with other subsystems such as culture,

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personality and organism. All these subsystems interact with each other and with subsystem of the society. At the same time the society is regarded as the system that rises over individuals and does not depend on their thoughts and acts; individuals come and go, they are born and die, but nevertheless the society exists, keeps on functioning, developing and evolving. The main function of the society is using of the balanced combination of mechanisms of the control in the course of the relation with five environments surrounding it, and also a degree of internal integration. This can explain the self-sufficiency and isolation of the society as a complex system. This work concludes that the key elements of Parsons' concept of society is the Theory of Action, that is the bench mark for further development of the whole concept of society; structural functionalism as the key tool that reveals the essence and interaction of the elements of the society from the point of view of their functioning; and the concept of social order, which is a kernel of society as a system.

Parsons uses a system approach to analyze the society as a type of social system. He regards the society as a system consisting of different interrelated elements that make integrity. At the same time the society as a system possesses a certain structure and function. Comparatively firm tie of the elements in the system and relations between the system as a whole and its parts make the structure of the system. The function of the system is in the role that the element performs; the contribution that a certain activity makes into common activity. In its turn, each element of the system can form a new system and as a result within one system there can be several subsystems. The system is the integral unit and it can interact with

environment and in the process of interaction it can be an active side.

Parsons (1966) noticed that "...the society is a special kind of social system... treat the social system as one of the primary subsystems of the human action system, the others being the behavioral organism, the personality of the individual, and the cultural system" (p. 5). The system is understood as something integral that confronts its environment, that is segregated from its environment and that exists independently from other things. The society of Parsons (1966) is a « self-sufficient» social system isolated from other subsystems (p. 9). As a self-sufficient system it must possess certain features. Parsons (1966) explains self-sufficiency as the function from balanced combination of control mechanisms over the relations of the society with the environment and the degree of its inner integration. The society is able to institutionalize some elements of culture that are specified from outside – by the system of culture; to grant a wide spectrum of the roles of the individual and also to control economic complex and territory.

The period from the Second World War until 1960s, as notes Alexander (1987): " was marked by the emergence of structural-functional theory" (p. 35). Structural functionalism while considering the society underlines that any system aims at balance as it is characterized with concordance of the elements; it always affects the deviations the way to adjust them and return to equilibrium position. Any dysfunctions are overcome by the system, and each element contributes something into supporting its stability. While analyzing the society Parsons constantly feels instability that was intrinsic to a social system and while writing his works he concentrated on problems of supporting the balance, self-regulation and self-organization of the society.

As Edward C. Devereux notes (1961): “ One cannot ever take for granted, Parsons argues, that the motives, goals, capacities and values of individual actors will automatically move them toward the sorts of adequate role performances necessary for the functioning of this or that particular social system” (Black, p. 35). He is not interested in what processes exactly influence the society and overbalance it, or break the relations of separate elements and subsystems in the whole system. He pays attention to the way the system eliminates the negative interference in the processes of its functioning, how the system manages to survive and function in the complicated and changing conditions. How and to what extent the system manages to preserve its ability to self-healing. According to Edvard C. Devereux, “ Parsons does indeed postulate an equilibrium-seeking tendency as a property of systems of any sort, partly as a generalization from experience, but more particularly for heuristic purposes” (Black, 1961, p. 33). In his works Parsons pays special attention to the problem of order that is closely connected with preserving the society in the stable condition and achieving the balance. According to Parsons (1966), the core of any society as a system is a special organized normative order with the help of which a collective life of people is organized. Obeying the norms and laws that exist in this society by each member of the society, is understood under the social order, i. e. the individual should perform the roles that are expected of him. Within the social system Parsons (ibid.) distinguishes one of four subsystems – societal community which represents the single collective that obeys certain established normative order, some set of statuses, rights, and obligations. By means of police functions and various sanctions are implemented the control over observance a normative system of order by <https://assignbuster.com/key-elements-of-parsons-concept-of-society-sociology-essay/>

collective. The collective forming the societal community represents an association of the people rallied on a basis of the accepted order. According to Parsons (ibid.), integration of people is the basic function of the given subsystem, that is, the process of association of different elements into a single whole. To achieve and preserve the balance and order in the social system it is necessary to solve some functional problems that arise in the process of existence and functioning of any system. Parsons calls these problems “ motivational problem of order”, their solution is in satisfaction of biological and psychological needs of the individuals, in effective activity of organs of social control and in coincidence of personal motivations of the individual with the norms of the society with the aim to perform the roles and objectives prescribed by the society (Black, 1961, p. 35). The concept of the social order characterizes the society as an internally interrelated and self-sustained social system that works and functions in external environment.

Proceeding from the structural-functionalism Parsons (1966) defines five types of the system that surround the society as a social system: “ ultimate reality” includes religious and moral norms, cultural system – value-normative structures, personality system – needs and interests, system of organism – instincts, temperament, etc., and physical-organic environment – geographical conditions for the society to exist and national environment. In his work *The Social System* while analyzing interaction of the society and the systems that surround it Parsons faces the problems in building and defining surrounding systems, depending on the level they enter the social system from. This scheme gets even more complicated when these interrelated

systems function differently, i. e. each of the systems performs different function in the total system of action. Parsons uses structural-functional approach while analyzing the society. This approach bases on the ideas of Durkheim E. and Marx K. and analyzes the structures and systems of the society at macro-level. Structural functionalism presents the society as a system consisting of large subsystems – economics, politics, law, religion, family, etc. These subsystems are interrelated and mutually dependent. Representatives of structural- functional approach analyze social subsystems and basing on this analysis reveal how these subsystems are mutually dependent, what good or harm they do to the society. Proceeding from Parsons' structural-functional analysis each social system has a number of functional requirements or prerequisites that are met within the frameworks of social subsystems:

Considering a whole society (e. g., the United States) as a type of social system, Parsons imagined four subsystems emerging to satisfy the four functional needs. Thus, the economy specializes in securing the material conditions of society (adaption); political institutions prioritize the goals of society and ensure that they are attained by mobilizing social resources (goal attainment); the legal system plays a key role in maintaining social regulation and solidarity (integration); and the family, religion, and education aim to produce individuals who have the appropriate needs, values, motives, and skills (pattern maintenance) (Seidman, 1998, p, 109).

Thus, the system must adjust to the environment, achieve the aims, have inner unity and be able to preserve this state, to reproduce the structure and relieve a stress in the system. Thanks to the defining these four functions it <https://assignbuster.com/key-elements-of-parsons-concept-of-society-sociology-essay/>

became possible to analyze the systems of any level in terms of functional subsystems.

Talcott Parsons has developed very difficult and extensive concept of society. It is based on a paradigm of social action which Parsons worked all long life in a science. He used a system approach for understanding the society as entire system. At the very high level there is a system of social act – a self-organizing system, the specific character of which, unlike the system of physical or biological action, is expressed in the presence of symbolism in the first place (language, values, etc.), secondly, of norms, and finally of irrationality and independence from environment conditions. In this system of social act Parsons defines four subsystems: organism – subsystem that ensures the adaptation function and gives the system physical and energy resources to interact with the environment; personality – subsystem ensuring achieving the aims; social system that is responsible for integration of the actions of lots of individuals; cultural system that contains values, beliefs, knowledge, etc. Proceeding from structural functionalism, within the frameworks of the social system Parsons, in his turn, also defines four subsystems and each of them performs one of four main functions: economic one called on to ensure the system adaptation to the environment, political one, the meaning of which is to achieve the aim, societal community, that ensures inner unity and performs the function of integration, and cultural subsystem the function of which is to preserve institutional cultural models, that is responsible for legitimization of normative order and preserving the state of unity. Thus, each subsystem specializes in performing certain function and the results can be used by another, wider system. Besides,

each subsystem depends on other subsystems; they exchange the results of their activity. Talkott Parsons's theoretical works do not differ by a surface, the heritage of the classical period of sociology is characteristic for them, which topical in our days too.