Sociological perspectives essay

Art & Culture, Symbolism

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Sociological Perspectives

Functionalist, Conflict and Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Sociology is home to a wide range of perspectives which all agree and disagree on a number of social issues and phenomena. The three perspectives which are, arguably, more central to sociological discussion are functionalist theory, conflict theory and symbolic interactionist theory. The first of these, functionalism, refers to the idea of different aspects of society work together in order to procure social order and stability or social disorder and instability (Ferrante, 2010, p28). A primary force in functionalist theory is the work of Émile Durkheim whose attention was devoted to understanding what caused social order and how the independent aspects of a society can all fit together and work harmoniously (Ferrante, 2010, p28). The second theory, conflict theory, is preoccupied with a division of resources: conflict refers to the conflict that surrounds the distribution of valuable resources such as food and how social factions behave in such a way as to procure more resources for themselves, leaving other poor and

without (Ferrante, 2010, p32). The inspiration behind conflict theory, which sees conflict as an inevitable social factor, is drawn from Karl Marx who felt that resources should be fairly distributed between everyone. The third and final theory, symbolic interactionist theory, focuses on how social interaction and self-awareness can lead to social order – they question how we all work together through a series of interactions and mutual understandings (Ferrante, 2010, p36). This theory takes its lead from American sociologists such as George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer – the latter of which coined the phrase ' symbolic interactionist' (Ferrante, 2010, p36). These three theories each bear a number of similarities and differences, the like of which will be discussed here.

The main contrast between the three theories is that they all approach society and social order from distinct, individual ways: functionalists question how individual aspects of society combine to create social order, whilst conflict theorists focus on who benefits and who loses out in terms of social aspects and resources, and symbolic interactionists focus on how social interaction and empathetic skills aid social order and society as a whole. Equally, whilst these three different perspectives provide a strong contrast, they are all focused on society and social order with regard to what enables it – from this point of view, they share a common goal. However, their individual images of society are different: each chooses to lay blame at the feet of a different social perspective: functionalists " define society as a system of interrelated, indepdent parts" (Ferrante, 2010, p28) which directly contrasts with symbolic interactionist theory, in particular which instead, concludes that society is consistent of a set of interactions which aid social

coherency. Equally, functionalism is also direct contrasted with conflict theory as the former prefers to focus on social order whilst the latter is resigned to social conflict as being an unavoidable part of life (Ferrante, 2010, p32). Ironically, through their disputes, functionalists are inadvertently proving conflict theorists to be correct.

The three theories each also have distinctly individual ideas concerning social change. Early functionalist theory worked on the misconception that white European or American societies were more evolved than black societies, meaning that their thoughts concerned with social change were largely incorrect due to this biased view. However, more recent functionalist theorists have rejected the "'primitive' verses ' civilised' dichotomy" and instead, examines social change with regard to how different racial, social and class groups all aid society through change (Anderson & Taylor, 2007, p622). As a whole, functionalism is unlikely to favour social change because by its very nature, it presumes that the natural order of society with all its individual aspects will create a balance that will enable and secure harmonious social change without direct action. By contrast, conflict theory prefers to examine the differences between the two main class factions in society: the privileged upper and middle classes verses the brow-beaten working class (Anderson & Taylor, 2007, p622). All of conflict theory revolves around this central idea that for the bourgeoisie to benefit the proletariat must suffer and their addressing of social change is no different. This is contrasted with functionalism in the sense that the latter focuses on all areas of society with regard to social change, whereas conflict theory focuses entirely on class. Symbolic interactionism focuses entirely on the interaction

between human beings and in its discussion of social change, it implies the vital importance of symbols (in other words: language and gestures) meaning that often, symbolic interactionist theorists may disregard the bigger issues (such as social change) in favour of focusing on more detailed interactions – often missing the individual ideas of social change in favour of the bigger picture, viewing social change as something that happens through interaction entirely. It is clear to see how these three, central sociological perspectives are massively contrasted to one another and whilst all three address the idea of society and/or social change, they each do so in their own unique way and with their own focuses.

A major complaint made with regard to social interactionism is its lack of ability in addressing key social issues, preferring instead to address macro-details such as conversations, symbols and minor details that add meaning to something. The theory was prominent in 1920s America, at a time which stood directly before the increase in extreme nationalism across the world – arguably, social change was happening with regard to bigger issues such as the economy, religion and race and as such, social interactionism missed the point somewhat. Functionalism achieved its highest regard in 1930s and 40s America where sociologists such as Robert Merton discussed human functions in terms of their being intentional and obvious or unintentional and unobvious. This was of particular interest around this time as the behaviour of soldiers in the First and Second World Wars can be classified into similar categories and indeed, the common argument in the war crime trials which followed each war was that they were ' only following orders' implying that their actions were latent when in practice, they were manifest. Conflict

Theory came into its own in America in the 1960s which was a time of war and social conflict between right-wing and left-wing political activists. These two factions represented those who had and did not have money and as a consequence, conflict theory came into play by addressing a time where those who had prospered, to the detriment of those who did not.

The Application of these Theories

Functionalism preaches the importance of many different areas of society and states that regardless of the outcome, these different aspects will compile to create a social harmony and cohesion. From a conservative perspective, marriage represents traditional values and a belief in God and from this point of view; it is easy to align marriage with people who are of a particular belief system. However, functionalists would see marriage as a further form of social cohesion: the joining of two individuals who will support one another and potentially bring new life into society and will, as a team, work towards improving society as a whole through work, education, tax paying and general social attitude. Functionalism would see the end of a marriage in the same way – if the couple are unhappy then they are not functioning as fully on a social scale, as they could be. So, therefore, divorce enables them to move on from one another and to be happier and perform better within society.

Conflict Theory, however, prefers to view marriage from the practical point of view that individuals are teaming up to strengthen their pursuit of sparse resources. Equally, Conflict Theory still attempts to view marriage as a form of contractual obligation to one spouse to be subservient to the other. A

major criticism of Conflict Theory is its reluctance to look deeper than the conflict that exists in any relationship, stating that there must always be a subservient party in any situation – they see marriage as being no different and are, therefore, arguably against marriage as an institution. However, modern marriages are far more equal affairs and as such, conflict theory fails somewhat – particularly since its theorists are seemingly unable to view marriage or committed relationships as being a personal choice made by the individual.

Symbolic Interactionism does not view marriage as a broad topic but rather, it views marriage as being a series of symbols which indicate togetherness and a connection. For example, society attaches meaning to symbols such as a wedding band - meaning the individual's commitment to their partner and forsaking all others; the white wedding dress – representing virginity and purity of spirit upon entering into marriage; wedding vows - representing, quite literally, the lifetime of commitment that the couple are agreeing to; a church ceremony as being symbolic of the couple's love for God and the belief that their marriage is a Christian one and so on. Marriage is full of symbolic meanings that imply messages to society however; marriage symbols can also have personal meanings such as wedding bands may be a symbol of their commitment to one person whilst another may see them as an unnecessary expense (CliffsNotes. com). Symbolic Interactionism can arguably be accused of focusing on the minor details to too great an extent and rather than addressing what marriage means for society as a whole or even for the individuals concerned, it prefers to address marriage with

regard to its symbolic representation and as an institution that represents traditional values.

References

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