

Sociology 915 Interrogations #9
Functional Explanation
November 4, 2004

1. Eva Williams

Arthur Stinchcombe asserts, “There are a wide variety of social, psychological, and biological processes which can serve as a reverse causal link between homeostatic variables and functional structures. Hence there is nothing more philosophically confusing, nor anything any less empirical or scientific, about functional explanations than about other causal explanations. Functional explanations are merely a special case of causal theory, whose particular structure creates some interesting special results. But these are empirical results which can be tested against the facts” (90-91). It seems to be this last point that Elster misses in his critique of functionalism.

Elster is refreshingly unambiguous about his position. He cuts straight to the chase; “Without a firm knowledge about the mechanisms **[I think the word “processes” in the first sentence of the Stinchcombe quote above and “mechanisms” here refer basically to the same thing.]** that operate at the individual level, the grand Marxist claims about macrostructures and long-term change are condemned to remain at the level of speculation” (454). Having made his methodological position clear, he goes on to critique functionalist arguments, specifically, he posits that “To the extent that the main functional paradigm invokes teleonomy, as in the explanation of market behavior through a natural selection model of competition between firms, there can be no objection to it. In the many more numerous cases where no analogy with natural selection obtains, latent functions cannot explain their causes.” Yet doesn’t Stinchcombe identify five other ‘mechanisms’ of selection (p.86)? **[I think the pivotal issue here is whether or not the “selection” mechanisms listed by Stinchcombe are all, in one way or another, operating at the “individual level.” Stinchcombe invokes terms like “groups” and “structures”, but when the exposition is fully elaborated, perhaps this always suggests individual-level mechanisms. But maybe not: perhaps there is “group selection.”]** Or is the answer to this question embedded in the distinction between the *Weak*, *Strong* and *Main* functional paradigms? **[I forget precisely what this contrast is about was this in Stinchcombe or in Elster?]**

I am as of yet still more than a bit lost in the complicated nuances of game theory, I am left wondering and unable to discern, what do functionalist theories tell us that game theory cannot, and vice versa? **[Game theory is about equilibria that result from the strategic interactions of choosing agents (units of whatever sort – individuals, firms, associations, governments). Functional explanations simply explain a structure or pattern by its consequences, without the process that regulates this necessarily being generated by the strategic interactions of individuals/groups/etc.]**

G. A. Cohen identifies the primary issue with functionalist explanations that they, functional explanations explain why but not how. Consider this section from page 487:

“In this sense of “how”, we can ask: how does the fact that the economic structure promotes the development of the productive forces...explain the character of the economic structure...to say correctly that a species of giraffe developed a long neck because of the utility of that feature [The why] in relation to the diet of giraffes...is not to say how the utility of that feature accounted for its emergence or persistence” (487).

Cohen then proceeds to identify that it is not the functionalist paradigm, which is problematic, but the accompanying explanations of specific causation, which separates excellent from unexcellent explanation. Returning us again to the issue of mechanisms and causal primacy. **[In the debate with Cohen, I think, part of the problem is the conditions under which we can distinguish a robust functional explanation from a phony one. Elster insists that sloppy functionalism is too easy and that the only way to safeguard against it is to posit the feedback mechanisms that regulate the system.]**

2. Gocken Coskuner

This week’s readings dealt with functional explanation, which refers to the explanation in which the consequences of some behavior or social arrangement are essential elements of the causes of that behavior.

Talking about functional explanations Stinchcombe refers to Heider’s concept of equifinality meaning consequence and/or the end being the same there can be various ways to achieve that end and/or various causes causing that effect. Then how are we to decide which of the causes has causal primacy on the effect? **[I think the idea here is that none of these individual causes – the multiple “ways to achieve the end” – has any primacy in the explanation. The primacy is accorded the consequence in the explanation – the goal or purpose – for it explains the entire set of possible means. The consequence may not which of these means is chosen, since that could be random, but it does explain the set of possible means.]** Stinchcombe suggests the equifinality feature, the causal priority of consequences, is a logical derivative of a causal theory. But are the links between homeostatic variables and functional structures driven only by logic? And following that point how are functional explanations different than any other type of scientific explanation that searches for causal relations? **[The difference is precisely because of this feedback/homeostatic process, which is not present in most explanations.]** Stinchcombe asserts that functional explanations are merely a special case of casual theory. **[They are a special case insofar as all of the links in the explanation involve causes – i.e. when we talk about the mechanisms which explain how the consequences of a structure explain that structure, we are giving a causal analysis of this process.]** However, Elster feels the need to distinguish between causal, intentional and functional explanations. **[When Elster uses the terms in this way he is, I think still meaning that in a more general sense all of these**

explanations are “causal”. Strictly he probably should have called them simple causal explanation, causal-intentional explanations, and causal-functional explanations. His whole point is that without something like natural selection – which is a causal mechanisms – functional explanations don’t make sense.]

Elster rejects functional explanations in social science. He suggests that any state action (the effect) can be viewed from one of the following three perspectives 1) the interest of the individual of the capitalist out to maximize profits come what may; 2) the interest of the capitalist class, which may have to curb the individual’s greed; 3) the interest of Capital, which may have to dissociate itself from class interests to ensure legitimacy. He suggests this equifinality makes Marxism invulnerable to empirical disconfirmation and nullifies its scientific interest.

Elster suggests instead, a mixed causal explanation- intentional understanding of the individual actions, and causal explanation of their interaction and introduces game theory to explain the intentional action of the individuals. **[Game theory is better framed as a way of theorizing the interactions of intentional actors than of explaining the intentional actions as such. There is a sense in which it also explains individual intentional action, but only insofar as they are part of the explanation of interaction.]**

Although game theory provides useful agenda to think about the actors’ agenda I don’t see how exactly it solves the problem of equifinality. Because at a given time it is difficult to assess the individual motivations and to understand how the different conditions (universal cooperation, universal egoism, the free rider, the sucker) are in play in generating a macro effect in the society. The game theory approach may be useful in explaining why the wages in textile industry is low. Borrowing from Joan Collins’ recent study in the matter, one can argue that in a global market it becomes ever more difficult to overcome the free rider problem and for workers to unite with a common consciousness. However, how are we to explain, say, Bush being reelected using game theory approach? **[Remember: the issue in play here is the extent to which Game Theory might provide tools for dealing with the gaps in functional explanations – that is, by providing a way of understanding how aggregate equilibria emerge from the motivated, strategic action of individuals. Elster is not claiming that Game Theory provides the best explanations for everything, only when you face an explanatory problem of looking for the explanation of an equilibrium of some sort.]**

In this example, I think the model provided by Stinchcombe works better since the same homeostatic variables acts both positive and negatively on the effect. **[Stinchcombe considers ordinary motivational explanations as basically a subtype of functional explanations, whereas Elster draws a conceptual contrast between functional and intentional explanations. In Stinchcombe’s framework an explanation for the Bush election that focuses on the ways in which Bushes policies have consequences for different actors given those actors interests (preferences) would count as a functional explanation, but for Elster the identical explanation would be considered an intentional explanation. Elster would say that Stinchcombe is confusing an explanation of something – Bushes election – by its anticipated effects (an intentional explanation) with an explanation by its actual effects (a functional explanation).** For example, Bush’s stand on war or taxes or family values act positively on the effect for Bush supporters (Republicans) and negatively on Kerry supporters

(Democrats). And then we can conclude that since the positive effects were dominant in the case, the effect turned out to be Bush's reelection. But this does not still explain why the positive effect was more dominant.

Cohen, criticizes Elster's claim of functional explanation not having a place in social science. He thinks that historical materialism is indissolubly wedded to functional explanations. But he concedes that the Marxists have not yet produced good elaborations of their functional explanatory theses. Then am I right in understanding that Elster sees functional explanation as a statement of "effect B is caused by cause A" without explaining why or how. **[I don't think that your quoted expression quite captures a functional explanation. A functional explanation would be something like: "The effect of A on B explains (causes) A"]** Cohen on the other hand suggests that functional explanation should provide answer to why and how questions but concedes that historical materialism has failed to do that?

3. Fabian Pfeffer

In this interrogation, I would like to approach the logic of functional explanation from a general perspective - detached from its special importance in Marxist theory (especially the theory of history) and its fruitful connection to the concept of power relations and the idea of differential consequences for different actors (a straightforward application of this later approach is in my eyes e.g. taken by Wright 2004)¹

It seems to me that there is one tacit assumption in "crude" functional explanations which has rightly been challenged at other instances: the assumption of perfection information. **[Strictly speaking, even crude functional explanations do not require "information" if by this you are referring to cognitively apprehended information, since they need not work through the intentions of actors.]** How can consequences of behavior cause the behavior itself in a predictable manner if the individual (or social group, specific problems for this case see later) does not possess enough information for predicting the consequences? **[This is indeed a problem in Stinchcombe's usage, where he collapses the contrast between an intentional explanation and a functional explanation – an explanation on the basis of anticipated consequences instead of actual consequences – for in this case one would need perfect information to be able to know in advance that what one anticipates will actually happen. But Elster's concept of functional explanation does not require this.]** I cannot see that e.g. the well-known "unintended consequences of social action" (Merton, 1936) are addressed by any author of this week's reading. **[Elster is in fact preoccupied with unintended consequences – which is why he distinguishes intentional from functional explanations. For Elster you need some sort of analogue to natural selection to be present in order to have a functional explanation, since social/natural selection can work without information.]** One of the ways how uncertainty or misjudgment enters the analysis in their work is the common-sense psychological concept of "wants" or "latent ends": "if people give erratic and unconvincing reasons for a structure, but the structure keeps functioning when those

¹ Wright, E.O. (2004): Beneficial constraints: beneficial for whom? Socio-Economic Review, 2, 407-414

reasons do not apply, it is likely to be caused by some of its unrecognized consequences” (Stinchcombe, p. 99). I wonder how the “Strong Functional Paradigm” can be upheld in face of those “counterfinalities”, as Sartre calls them. My doubts about the power of functional explanations is joined by a range of objections brought forward by Elster (1982), especially his mentioning of “action in search of an actor” by which he points towards the assumption of a collective actor for the case of supra-individual action or also the likelihood of merely unconceived needs and possibilities. This lets me think that functional explanations in general involve strong assumptions which are not likely to hold and additionally and can hardly be assessed empirically: the “conspiratorial design” of “latent interests” might rather be restricted to some specific phenomena than be proclaimed universally valid.

4. Elizabeth Holzer

Stinchcombe (1968, 80) and Cohen (1982, 490) argue that functional explanations are causal explanations—a claim that Elster disputes (Elster 1982, 463) presumably because he believes that (1) functional explanations do not explicate the mechanisms operating at the level of the individual; and (2) mechanisms are necessary for causal explanations. While I don’t find Elster’s argument that we need individual-level explanation compelling, Cohen’s defense of functionalist arguments raises some concerns for me. Cohen writes that in making functional claims, “we look for appropriately consonant and discrepant parallel instances” (Cohen 1982, 491). One common way of finding consonant instances is by surveying a large population for these instances. But would researchers be *likely* to distinguish correlation from causation under this mandate—if we’re expecting to explain consonant instances functionally, wouldn’t we be likely to churn out functional explanations that are in fact explaining spurious correlations or missing intervening variables? I’m reminded of the study that the good folks at Cheerios (or somewhere) cited in a commercial a few years back: a study explained the finding that kids who ate breakfast did better in school by making a functionalist argument about blood sugar and whatnot—but it turns out that social class was an intervening variable. **[The finding you cite is not really a functional explanation – even apart from the incorrectly specified mechanism. The finding you cite is that breakfast eaters do well in school. That is a claim about the effect of eating breakfast. A functionalist explanation would explain the eating of breakfast by virtue of this effect. The mechanism problem would be to show the feedback mechanism through which doing well in school “feeds back” to selecting eating breakfast. The mechanism problem you have identified is with the purported consequence itself. That mechanism problem is not the one Elster is worried about. He is willing to assume that the consequence in question is a genuine consequence; what he worries about is the feedback problem, which is the crux of turning an ordinary causal explanation into a functional explanation.]** How do we falsify “how” explanations within the functionalist rubric?

Also, Stinchcombe in writing his definition of a functional explanation—“one in which the *consequences* of some behavior or social arrangement are essential elements of the *causes* of that behavior” (1968, 80)—assumes that “consequences” are objective, knowable elements of empirical reality. But what if consequences are subjective? Can we have a falsifiable functional explanation of a subjective consequence? **[I think we need to distinguish two issues here: 1) the generic problem of making objective claims about subjective phenomena of whatever sort, and 2) the specific problem of establishing a functional explanation where the feedback processes involve subjective (mental) processes. If the first of these is solvable – if we can make objective claims about things like beliefs, attitudes, emotions, etc. – then I don’t see any particular problem with the second problem, other than problems which bedevil all efforts at providing solid evidence for feedback mechanisms of whatever sort.]**

5. Ana Cristina Collares.

In the readings for this section, both Elster, Stinchcombe and Cohen agree in several points: they all agree that Marxist explanations of history are in general functionalist (i.e., that historical materialism leads to functional explanations of history); that a functionalist explanation is related at least in part to some sort of **social Darwinism**, **[technical note: the expression “social Darwinism” is used to indicate a substantive theory, associated with Spencer, at the end of the 19th century, which argued for the evolutionary superiority of some civilizations – or races – over others. The idea of a social analogue to natural selection is not the equivalent of “Social Darwinism” as a specific theory, so it would be best not to use the term here.]** where the social systems that are more “functionally” adapted to the environment last longer; and also that functionalism explains *causes* by their *consequences*, e. g. the parliamentary system was strengthened in the feudal period because it was functional to the ascension of the bourgeoisie to power. It is not the increasing influence of the bourgeoisie that really explains the consolidation of this political regime. **[Or more precisely: it is not merely the increasing influence of the bourgeoisie that explains this. It would probably be too strong a functionalist argument to insist that intentional/strategic action plays no role whatsoever.]**

They also disagree in some fundamental points: Elster disagree with Stinchcombe (and possibly with Cohen) about the possibility of having functional explanations in sociology because, according to him, there is no mechanism such as ~~social Darwinism~~ a **social equivalent of natural selection** that can be used as an explanation for any sociological phenomena. **[Elster doesn’t quite say this: he agrees that market competition may operate like natural selection on the properties of firms – firms with more profit-enhancing attributes have higher chances of surviving.]** Cohen also disagrees with Elster about the possibility of using game theory instead of functional explanations in Marxist theory.

In order to understand Elster's claim, and to assess Cohen's criticisms of it, I would like to go back to the two last sessions and clarify some issues. Below I will expose my understanding and my doubts about it:

First of all, there is a difference between *explanation* and *cause*. Explanations can be causal or not. They can deal with the micro or macro levels of analysis. And they can be phronetic – in the sense that they look for power relations and take into account the influence of the explanation itself over the “explanandums” (or explananda), or they can be focused on mechanisms and predictions.

From the discussion about phronetic science I got the idea that social sciences should not worry about predictions because of the instability and variability of social phenomena *versus* natural phenomena. About this I would like to say that natural phenomena, even in physics, are also very unpredictable, or better, are probabilistic. The difference is that they have a bigger R^2 when they try to find correlations about variables. Weber lets it clear in *The Methodology of Social Sciences* when he says that, when we throw a stone into a wall, we have as a small chance of predicting where the pieces of this stone will fall than we have of predicting human behavior. All we can know is the probabilistic zone where the pieces will fall. **[I think this is a false analogy, since there is no way of rendering equivalent how fine-grained the prediction is supposed to be. We have a 100% prediction that the pieces will fall to the ground within 10 meters of the wall. We have a 0% prediction of the precise fine-grained details of human behavior (the precise words and pauses a person uses in a conversation, for example). I am not sure there is any way of bringing into alignment the specificity of explananda across domains so that one can say there is “more” prediction in one area than in another].** Weber goes farther saying that we have even more chance of predicting behavior, because we have empathy for the human actors. Chaos theory and quantum mechanics also shows how predictability in physical sciences are reduced to probabilities.

Moreover, making predictions is part of the common sense itself. Social relations are based on our ability of predicting the behavior of the “other” and reacting accordingly. If there wasn't any predictability in society, society itself would be impossible.

Having said that, I turn back to the question of explanations. If I ignore the phronetic claim, an explanation is reduced to the unveiling of mechanisms, of to the finding of causal relations. Have this search of mechanisms to be reduced to the micro explanations? If we agree with this, are we automatically discharging the possibility of functional explanations, because those last ones are related to *structural* mechanisms, especially when the functionality is latent? **[A “structural mechanism” is not necessarily opposed to a micro-mechanism: when you elaborate the structural mechanism it may well work through the actions, choices, and intentions of individual persons. The structural mechanism of market selection in functionally explaining the properties of firms still works through the actions and choices of individuals – managers, owners, buyers, sellers. The key that makes this still a functional explanation is that the properties of firms that are selected need not be**

properties that were chosen by the actors with the purpose of making the firm profitable.]

There is an overlapping, in this discussion about macro and micro levels of explanation, between the macro/micro and the concrete/abstract (“fine grained” *versus* general tendencies) approaches. Elster claims that game theory can substitute Marxist functionalism in the explanation of the behavior of economic actors. But Game theory presupposes a rational (meaning instrumental reason) individual that is abstract. Game theory does not provide, therefore, a “fine grained” explanation as Elster pretends, but a very generalist account of behavior, that has as few chances of making predictions than functionalist explanations. **[True: Game theory qua theory does not provide fine-grained explanations, but the application of game theory to a specific context can provide incredibly fine-grained explanations. The application of game theory involves specifying the precise preferences of actors, their information conditions, the feasible set of strategies they confront, etc. And, of course, the fine-grained explanations also involves showing the fine-grained gaps in the game-theoretical part of an explanation.]**

The main point of Marxist explanation is the idea of the *fetishism of the commodity*, i.e., the idea that individuals act under a illusion, and do not realize that what they see as a relationship between objects is, in fact, a relationship between people. This illusion is created through a historical process that “freed” the labourer from its means of production and led him to sell his labour as a “thing” in the market. What is this, if not a explanation of the mechanisms under which economic relations develop, that is not functional nor based on the individual’s preferences? **[Elster has no problem at all with explanations like commodity fetishism so long as one doesn’t add the two clauses: “... (1) commodity fetishism contributes to the stability of capitalism, and (2) the fact that commodity fetishism contributes to the stability of capitalism helps explain commodity fetishism.” Elster doesn’t mind (1) so long as this is regarded as a fortuitous accident; what he objects to is the functional explanation embodied in (2).]** Of course individuals have personal preferences, and in a “fine grained” analysis we could identify such preferences and predict the possible range of behaviors that can be based on these preferences.

But is it not as important as this to understand the mechanisms under which these preferences are formed, and acknowledge that even if instrumental rationality is at play, the lack of information about what is really going on can reinforce capitalist exploitation (“functionally”)?

My personal opinion is that, when Elster ignores the idea of the fetishism of the commodity, he is no longer a Marxist. **[Why do you think Elster ignores the idea of fetishism of commodities – except when this is rendered part of a functional explanation?]**

6. Wayne AU

I’m a little unclear on what defines functionalism. Is it that a system, with apparently chaotic or contradictory “surface” phenomena present, still “happens” to produce a relatively consistent outcome – regardless of the chaos? (This would imply the function

of the system, but not necessarily imply a causal mechanism). This also may be totally obvious, and I may just have missed something, but: Does functionalism allow for an underlying causal mechanism to be operating as the cause of the outcome? Or is the outcome just a “natural” product of relationships existing in the system? **[Functional explanations always involve the specification of causal mechanisms, at least the kind of functionalism advocated by Elster and Cohen. What renders an explanation functionalist is the specific way in which different causes are interconnected. The hallmark of the interconnection is some sort of feedback loop, some sort of process by which the consequences of X feedback to select the properties of X that produce those consequences. This implies that functional explanations are always embedded in some kind of “system” analysis of a social process.]**

Generally this seems like a re-hashing of the structure/agency, limits/selections, discussion, with an obvious tie to the Macro/Micro issue as well (given Elster’s methodological individualism). Can Elster’s methodological individualism ever recognize or even account for the possibility of macro level causal primacy in relation to the actions/beliefs/etc. of individuals? (His discussion of individual capitalist’s relation to the state is what raised this question for me.) **[This is really a separate issue from the problem of functional explanation. Whatever one’s view of the micro/macro problem, you could either accept or reject functional explanations as a legitimate form of explanation in social science.]**

I do not have Cohen’s book (yet), but I would like more explanation about “consequence laws” and how they justify functional explanations (p. 486 of Cohen’s piece).

7. Brett Burkhardt

Functional explanation in social science, according to Elster (1985), accounts for behavior by reference to a consequence that feeds back to the behavior in a beneficial (or functional) way. Elster (1985; 1982) argues that functional explanations per se are deficient when it comes to explaining social behavior. To be acceptable, they must be supplemented by a tentatively posited feedback mechanism, a proposed consequence law, or possible intentions of actors involved.

I am sympathetic to Elster’s calls for the further explication of functional relationships in social science. Elster makes a very important distinction between “*intended* consequences of behavior”, which are used in intentional explanations, and “*actual* consequences” cited by functional explanation (1985, p. 27, original italics). The former, of course, puts people into the analysis. In this explanation, a consequence only occurs (and therefore has a feedback effect on actors) because an actor acts on the *expectation* that a beneficial consequence will follow. This is perfectly commonsensical, but it also provides more detail and reality than an actor-less functional explanation.

Intentional explanations, though, can seemingly only go so far. For example, they would not apply to situations in which actors act on the basis of socialization. Elster claims (1982, p. 464) that socialization is nothing more than a preference structure that

leads to a specific action. The implication is that the actor still has intentionality and chooses a behavior based on expected consequences. Yet our own experiences would suggest that actors (me, you, others) do sometimes act without consideration of consequences. **[Elster doesn't deny that such actions happen all the time. He would call this subintentional action, which is a kind of causal explanation: explanations by habits, unconscious drives, etc. In the context of functional explanations, however, he would contend that these do not plausibly provide the needed feedback mechanisms.]** For example, saying "Hi" to a driver as you step onto a bus. Routines like this one cannot be accounted for by intentional explanations, because there is most likely no consideration of potential consequences. But can routine (or repeated) actions like this be explained functionally? Some people may derive some benefit from greeting a bus driver. But for those who do not, to explain such an action functionally would force us to consider not beneficial consequences, but an absence of negative consequences. **[The functional explanation here would be of various kinds of norms, in this case norms of greeting. Explanations of norms are complex and they usually involve, in some way or another, the explanation of a mechanism that negatively sanctions, if only weakly, deviance from the norm. When the sanctioning effects decline, then the norm will tend to be eroded over time unless it is pretty powerfully reinforced through some positive psychological mechanism. Norms are the sort of things that often get purported functional explanations, since they do seem to "fill certain functions" (i.e. have desirable effects). The question is whether or not functional explanations of norms – including language norms – are plausible, and how, if plausible, one could test the explanation.]** This satisficing behavior, in which an actor (or firm, group, etc.) seeks only to maintain some minimum standard, gives functional explanation a very wide range of applicability. Repeated behavior can then be explained because it does *not* have a negative or dysfunctional consequence. While this may extend the applicability of functional explanation, I wonder if it is too easily applied to patterns of behavior, or even if it is tautological. **[This is a good point: it may well be that efforts at making functional-type explanations more plausible by weakening them end up turning them into non-explanations. This is a bit like expanding the notion of "egoism" to include things like guilt fines, which eventually makes it definitionally true that all action is selfish. But perhaps there is some wiggle room here. Maybe whether or not this is tautological would depend, I think, on what other elaborations come with the explanation. For example, the explanation should include an account of the search procedure for a new norm when negative consequences occur.]** What repeated behavior pattern could *not* be explained by its lack of consequences that either harm the actor or that disrupt the behavior pattern?

8. G.C.

Elster objects to the Hegelian and the Biological in social-scientific explanation, specifically, their objective teleology. Roughly speaking, it is the manner of Hegel (as well as Aristotle) and the biologist to postulate goals toward which organisms progress over the course of time, e.g. an acorn is potentially what it finally becomes actually in the fullness of time, i.e. an oak tree (which is fully actualized and self-sustaining). **[The biologist would not, generally, call this a "goal": the tree is not the "goal" of the**

acorn. It is the program of development of the acorn inscribed in its genetic structure.] Similarly, a child is potentially the rational adult which it becomes actually. This end point (the oak tree or the adult) for Aristotle constitutes the nature, or essence, of a thing. Thus the embryonic, immature stage (it might be said) possesses the essence which will finally become actualized as a self-subsistent whole. Such a claim, about an acorn or even of a child, viz. that it is progressing toward a limit or end, can be supported by (and might even arise entirely from) observation: acorns in fact become trees. It is no coincidence that the very first words of Aristotle's *Politics* are "Observation shows us..." Having observed the *completed* process (what is more, a recurring process), it seems reasonable to cognitively connect acorns with the oak trees they will eventually become. One can use more metaphysical language, and say that the oak tree *is* the acorn's essence, nature, or ideal, if one likes. **[I think the proper analogous problem in biology to the social-functionalism, is evolutionary theory: is there anything in the single-cell creature that makes it biologically plausible to postulate the human being as its "goal" – are we the essence of the origins of life? Obviously biologists say no to this. But an Hegelian evolutionist would probably say yes.]** Yet, it seems that, in answering questions (why-questions or what-questions) about society, it could be very easy to give answers in terms of consequences that have not yet happened (e.g. that there will be, as a future consequence, a proletarian revolution). It is one thing to give functional explanation of rain dances performed by primitive communities on a regular basis; it seems to be quite another to postulate a seminal social phenomenon of world-historical scale. Is this a valid distinction to be made here? viz. that functional explanations are fine most of the time, but Marxism has ambitions to describe a novel outcome, i.e. a communistic society that "seems" to have qualities that would make it non-contradictory (or, in the Aristotelian sense, self-sustaining). This limit, or telos, is not taken to be such from any observation of a complete growth cycle. **[I think you have exactly identified the problem here: the difference between an organism-based functional explanation and an evolutionary-based functional explanation. What Marxism tries to do – unsuccessfully – is transfer an organism-based functional explanation to solve an evolutionary problem in which we pretend that the history of human society is more like the development of a single organism than it is like the succession of species in an evolutionary process. "Communism" is seen analogous to the adult phase of development of an organism rather than a novel form of society that evolves from previous forms.]**

Some social phenomena are self-contained cycles which might be observed in their totality and then might be explained functionally (maybe, why people vote the way they do). Marxism seems to me to aim for something of a different sort, which is grander. While functional explanations may be suitable for explaining many social phenomena and answering many questions about "social things," is it the case (and, if so, is it worthwhile to note) that "social things" to be explained can be of two sorts, one of which is open-ended, so to speak (or, world-historical)? Can the transition from the ancient to the feudal mode of production, or from the feudal to the bourgeois, provide a paradigm for understanding a *post*-capitalist consequence of capitalism? It seems like Elster and Cohen both (following Marx, of course) want to have something to say about novel outcomes; Elster simply wants to reduce such speculation to the individual,

subjective level, since human actions can only be teleological or purposive (i.e. contain their essence before it is actualized) at the level of the mental, or of reason and conscious deliberation. Is it accurate to say that Cohen wants to preserve objective teleology, in the form of “productive forces,” and this notion can be used to predict novel outcomes? Or is this merely the language for explaining any already-observed productive force-productive relations-superstructure correspondence? **[Cohen would like the theory to be powerful enough to predict future states of the system on the basis of laws governing previous transition. That is an extraordinarily ambitious explanatory project, and probably an impossible one.]**

9. Matt Desmond

Though a functional explanation asserts that homeostatic variables/structures function in the service of one group or another, the reproduction of functional structures need not be a cognitive rational endeavor. For example, Stinchcombe uses Malinowski’s work on Trobriand islanders to assert that “societies will concentrate magical rituals to control the environment in those areas where their actual control is least” (p. 83). Magic serves the function of decreasing anxiety even if, and this is a key functionalist claim according to Stinchcombe, the Trobriand islanders tell you different. If some of the islanders assert that their behavior is to appease the gods while others claim it is to serve as a dating ritual, then “an equifinal structure is indicated” (p. 84). I do not see why Stinchcombe sees a variety of explanations as a cacophony rather than the perfectly logical co-existence of explanations. There is no logical reason that we should conclude that one explanation swallows all others or that if multiple explanations are given for a phenomena, that this signals the existence of a equifinal structure. **[It could, of course, be the case that there are simply many motivations for the ritual, and that the actual occurrence of the ritual is nothing other than the sum total of these individual motivations. There is no single explanation, there are fifty explanations (i.e. fifty observed different motivations), and it is this set of motivations that explains the outcome. That would be one possibility. If the ritual is stable over time – reproduced generation after generation – then one would need at least one other ingredient to the explanation: why is the ritual so stable if the motivations continually shift? Some sort of psychological fact could explain that – something like, for example, the importance of predictable events as a way of acting out these other motivations. There would, I think, still need to be some sort of psychological functionality in play here for the multiple motivations to repeatedly generate the same ritual; but it would not have to be a social-functionality.]**

If functional theories explain phenomena by their consequences, why do they assume only one consequence? Do functional explanations have a difficult time accounting for multiple cases? It is not hard to think of multiple functional explanations for magic that satisfy Stinchcombe’s requirements. For example, magic increases when uncertainty does, this means magic increases when bodily risk does. Hence, magic can serve the

purpose of heightening a group's attention to those involved in risky behavior, increasing their status, and serving the function of the larger group that relies on the fish caught by the efforts of the smaller group because this system of status ensures that certain people will sacrifice from the larger body to earn status. This example is a bit convoluted, but I my overall question is one of multiple consequences and thus multiple explanations.

[There could be multiple consequences, just as in biology: a given morphological feature may increase fitness in more than one way. Presumably there would be some empirical indicator of which consequence is connected to the required feedback process. If all possible observations would be consistent with both functional explanations, then I guess this would either suggest that neither is a genuine explanation, or that we simply cannot differentiate between them.] It seems to me that Stinchcombe places a high priority on a *single functionalist explanation*, manifest in a “uniformity of consequence” or an “equifinal structure,” and when confronted with an idea of multiple explanations, he argues that a single latent explanation (‘want’) motivates the action. But there is not a logical justification for this deduction. Just as people can have multiple wants, equally valid, structures can have multiple consequences, and so on. **[It could be the case that multiple-functionality is the general condition for stable structures – this is apart of what it means to say that they are “overdetermined” – there are multiple sufficient causes present. If a ritual in fact serves two functions it will be less vulnerable to decay over time than it if only serves one. But still: the claim that it serves two functions needs to be distinguished from the claim that these two functions both explain the existence of the ritual. It could be that one function explains the ritual, and that the other function is a happy accident, or reflects some other kind of adaptation.]**

This seems to be problematic to the functionalist explanation because it relies on an overarching function to explain the existences and reproduction of a social phenomenon. Can functional explanations be multiply realized? If this is the case, they seem to lose their causal potency.

10 Dan Warshawsky

This week we are introduced to functional explanation. This concept is quite new to me, as I have actually never studied it directly. Therefore, I found the assigned readings very interesting. After doing some additional readings of Parsons' work and some literature in human geography (my field), I have a better grasp of functional explanation: its basic message, its strengths, and its weaknesses. In this interrogation I intend to do a couple of basic things. First, I want to describe functionalism as I understand it, and see if Erik and others agree with my interpretation. Secondly, I am interested in functionalism's strengths and weaknesses as a mode of explanation. How relevant is it today, especially as it relates to historical materialism?

As I see it, functionalism can be described as a perspective from which the world is seen as set of differentiated and independent systems, whose collective actions and interactions are ‘instances of repeatable and predictable regularities in which form and function can be assumed to be related’ (Bennet and Chorley, 1978). Additionally, it appears that this perspective emphasizes the form-function relations in terms of their role in maintaining the continuity or integrity of the system. Structural functionalism is generally tied to the sociologist Talcott Parsons who emphasized that the structure of any social system must be explained by ‘functional imperatives’ rather than the ‘the actor’s point of view.’ The functions of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency are all central to his perspective. Throughout his analysis, he emphasizes the conjunction of a static ‘structure’ and dynamic ‘function’ components and the interaction between the systems and sub-systems in social systems.

This is a general overview of my interpretation of Parsons’ ‘structural functionalism’ as it is often called. Although I understand what he says in general, I am still unclear on a couple of issues. Why does he emphasize the importance of ‘functional imperatives’ over the ‘actor’s point of view’? **[The issue here is explanation: how do you explain the properties of an institution, for example. How do explain why schools are organized the way they are, why cities have the structure they have, etc. An explanation from “the actors point of view” would emphasize the purposes actors have and how these purposes shape in various ways the properties of institutions. The specification of “functional imperatives”, in contrast, says: there are certain kinds of “functions” which must be met in one way or another in order for a society to exist. Unless these functions are met, no society. They are “imperatives”. If we then observe that an institution fulfills this required imperative, we can claim that this is what explains the property: it is the way it is because it fulfills the imperative, not because of the intentions or goals of the actors.]** Additionally, why does he limit his ‘functional imperatives’ to just four: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency? **[In Parsons he makes the strong claim that all concrete functional requirements are instances of one or more of these abstractly defined functions. Basically this is meant to be derived from a logical account of what must happen for any abstract system to be reproduced over time. The appropriate counter to his argument – if you buy into the general project of grand functionalism – would be to posit some functional imperative that does not fit into this typology.]** Some additional clarity would be helpful, especially to understand the context in which his ‘structural functionalism’ developed.

My second broad thread in this interrogation focuses on general strengths and weaknesses of his general perspective. I can understand why many components of historical materialism became integrated with ‘functionalist’ explanations. To understand how capitalism works, one must emphasize that capitalism is as much crisis-dependent and self-regulating mode of production as much or more than it is a crisis-ridden mode of production. However, I can also see how functionalism was attacked by those who wondered how it could explain the unintended or unanticipated consequences of a form of social conduct that could explain its existence or functionalism’s lack of central agent to carry out its ‘needs’ or ‘goals.’ Although I am not a complete supporter of Elster, I can

see why he brings his methodological individualism in to ‘empower’ agency, but I can also see where Giddens’ structuration or other post-modern or post-structuralist critiques might discredit functionalism. Some, such as Gibson-Graham, have noted that some conceptions of capitalism have constructed a unified entity rather than showing its often fragmented nature and possibilities for social or cultural intervention. **[The unified vs fragmented character of society is a different issue from functional explanation. Whatever property of society one might postulate, unitary or fragmented, could potentially be explained functionally or by some other means. A grand functionalism does try to imagine society like an organism with a complex array of interdependent parts in which the whole thing is driven by functional explanations of “the system.” But functional explanations do not depend on that grand system-theory formulation.]**

So, in all, it seems that functionalism has been attacked from all sides. I am not completely sure how directly directed ‘functionalism’ is or should be connected to Marxist analyses (a question I’m sure Erik can answer). Secondly, with all of these powerful critiques of functionalism, especially as they incorporate agency, I wonder if functionalism can still be viewed as being useful at all and can absorb these critiques, or if functionalism is just too problematic to be of any utility.

11 Mark Cooper

I found it difficult at some points to ground this week’s readings in the context of topics previously covered in the seminar. Two particular topics, mechanisms and methodological individualism are most closely addressed in the readings; I am left with questions about both of these in terms of functional explanation. Each of these questions likely relates to the general nature of functional explanation at its most general level. Stinchcombe outlines some of the types of mechanisms that enter into functional explanations, isn’t clear on how necessary identification of specific mechanisms in actual explanations might be. In his discussion of the logic of functional explanation, he then describes the relationships between homeostatic variables and structures. Does the description of a particular relationship necessitate the identification of a mechanism, or is describing the relationship itself sufficient? **[The description of a relationship need not imply specifying a mechanism, but the shift from describing to explaining the relationship does. Elster draws the contrast between functional descriptions and functional explanations. It is the latter that he is worried about.]** A related question then might be how critiques of a given functional explanation proceed to alter the shape of the general explanation through hypothesizing the existence of ulterior mechanisms. I would also be interested in an explanation of Wright’s note on figure 3.7 on how identification of certain mechanisms affect whether functional explanation is teleological or non-. **[A Teleological explanation, I take it, is one that does not require a feedback process that dynamically links changes in a structure to its consequences.]**

The second topic in Elster's case for methodological individualism and its relationship to functional explanation. Elster claims that, "Marxists have not taken up the challenge of showing how ideological hegemony is created and entrenched at the individual level." (454) That certainly seems to be a valid point, but it's unclear how he then proceeds to declare the "poverty of functionalist Marxism." I was under the impression that explanation that stopped before reaching foundations of individual action were often valid, but incomplete. While this might exclude a case such as O'Connor, it seems that the difference between cases of what Elster calls "objective" and "subjective" teleology are sometimes conceivable as a difference of emphasis, rather than logic. Elster, however, seems to exclude any potential for functional explanation. Is he correct in his juxtaposition of functional and intentional explanations? Are individual level mechanisms not compatible with the logic of functional explanation? **[I think individual-level mechanisms are potentially compatible with functional explanations, but if the individual mechanisms are entirely constituted by the intentionality of the actor, then the question is: why bother with the more complex functional explanation when a simple intentional explanation will do. To explain some regulatory policy of the state one could either say:**

(1) This policy occurred because powerful capitalists believed it would be beneficial to their interests and they engaged in strategies that generated the policy. In this case, they turned out to be right – after they observed the actual effects of the policy – and therefore they continued to support the policy because they believed these effects would continue into the future.

(2) this policy occurred because of the functions it fills in the reproduction of capitalism. The mechanism through which this function was met was the beliefs and strategies of powerful capitalists.

Elster argues that the actual explanation is the first of these. The second doesn't add anything. I am not completely sure he is right on this.]

12 Matt Dimick

In *Making Sense of Marx*, Elster says that the "best way" "functional explanation could be made intellectually respectable ... would be to provide the actual mechanism by which the consequence feeds back on the behaviour to be explained" such as a "natural selection" mechanism or "filter process" (p. 28). Elster also says, however, that this way of repairing functional explanations "is equivalent to the substitution of a non-functional explanation for a functional one" (p. 29). Is Elster saying that the addition of such a feedback mechanism makes an otherwise functional explanation not a functional one? **[That seems to be what he is saying, but I don't think he is right on this – and I think he has pulled back from this strong claim. He accepts functional explanations in biology in spite of the fact that they contain such causal feedbacks. It still makes**

sense to distinguish causal structures in which there are such feedback processes and systems-connections among causes from causal processes in which this is absent.] After all, Stinchcombe appears to believe that functional explanations have a unique structure that distinguishes them from other explanatory structures even after the addition of “reverse causal” links. In other words, for Stinchcombe, the addition of feedback mechanisms to functional explanations does not render them non-functional explanations. Perhaps it would be better to classify functional explanations, as Stinchcombe does, as “a special case of causal theory” (p. 91), rather than as distinct from causal explanations, as Elster does (e.g., *Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory*, p. 463). Or, perhaps better, the additional of feedback mechanisms or reverse causal links to functional explanations take such explanations out of a distinct class of explanations, alongside causal and intentional explanations, and places them as a subcategory within causal explanations.

A small terminological curiosum: Does anything distinguish teleology from functionalism? I am tempted to say, No, but Erik has scribbled in his notes on Stinchcombe statements that appear to distinguish teleological from non-teleological versions of functionalism (for the latter, “the ends are not intrinsic to the process [being?] selected [or?] created by specific mechanisms). **[I would need some historian of ideas to clarify the precise meaning of telos and teleology in these contexts. I think my note was meant to distinguish a causal process which had the same form as intentionality – there is an end-in-sight which explains the whole process – from the kind of detailed feedback causal structure of Stinchcombe’s functional explanation. The former is what I took “teleology” to be about.]**

I have often heard it said that functional explanations are less useful for explaining the *origins* of something than for its *persistence*. I’m not sure if this argument refers to functional explanations with or without feedback mechanisms. If it applies to functional explanations without feedback mechanisms, wouldn’t one still need to specify a feedback mechanisms to make it intellectually defensible? I don’t see why a new social practice would necessarily persist just because it was beneficial—one would still need to specify some feedback loop to explain why that practice was used again. If the argument applies to functional explanations with feedback mechanisms, what is really different or better about a functional-persistence claim than a functional-origin claim? **[The analogy here is with biology: the origin of a trait is random mutation in the context of morphological possibilities. The rate of mutations is caused by all sorts of things unconnected to feedback. The persistence is explained by a completely distinct process from the origins. In social contexts, however, trial and error, purposive action may indeed be part of the origins questions: we are like Gods with respect to social institution – intelligent design figures into the origins of things. But the persistence could stil be because of actual stabilizing effects, not purposes.]** Finally, couldn’t one say that *all* functional explanations are of the persistence variety since the actual coming into being of the features can often be treated as random? In biology, traits mutate at random; they simply persist when have generate differential survival. In firms, there are a variety of strategies of profit maximizing; those strategies that work simply persist in firms that survive. Indeed, this is what “feedback” would seem to imply. Most

of the mechanisms that Stinchcombe lists appear to be ones that will generate tendencies to repeat a certain practice after it has been tried for whatever reason. This seems true for all except “3” (p. 86), which one could construe rather as *intentional* explanation. So what really is the difference between functional-origin and functional-persistence explanations?

13. Matías D. Scaglione

Marx and functional explanations

Although I do not deny the validity of the so-called “functional explanations”, I believe that Cohen’s “functional” interpretation of Marx is inappropriate and leads to erroneous conclusions. In the *Preface* of the *A contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (*Contribution* henceforth) Marx present a *summary* of “*general conclusion*” that “became the guiding principle of [Marx’s]... studies” (*Contribution*, emphasis added). Cohen interprets that the text that follows such warning in the *Contribution* is but the one “which gives the clearest *statement* of the *theory of historical materialism*” (Cohen, 484, emphasis added). This is crucial and precedes any methodological discussion, insofar as Cohen’s decision is less methodological than *epistemological*. **[But Cohen makes this claim after a careful study of the entire corpus of Marx’s work in which epochal trajectories of change are discussed, or in which the reproduction of social systems are discussed. I don’t think Cohen really bases his whole argument on the *Contribution* irrespective of its connection to the complete corpus of Marx’s writing on relevant themes.]**

According to Cohen’s functional interpretation, the assertion that the “definite relations” are “relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production” (*Contribution*, *ibid.*) means that “[t]he level of development of the productive forces in a society *explains* the nature of its economic structure”, as long as “the economic structure of a society *promotes* the development of its productive forces”. This is a *salto mortale* in Cohen’s interpretation. I think that the level of generality and determinism of Cohen’s functional explanation not only does not capture Marx’s warning against “the master key of a general historico-philosophical theory” (Marx to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski*), but also entails the *abandonment of the critique of political economy*, through which Marx was trying to uncover the *particular* laws or underlying mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production [I have no space to elaborate this important point]. **[There is no necessary tension between establishing the particular laws of capitalism and the general laws of a materialist theory of history. These can be considered two strategies for theorizing the transcendence of capitalism, of defending the claim that capitalism has a specifiable future.]**

Thus, my main contention against Cohen’s functional interpretation implies that a *functional explanation can lead the researcher to distort what Marx’s calls “general*

conclusions” (and what Schumpeter calls “*vision*”) and thus distort or overlook the underlying mechanisms of the studied phenomena. In my opinion, the well-known dialectical interplay between relations of production and productive forces is but a *rough summary*, a *guiding principle* of a complex set of underlying mechanisms. In this particular case, I think that Cohen’s functional explanation distort the articulation or description of the rough summary (that maybe other “functional explanation” could capture, although without adding conceptual richness to the original exposition) and does not serve as an *explanation* of the phenomena, that is, as a final account of the phenomena’s governing historical (i.e. particular) laws. **[I am not convinced you are right. I think a functional explanation is an elegant way of rendering the various components of Marx’s theory of history coherent and integrated – indeed, backing the overall theory somewhat more integrated than in Marx’s own explicit statements. It is hard to see why Marx would have bothered studying the transition from feudalism to capitalism unless he believed that generating a coherent explanation of that historical epochal transition would be relevant to understanding the supercession of capitalism. If there were no mechanisms or processes or logics in common, then why bother? Cohen provides – I think – the best reconstruction of Marx’s work that makes sense of this. And it in no way contradicts the dynamic argument for the specific political economy of capitalism and its trajectory of development and contradiction.]**

14. Martín Santos

Functional explanation of what?

Functional theories explain behavior or social structures by their (positive) *consequences* for actors, for institutions/mechanisms (for instance, the market rewarding efficient firms) and for complex structures or systems (for example, late capitalism). The functional causal explanation entails a loop structure consisting of *reverse causal links from consequences back to the phenomena to be explained*

Jon Elster contends that the proper paradigm for the social sciences should be a combination of “*intentional understanding* of the individual *actions* and *causal explanation* of their interaction” (p. 463). I do agree with Elster in that for explaining *social action* the functional paradigm, as stated above, is clearly unsatisfactory. For example, in the classic study by Paul Willis (*Learning to Labour*, 1977), the behavior of the *Lads*, a group of students in a working-class school in London, is explained by recognizing the agency (intentional explanation) of these students: they wanted to challenge the authority structure in classroom (teacher-student relationship) and the disciplinary order of the school. However, their actions had *unintended consequences*: they finally became dropouts, and given their low level of education, they joined the sector of unskilled and unemployed young people in England, which met the needs of capitalists for cheap labor force. One of the consequences of this process is that the

capitalist economy come to get reproduced. In this example, if we want to explain the *behavior* of the Lads, it is misleading to explain it in terms of its “functional” consequences for the reproduction of the capitalist economy. Rather, it is better to make recourse to a complex set of goals and motives (as suggested, for example, by A. Giddens). **[It is not so obvious that the positive functions for labor markets isn't a critical aspect of this explanation. Here, I think, a counterfactual is useful: suppose that these behaviors and strings of consequences were deeply disruptive to capitalist labor markets and labor supply conditions, would the behavior have continued? Would there have been some mechanism triggered by this which would have lead to a change in behaviors? Does the pattern of behaviors-and-institutions persist because of the functionality of the configuration? These are the sorts of things which open the possibility of a functional explanation here.]**

What happens if we want to explain a *contingent situation*, such as a war? Nowadays, it is common to “explain” the war in Iraq by saying that “it serves the interests of powerful groups owning oil companies in the USA (for example. Mr. Bush’s network)”. War is “functional” for powerful groups is the core idea. But we could use an intentional language instead of a functional one: “owners of oil companies in the USA, in order to increase their profit rate, found quite convenient to go to war. They masked their real interests by appealing to the discourse of the ‘threat of terrorism’ ”. Strategic action as an explanation seems to me here more convenient than a functionalist logic. **[The pivotal issue here is whether the explanation should be entirely in terms of anticipated effects or actual effects. It is pretty hard to see how the decision to go to war could be explained by anything other than anticipated effects. But if warmaking is part of a systematic feature of an enduring structure, then there is a possibility for a functional explanation. Militarism would be functionally explained, but a given event strategically explained.]**

But what about the explanation of *social systems* (complex social structures) such as the political or economic ones? Is it valid to use a “functional causal structure”? A statement such as “economic crises in capitalism *are necessary for* its reproduction”, has functionalist overtones. However, if we provide a historical account of these crisis, and also uncover the *mechanisms* that allow us to understand *in what ways* capitalism benefits from cyclic crisis, what would it be wrong with such a “functionalist” statement? **[This could just be a functionalist description without becoming a functional explanation: crises are beneficial = a functional description; the actual benefits of crises explain the existence of crises = a functional explanation.]**

Or what about the typical structural-functionalist explanations of the “*institutional orders*” (Wright and Mills: *Character and Social Structure*) such as economy, politics, religion, etc? I think that if we show *both* the “functionalist” *matches* (correspondence) *and* mismatches, conflicts, “disfunctionalities”, among these institutional orders, and also the mechanisms by which these processes occurs, we can *add* to our understanding of their dynamic.

15. Matt Nichter

In his book chapter, Elster says that “the best way [to make functional explanation intellectually respectable] would be to provide the actual mechanism by which the consequence feeds back on the behavior to be explained.” He then adds that this “is equivalent to the substitution of a non-functional explanation for the functional one.” This seems wrong. Identifying a causal feedback mechanism can a) explain why the functional relationship obtains (effectively shifting the explanandum away from the one for which the functional explanation was proffered) and/or b) provide evidence for believing the functional explanation is true (and only one type of evidence, as Cohen points out). Important stuff, but not a “substitute” for the original functional explanation. **[You are right on this.]**

The stuff about dialectics is kinda tangential to this week's topic but...Elster's account of 'transformation of quality into quality' in terms of discontinuous functional links and/or nonlinear relationships seems to capture much of what Marx had in mind; I think he may also have been grappling with the idea of threshold effects, critical mass, etc. Not so sure about Elster's account of 'contradiction' which, as I interpret Marx's usage, involves institutions that are in some way integrally connected to one another but nevertheless mutually conflictual (as opposed to merely externally related and/or smoothly reinforcing). Though understanding such ideas is hardly a master key for solving concrete problems, keeping them handy in one's methodological toolkit seems like reasonable enough advice.