

# Functionalism and Vietnam

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Functionalism is a macro social theory, developed by Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. Functionalists see society as being like the human body: people are like individual cells and institutions are like organs, and are interdependent. Institutions are very important for Functionalists. They are the formal structures in society that fill a functional role by responding to a particular social need. For example, the educational institutions (including schools, tutoring, university etc) fulfill the role of completing the secondary socialisation of children and preparing them for the workforce.

These interdependent institutions are constantly aiming for a situation of stability and continuity in society. They rely upon each other to maintain the present power dynamic in society. When one institution is failing in its role in society other institutions will increase their role in society in order to compensate. An example of this would be the idea that the family is no longer socialising children (and workers) as effectively as a result of feminism“ women are no longer caring for children on a full-time basis and some would argue that this has led to a lack of inculcation of social and cultural norms in young people. In order to compensate for this change and maintain social and cultural stability in Australian society, the institution of education is now required to complete more of the, formerly considered primary, socialisation of young people through the provision of more pastoral care programs in schools.

The change in the roles of various institutions must be based on value consensus, as is the minimal integration of parts in the day-to-day functioning of the system. Traditionally, the socialisation of children was seen to be the natural' role of the family, and this was tacitly agreed upon by most members of society. In order for the institution of education to take a larger role in this area, the collective values of all (or most) members had to change. In Australia, this has been facilitated by the media and the government: the media, through the promotion of the idea that children are being inadequately socialised, and the government through the introduction of legislation to enhance the role of education.

## **CRITICISMS OF FUNCTIONALISM**

Functionalism is designed to explain how change is managed, or maintained, in society, in order to achieve overall continuity. It assumes that all change is gradual and progressive. This means that, while it is an effective theory to explain continuity and incremental change, it is less effective at explaining dramatic or rapid change.

Functionalism is a macro theory. This means that it assumes that all members of society must accept their roles within it. This limits individual personal power and decision-making ability, and it does not allow for individual difference in experience.

Functionalism is a grand narrative theory that attempts to explain everything through one sweeping theory.

## **APPLYING FUNCTIONALISM TO THE COUNTRY STUDY OF VIETNAM**

Functionalism is very effective at explaining the sort of gradual change generally seen in Western, industrialised, liberal societies such as Australia, where there has been little rapid or dramatic change for the last one hundred years. However it can also be useful to explain more drastic change in societies, such as in Vietnam.

If we assume that, as Functionalists assert, societies are constantly aiming to meet the basic needs of society through the cooperation of institutions, we can see how the failings in the system necessitated the introduction of the Doi Moi in Vietnam, and how the system has adapted to cope with these changes since.

By the mid-1980s, the system was failing in Vietnam. The communist government had attempted to maintain a planned economy however this was ineffective and inefficient. The Vietnamese people had lived through a series of famines caused by the collectivisation of farming and they were tired of the sacrifices they had been forced to make. In order to resolve the ongoing crisis, the institution of the Vietnamese government realised that a change would have to occur in order to help restructure the institution of the economy. Without this change, the government would have been in danger of revolt caused by total economy collapse. A value consensus took place that involved the implementation of the Doi Moi (meaning change and newness') in 1986. Vietnam, while remaining communist, took on a capitalist-style economy to overcome and solve their economic problems.

The interdependence of each part of the system is demonstrated through the fact that every part of the system will, in some way, affect every other part within society, impacting on the continuity of the system as a whole. In Vietnam this can be demonstrated through looking at the institution of the workforce. After the introduction of the Doi Moi there was an increased employment market created for Vietnamese citizens as a result of industrialisation. Women were required to join the paid workforce to fill these vacant positions, however this was not part of the traditional value consensus in Vietnam. Accepted roles for women in Vietnamese culture have been in the home. Therefore, the government had to introduce propaganda to shift and influence attitudes to allow and encourage women to enter the workforce. The continuity of traditional values is also seen through the fact that most women now take on the 'double burden' of paid work and completing most of the domestic duties.

The institution of the family has been weakened as a result of these changes to the workforce. Traditions and family values are being eroded due to urbanisation and the introduction of the values of Western-style individualism. In order to maintain traditional values, the institution of the government has increased its role to promote filial piety to the citizens of Vietnam to allow the continuity of cultural heritage.

As change takes place, Functionalism explains how different parts of the social system will shift and adapt in order to minimise the disruptive effects of those changes.