



# Robert K. Merton

A Structural-Functional Approach

As told by Dr. Frank Elwell

# Note:

This presentation is based on the theories of Robert King Merton as presented in his works. A more complete summary of Merton's theories (as well as the theories of other macro-theorists) can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell. If you would like to receive a .pdf file of the chapter on his theories please write me at [felwell@rsu.edu](mailto:felwell@rsu.edu) and put Merton.pdf in the subject line.

# Structural-Functional Approach

IN 1949 THE PUBLICATIONN OF SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE PLACED ROBERT MERTON AT THE FOREFRONT OF THOSE WHO ADVOCATED STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SOCIETY. TO UNDERSTAND MERTON'S THOUGHT REQUIRES, THEN, THAT WE TURN TO AN EXAMINATION OF STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM.

# Structural-Functional Approach

- **STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM TURNS TO SUCH ISSUES AS CONSIDERATION OF WHAT IS MEANT BY A SOCIAL SYSTEM.**
  - WHAT ARE THE PROPERTIES OF ANY SOCIAL SYSTEM?
  - HOW ARE THE ELEMENTS WITHIN THE SYSTEM INTERRELATED TO FORM A STRUCTURE?
  - HOW DO THE PARTS, AND THE MANNER OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP, BEAR UPON THE PERFORMANCE OF THE ENTIRE SYSTEM?
  - WHAT ARE THE FUNCTIONS OF THE DIFFERENT PARTS?
  - WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF A GIVEN STRUCTURE FOR THE PEOPLE WHO MOVE WITHIN IT?

# Structural-Functional Approach

By the end of World War II structural-functional analysis was the dominant school of thought within American sociology.

# Structural-Functional Approach

FUNCTION DOES NOT MEAN EXACTLY THE SAME THING AS PURPOSE OR MOTIVATION. IT MEANS, INSTEAD, THE EXTENT TO WHICH A GIVEN ACTIVITY DOES, IN FACT, PROMOTE OR INTERFERE WITH THE MAINTENANCE OF A SYSTEM.

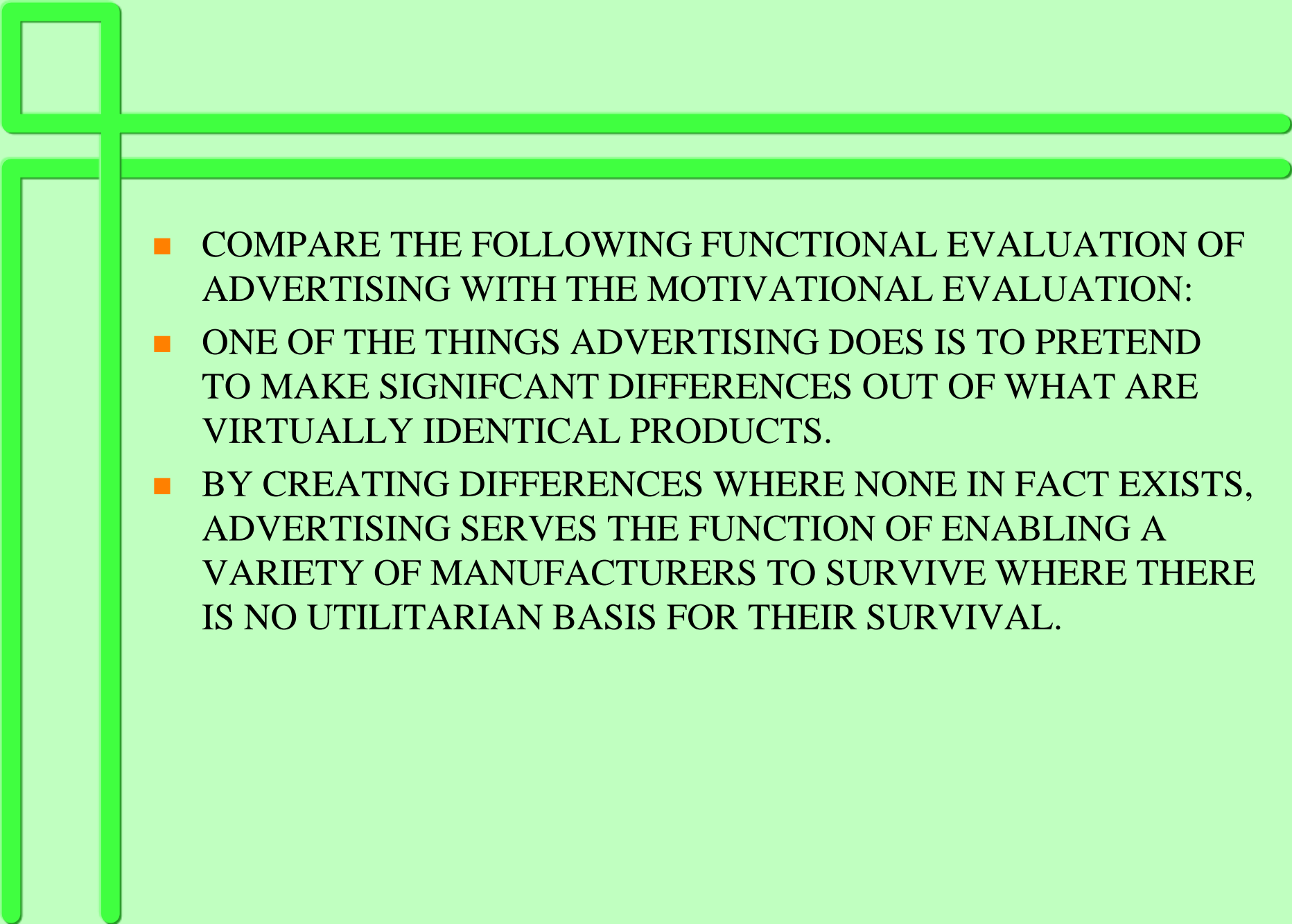
# Structural-Functional Approach

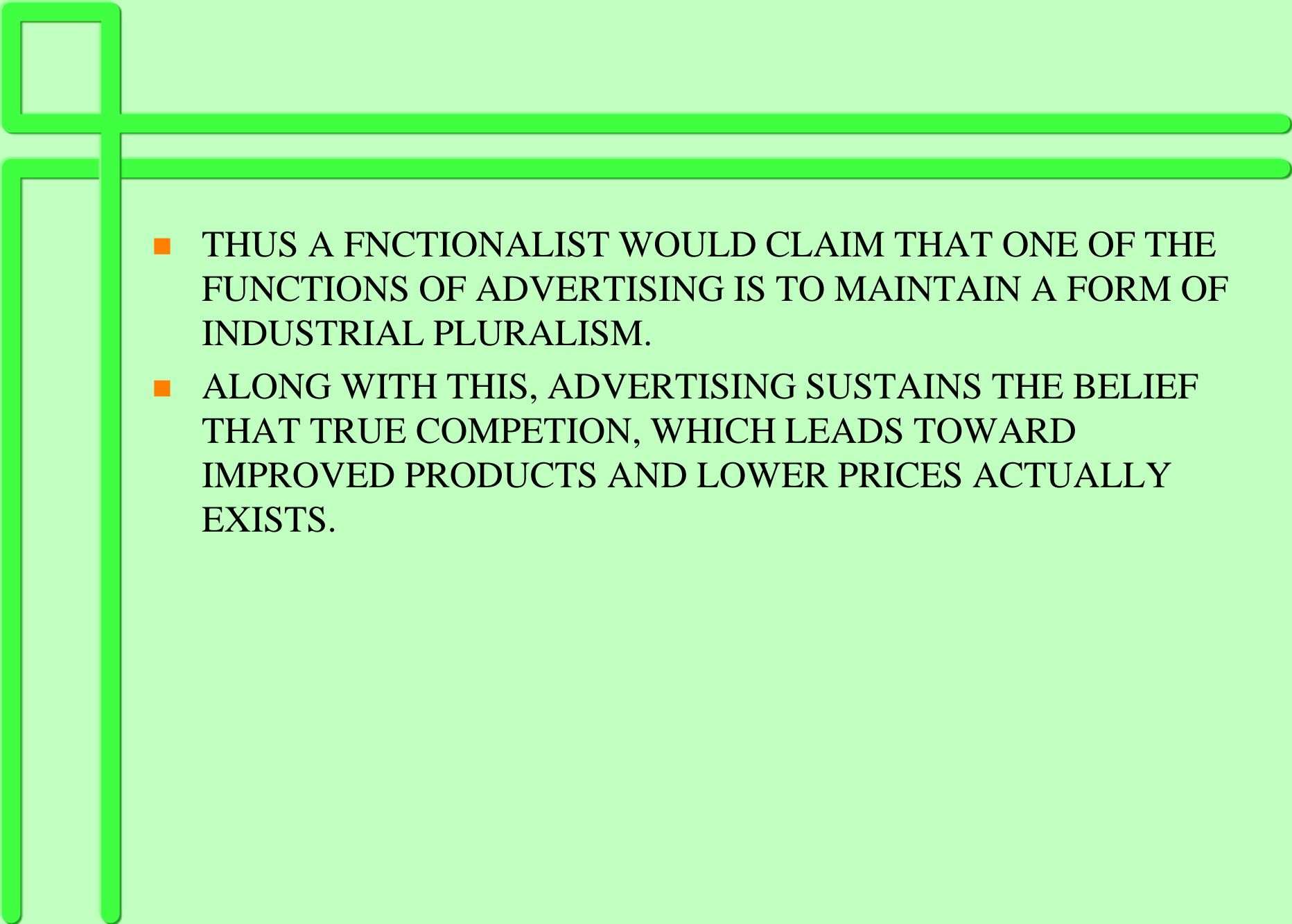
“Social function refers to observable objective consequences, and not to subjective dispositions (aims, motives, purposes).”

# Structural-Functional Approach

A functional analysis promotes a different way of looking. What does advertising in fact do? Further, what are the consequences of what it does for the greater society?



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- COMPARE THE FOLLOWING FUNCTIONAL EVALUATION OF ADVERTISING WITH THE MOTIVATIONAL EVALUATION:
  - ONE OF THE THINGS ADVERTISING DOES IS TO PRETEND TO MAKE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES OUT OF WHAT ARE VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL PRODUCTS.
  - BY CREATING DIFFERENCES WHERE NONE IN FACT EXISTS, ADVERTISING SERVES THE FUNCTION OF ENABLING A VARIETY OF MANUFACTURERS TO SURVIVE WHERE THERE IS NO UTILITARIAN BASIS FOR THEIR SURVIVAL.

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- **THUS A FNCTIONALIST WOULD CLAIM THAT ONE OF THE FUNCTIONS OF ADVERTISING IS TO MAINTAIN A FORM OF INDUSTRIAL PLURALISM.**
  - **ALONG WITH THIS, ADVERTISING SUSTAINS THE BELIEF THAT TRUE COMPETION, WHICH LEADS TOWARD IMPROVED PRODUCTS AND LOWER PRICES ACTUALLY EXISTS.**

# Structural-Functional Approach

IT IS ONE THING TO SPECULATE ON THE AIMS, MOTIVATIONS, AND PURPOSES UNDERLYING ADVERTISING IN MODERN AMERICA AND ANOTHER TO SEE IT FROM A FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

# Structural-Functional Approach

- IF WE ASK AN ADVERTISING PERSON TO TELL US THE AIMS OR PURPOSES OF THE PROFESSION, SHE MIGHT MENTION SEVERAL THINGS:
  - ADVERTISING EXISTS TO IMPROVE THE LEVEL OF LIVING OF AMERICANS.
  - ADVERTISING SEEKS TO MAKE AMERICANS AWARE OF THE GOODS AND SERVICES THAT INDUSTRY PROVIDES
  - ADVERTISING SEEKS TO MOTIVATE PEOPLE TO BUY SPECIFIC PRODUCTS.
  - WE COULD GO ON AND ON.

# Structural-Functional Approach

Merton makes a distinction between two forms of social function. One of these he refers to as “manifest function” and the other as “latent function.”

# Manifest & Latent

- MANIFEST FUNCTION ARE OBJECTIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR SOME PERSON, SUBGROUP, OR SOCIO-CULTURAL SYSTEM WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO ITS ADJUSTMENT AND WERE SO INTENDED.
- LATENT FUNCTIONS ARE CONSEQUENCES WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO ADJUSTMENT BUT WERE NOT SO INTENDED.

# Manifest & Latent

MANIFEST FUNCTIONS ARE ESSENTIALLY THE OFFICIAL EXPLANATION OF A GIVEN ACTION. LATENT FUNCTIONS ARE THE SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF A GIVEN ACT. AN EXAMPLE WILL HELP MAKE THE DISTINCTION AND INDICATE ITS VALUE:

# Manifest & Latent

“Ceremonials may fulfill the latent function of reinforcing the group identity by providing a periodic occasion on which the scattered members of a group assemble to engage in a common activity...such ceremonials are a means by which collective expression is afforded the sentiments which...are found to be a basic source of group unity.”



# Manifest & Latent

“THROUGH THE SYSTEMATIC APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF LATENT FUNCTION, THEREFORE, APPARENTLY IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOR MAY AT TIMES BE FOUND TO BE POSITIVELY FUNCTIONAL FOR THE GROUP.”

# Manifest & Latent

It becomes quickly apparent that the concept of latent function has some of the qualities of an after-the-fact rationalization or excuse for the way things are.

# Manifest & Latent

THE FUNCTIONALIST SEEMS TO BE SAYING, “WELL, IF SOMETHING EXISTS IN THE SOCIAL ORDER, THERE MUST BE A PRETTY GOOD REASON FOR IT--OTHERWISE IT WOULD NOT EXIST. THEREFORE, LET US THINK LONG AND HARD ON THE MATTER, AND SOONER OR LATER THE REASON FOR ITS EXISTENCE WILL COME TO US.”

# Dysfunction

Merton was aware of this disturbing feature of structural-functional thought and tried to get around it by introducing the idea of dysfunctions.

# Dysfunction

Dysfunctional events lessen the adjustment of a social system. If the dysfunctional forces are too great, the social order is overwhelmed, disorganized, and possibly destroyed.

# Dysfunction

Society tries to constrain dysfunctional elements the same way an organism would constrain a bacterial or viral infection. Dysfunctional features of a society often cause stress, strain, or tensions.

# Dysfunction

- Several examples of Dysfunctions:
  - Lead poisoning among the upper class Romans because of their cooking pots.
  - Medical technology causing a rise in medical costs and the creation of a gerontocracy.
  - Increases in agricultural productivity causing a rise in population.
  - Higher consumption rates causing increases in depletion and pollution.

# Structural-Functional Approach

A complete functional analysis orients thought toward the social consequences--intended and unintended--of a particular action.



# Structural-Functional Approach

Merton claims functional analysis has the following virtues:

- 1) Inhibits the tendency to dismiss a seemingly irrational social event with the casual observation that it is merely superstition or foolishness.
- 2) The concepts of manifest and latent function provide us with a means of probing those features of social behavior which are more theoretically valuable.
- 3) A functional approach to social action brings a more sophisticated awareness to the moral issues involved in a situation.

# Structural-Functional Approach

Prolonging life, meritocracy, and industrialization are all obvious goods on a manifest level. However, each have latent functions and dysfunctions which make them more of a mixed blessing. Merton's analysis of the political machine of old is a good illustration of the moral sophistication to be gained from a complete structural-functional analysis...

# The Political Machine Analysis

“Examined for a moment apart from any moral considerations, the political apparatus operated by the Boss is effectively designed to perform (various) functions with a minimum of inefficiency.”

# The Political Machine Analysis

“Holding the strings of diverse governmental divisions, bureaus and agencies in his competent hands, the Boss rationalizes the relations between public and private business...He servers as the business community’s ambassador in the otherwise alien realm of government...and in strict business-like terms, he is well-paid for his economic services to his respectable business clients.”

# The Political Machine Analysis

Merton's statement of the benefits (or functions) of the political machine should not be read as an apology for Bossism and the machine system of city government, Merton goes on...

# The Political Machine Analysis

“To adopt a functional outlook is to provide not an apologia for the political machine but a more solid basis for modifying or eliminating the machine, providing specific structural arrangements are introduced either for eliminating (certain) demands of the the business community or of satisfying these demands through alternative means.”

# The Political Machine Analysis

If we wish, then, to operate either as a relatively detached social analyst or as a social activist, a structural functional point of view is a necessity. It inhibits a tendency toward naïve moralizing about social issues and it places any given action within the greater context of the total social structure.

# Deviant Behavior

Of the various contributions to social thought by Merton, perhaps the best known has been his considerations of the nature of deviant behavior, Merton is concerned with more than merely stating a truism that deviants are the sorry products of the society that spawned them. Rather, he is interested in specifying the process whereby deviant action is generated within a social structure.



# Deviant Behavior

Rather than view deviant behavior as the product of abnormal personalities, Merton is concerned with the extent to which it is the result of the social structure.

# Deviant Behavior

In his approach to this problem Merton strips social structure down to two elemental conditions that hold for any society. He makes a distinction between the goals of a culture and the means the culture provides for achieving those goals.

# Deviant Behavior

By making these distinctions Merton is attempting to locate the social conditions that increase the likelihood of getting one kind of behavior over the other.

# Deviant Behavior

American culture, for example, places great emphasis on the value of individual attainment of success. At the same time, the means of achieving success are unevenly distributed among the population, Merton is concerned here with the problem of how people adapt to society and the ways in which the structural feature of society affect the form which adaptations take.

# Deviant Behavior

Merton claims that in those social circumstances where social goals are highly valued and the means for obtaining the goals are not as highly valued, the likelihood of innovation is increased. Criminal behavior is likely in a society which places great emphasis on success and wealth and does not emphasize the value of legitimate means for obtaining these goals.

# Deviant Behavior

Merton recognizes that culturally held values have a strong effect on individual behavior. A culture that values individual initiative and innovation, following rules and established procedures, will be populated by such individuals. A society that places high value on consumption and leisure will be populated by...

# Deviant Behavior

<u>Modes of adaptation:</u>	<u>Cultural goals</u>	<u>Inst. means</u>
1. Conformity	+	+
2. Innovation	+	-
3. Ritualism	-	+
4. Retreatism	-	-
5. Rebellion	<u>±</u>	<u>±</u>

# Conclusions

Merton increasingly became interested in the idea of unanticipated consequences of social action until, eventually, it formed the underlying theme of his work.



# Conclusions

- From the rise of mass media and the consequent need for vast sums to run political campaigns, comes a lobbying system that has bought and paid for our political representatives.
- From fear of terrorism come repressive measures and a further weakening of our democracy
- Out of the Puritan religion, unexpectedly and without design, comes science.

# Conclusions

To evaluate a policy only in terms of its apparent or official objectives is to see considerably less than half of what is taking place.

# Robert King Merton

For a more extensive discussion of Merton, refer to *Macrosociology: the Study of Sociocultural Systems*. For an even deeper understanding, read from the bibliography that follows.

# Bibliography

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