**Parsons, Talcott (1902-1979)**

Talcott Edgar Frederick Parsons was an American sociologist who, as the principal exponent of what is known as structural functionalism, exerted a major influence over social theory in the middle part of the twentieth century. His work continues to be an important influence for German sociology. Primarily concerned with explaining the stability and order of social life, Parsons draws on ideas developed in cybernetics, in particular on what is known as systems theory. A system may be understood as a stable and organised structure that exists within an environment. Parsons argues that society, understood as a social system, must satisfy four functions if it is to remain stable. The first function is adaptation; the system must adapt itself to its environment. A society will require an effective economy to transform natural resources into the goods it needs. Secondly, goal attainment is setting and pursuing the specific objectives of the system, and will be done by political institutions. Integration is the system’s requirement to keep itself together as a whole, not least through the promotion of a common culture, be it religious or secular. Finally, pattern-maintenance is the need to motivate the members of society to perform the tasks demanded of them, through teaching and other forms of socialisation.

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**References and further reading**

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