# THE STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

The structural-functional approach is derived from earlier uses of functionalism and systems models in anthropology, sociology, biology, and political science. Structural functionalism became popular around 1960 when it became clear that ways of studying U.S. and European politics were not useful in studying newly independent countries, and that a new approach was needed. Structural-functionalism assumes that a bounded (nation-state) system exists, and studies structures in terms of their function(s) within the system. For structural functionalists the question to be answered is what does a structure (guerrilla movement, political party, election, etc.) do within the political system (of country x)? The goal is to find out what something actually does in a political system, as opposed to what it is supposed to do. Thus, structural functionalists would not waste time studying constitutions in Third World countries if they found that the constitutions [structures] had little impact on political reality.

Almond claimed that certain political functions existed in all political systems. On the input side he listed these **functions** as: **political socialization, political interest articulation, political interest aggregation, and political communication**. Listed as **outputs** were **rule-making, rule implementation, and rule adjudication**. Other basic functions of all political systems included the conversion process, basic pattern maintenance, and various capabilities (distributive, symbolic, etc.). Structural functionalists argued that all political systems, including Third World systems, could most fruitfully be studied and compared on the basis of how differing structures performed these functions in the various political system.

Structural functionalism is based on a systems model. Conceptually, the political process can be depicted as follows:
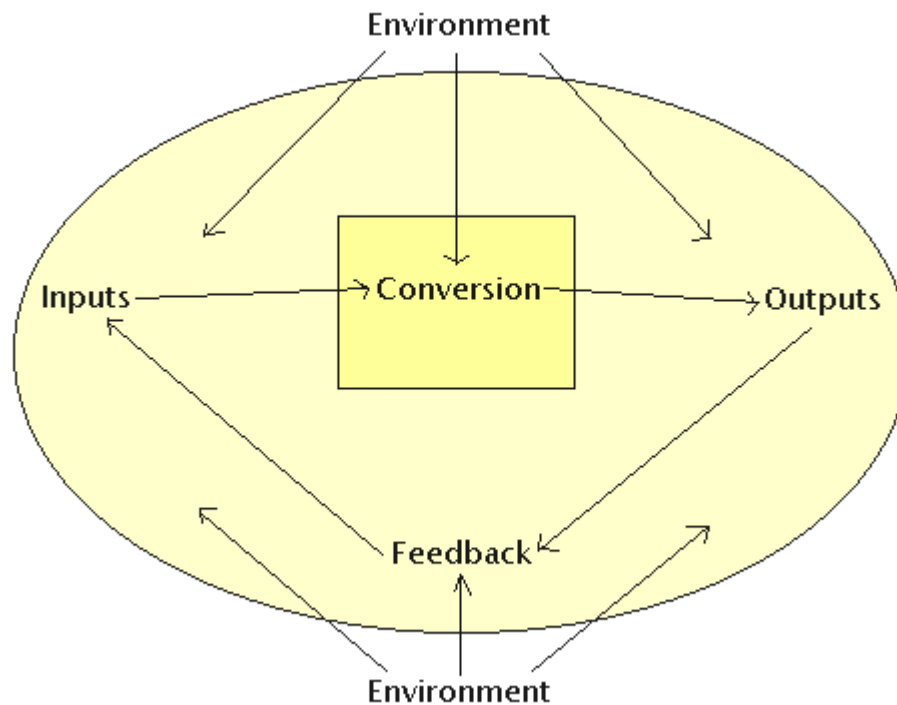
For analytical purposes the political system is considered to be the nation-state, and the environment is composed of the interactions of economic, social, and political variables and events, both domestic and external. The idea is that there are a number of actors in the national political system (political parties, bureaucracies, the military, etc.) and that the actions of all these actors affect each other as well as the system. The political analyst must determine the importance of these actors in a particular political system. This is done by analyzing the functions performed by the various actors. Any changes in the system also affect all the actors. The feedback mechanisms allow for constantly changing inputs, as actors react to outputs.

Structural functionalists, like systems analysts, have a bias toward systemic equilibrium, (ie toward stability). Such a bias tends to make this approach conservative, as stability, or evolutionary change, is preferred [and more easily analyzed], to radical, or revolutionary change. A problem which arises with this system-based model is that the nation-state's boundaries are often permeable in the real world, rather than being the neatly bounded nation-state conceptualized by structural functionalists. In other words, in the real world it is usually difficult to state exactly what the boundaries are, leading to some conceptual difficulties. For example, some international actors are only intermittent, such as the U.S. when it intervenes directly in Haitian or Panamanian politics. Should U.S. military forces be considered a part of the Panamanian or Haitian political systems?

STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM AND HISTORICAL SEQUENCES OF CRISES

The structural functional approach provides a useful framework for categorizing and comparing data, but has been criticized as being essentially static. It was not very useful for analyzing or predicting change; the issue of why, how, when, and in what direction, political development occurs. This issue of development, or change, is, of course, crucial for the Third World.

In response to criticisms, structural functionalists looked at history and concluded that political development takes place when an existing political system is unable to cope with problems or challenges confronting it without further structural differentiation or cultural secularization. Success at meeting such challenges constitutes political development. By challenges, Almond meant changes in the size, content, and frequency of inputs (especially demands) for the system. For structural functionalists:

Political Development is defined as increased structural differentiation and increased cultural secularization.

Structural functionalists argued that, historically, there have been **four major challenges** to political systems, and that the challenges have occurred in the following sequence (in the West).

1. penetration and integration (state-building)
2. loyalty and commitment (nation-building)
3. participation
4. distribution

(Perhaps a **fifth, international penetration**, should be added to the list. The agents of international penetration would include: other nations, international organizations, multinational corporations, prominent individuals, ideological movements, guerrillas, militaries, and technological sources such as radio broadcasts.)

In Europe the challenges occurred separately, and were handled one at a time. Thus, the problem of state-building (road construction, tax system, boundaries)) was usually solved before the problem of nation-building (transferring of primary political loyalty to the national ruler, and away from the local or regional leader) became acute. The challenge of participation was solved by the gradual extension of the vote and political rights to non-propertied people, trade unionists, all males, and finally, to women. The problem of distribution is still a challenge. The question of how to divide up the goods of society has not yet been fully solved, although there seems to be a movement in the direction of more equality in distribution.

The Third World is experiencing a fundamentally different pattern of challenge occurrence. **In the Third World the challenges are occurring simultaneously.**

In many cases "solutions" to historic systemic challenges in the West have been accompanied by violence and strong systemic resistance. (Extension of participation rights to workers; U.S. Civil Rights movement of 1960s) In Third World nations all the challenges are occurring simultaneously, and demands for solutions are putting severe pressure on national political systems. From a structural functionalist point of view, the amount of violence and instability sometimes observed in Third World politics should, therefore, come as no surprise.