



LESSON 24 SOCIAL SYSTEM PART-II

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24. SOCIAL SYSTEM PART-II

24.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Pitrim Sorokin's Classification of Social System
- Talcott Parson's AGIL Model

24.1 Introduction

Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian-American sociologist, viewed the social system through the lens of cultural dynamics and cyclical change. For Sorokin, a social system isn't merely a collection of individuals, but an integrated cultural system dominated by a particular "truth system" or "cultural mentality." He believed that societies don't progress linearly but rather move in cycles between dominant cultural types, which he called "cultural mentalities."

Sorokin argued that social change is an immanent process, meaning it arises from within the system itself as one cultural mentality exhausts its potential and gives way to another. He often used the metaphor of a pendulum to describe this cyclical swing between ideational and sensate extremes, with idealistic periods acting as a temporary balance. For Sorokin, a social system's stability and dynamics are intrinsically linked to the dominant cultural mentality that pervades its institutions, values, and norms.

Talcott Parsons, a prominent American sociologist and a key figure in structural functionalism, developed the AGIL model as a systematic framework to analyze the functional prerequisites for any social system to maintain stability and survive. Parsons saw society as a complex system of interrelated parts, each performing specific functions to contribute to the overall equilibrium.

Sorokin's Classification of Social System

Sorokin viewed society as an integrated sociocultural system, meaning that it's not just a collection of individuals but a complex web of interconnected cultural elements (values, norms, beliefs, knowledge, technology, art, etc.) and social



relationships. He argued that these elements are often organized around a central "truth system" or "mentality" that gives the culture its coherence and unity.

Pitirim Sorokin's idea of social systems involves understanding how societies change and evolve over time, focusing on the cyclical nature of societal development and the interplay between different cultural types. He proposed a cyclical theory of social change, suggesting that societies move through different phases, including ideational, idealistic, and sensate stages. Sorokin also emphasized the importance of social mobility, both vertical (movement between social strata) and horizontal (movement within the same social stratum), as a key element in understanding social change.

Sorokin's most famous contribution is his theory of the three main types of dominant cultural mentalities that societies tend to oscillate between over long periods:

Ideational Culture: In this type, truth and reality are sought primarily through spiritual, religious, and metaphysical beliefs. Values are absolute, derived from transcendent sources, and emphasized over material concerns. Art, science, and ethics in an ideational society would reflect these spiritual orientations. This mentality is characterized by a strong emphasis on spiritual, religious, and transcendent realities. Truth is sought primarily through revelation, faith, divine inspiration, intuition, and inner experience. The material world is often seen as secondary, fleeting, or even illusory (similar to the concept of *maya* in some Eastern philosophies). Ultimate reality is non-sensory, non-material, and eternal.

Human needs are predominantly spiritual. The ultimate goals are salvation, enlightenment, unity with the divine, or the pursuit of absolute moral ideals. Material comforts and worldly pleasures are often de-emphasized, or even seen as obstacles to spiritual growth. Values are absolute, derived from a higher authority (e.g., God, sacred texts, universal moral laws). Ethics are prescriptive and often ascetic, emphasizing self-denial, discipline, and devotion. Science, if it exists, is subservient to theological and philosophical frameworks. Knowledge is gained through contemplation, meditation, and logical deduction from spiritual premises. Empirical observation is less valued than spiritual insight. Art in an ideational culture is symbolic, spiritual, and often abstract. It aims to represent the divine, evoke religious awe, or inspire contemplation. Examples include Gothic cathedrals, Byzantine iconography, and religious chants. Social structures often reflect hierarchical spiritual authority. Religious institutions hold significant power and influence. Social relationships are guided by moral and religious commandments.

Sorokin often pointed to the European Middle Ages (roughly from the 6th to the 13th century) as a prime example of a predominantly ideational culture. Ancient India with its emphasis on spiritual liberation and ascetic practices could also be seen as leaning heavily towards ideationalism.



Sensate Culture: This mentality is characterized by a focus on empirical, sensory experience and material reality. Truth is what can be perceived and measured, and values are relative and utilitarian. Scientific inquiry is empirical, and art tends to be realistic and focused on the physical world. Sorokin believed Western civilization was in a late stage of sensate culture, leading to over-materialism and social disorganization. This mentality stands in stark contrast to ideationalism, focusing on empirical, sensory experience and material reality.

Truth is what can be perceived through the five senses and verified by empirical observation and scientific methods. Reality is purely material, tangible, and measurable. Anything beyond sensory experience is considered non-existent or irrelevant. Human needs are primarily physical and material. The goals are maximum gratification of desires, pursuit of pleasure (hedonism), wealth, health, comfort, power, and fame. Values are relative, utilitarian, and constantly changing based on immediate gratification and perceived utility. Ethics are often pragmatic, focused on what works or what brings the greatest pleasure/utility. Science flourishes as the primary mode of inquiry, emphasizing empirical research, experimentation, and technological innovation. Knowledge is gained through objective observation and analysis of the physical world. Art in a sensate culture is realistic, naturalistic, and often aims to stimulate the senses directly. It celebrates the human body, material possessions, and everyday life. Examples include realistic portraits, landscape paintings, and popular entertainment. Social structures tend to be more egalitarian or meritocratic, based on economic success and individual achievement. Economic institutions become dominant. Social relationships are often contractual and pragmatic.

Sorokin argued that Western civilization, particularly from the 16th century onwards and especially in the 20th century, has been predominantly sensate, reaching an "overripe" or decadent stage. The rise of industrialization, consumerism, and secularism are hallmarks of this phase.

Idealistic Culture: This is a synthesis or balance between the ideational and sensate. It combines elements of both, recognizing both spiritual and empirical truths, and striving for a harmonious integration of values, reason, and sensory experience. It's often a transitional phase between the other two extremes. This mentality represents a synthesis or balance between the ideational and sensate. It seeks to integrate elements of both, recognizing the validity of both spiritual and empirical truths.

Truth is seen as multifaceted, encompassing both rational/spiritual insights and empirical observations. Reality is understood as a blend of the material and the immaterial, the empirical and the transcendent. Human needs are a harmonious blend of spiritual and material aspirations. The goals involve both intellectual and spiritual development, alongside a reasonable pursuit of material well-being. Values are derived from both absolute principles and practical considerations,



seeking a balanced moral framework that is both universal and adaptable. Ethics emphasize moderation, reason, and a harmonious integration of different aspects of human experience. Science is highly developed, but it is often guided by philosophical and ethical considerations. There's an emphasis on systematic knowledge and the development of grand theories that integrate different fields of inquiry. Art in an idealistic culture is characterized by balance, harmony, and a striving for perfection. It combines realistic representation with symbolic depth, aiming for an elevated and meaningful aesthetic experience. Examples include the classical Greek period (5th-4th century BCE) or the High Renaissance. Social structures tend to be stable and well-ordered, with a balance between religious, political, and economic institutions. There's a strong emphasis on reason, justice, and civic virtue.

Sorokin considered the classical period of Greece (especially the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, exemplified by figures like Plato and Aristotle) and certain phases of the European Renaissance as prime examples of idealistic cultures. These periods achieved a notable synthesis of intellectual, artistic, and spiritual pursuits with a strong emphasis on human potential within a rational framework.

Sorokin believed that while cultures tend to gravitate towards one of these dominant mentalities, they rarely exist in a pure form. There are always elements of the other mentalities present, and the transition between them is often marked by periods of crisis, disorganization, and social upheaval. His theory emphasizes the dynamic and cyclical nature of sociocultural change, rather than a linear progression.

Cyclical Nature of Social Change (Sociocultural Dynamics)

Sorokin argued that societies don't progress in a straight line but rather experience a cyclical "pendulum swing" between these ideational and sensate mentalities, with idealistic phases acting as transitions. This is his theory of sociocultural dynamics. When a society reaches an extreme in one mentality (e.g., excessive materialism in a sensate culture), it experiences a crisis and eventually begins to shift towards the opposite mentality. This change is driven by an "immanent dynamic" within the system itself, as the prevailing mentality becomes exhausted or inadequate to address new challenges. The shift is not necessarily smooth or automatic; it can involve periods of social turmoil, conflict, and disorganization before a new dominant mentality emerges.

24.3 Pre-requisites of Social System

There are certain pre-requisites of a harmonious and active social system. It needs no emphasis that there should be harmony in a social system. A tension ridden social system cannot function efficiently. Just as an organism can work as a healthy body only if there is no disorder in its parts, or there is no diseased parts similarly a social system can function efficiently only if there is order among its



parts and these parts remain active, The essential pre-requisites of a healthy social system can be classified into three kinds:

- i) Biological pre-requisites
- ii) Functional pre-requisites
- iii) Cultural pre-requisites

i) Biological Pre-requisites

These are the following

- (a) Adequate number of people (b) A definite system of procreation

There should be sufficient number of people in a social system so that it may function efficiently. But the number should not be too much. Overpopulation is an evil. The number of people in a social system should be neither too less nor too many, Moreover, a social system should ensure a definite system of procreation to maintain its continuity. There should not be an exceedingly high death rate.

ii) Functional Pre-requisites

Functional pre-requisites are those pre-requisites which are concerned with the functions of the members of the social system. These are:

- (a) Obedience to social norms. Each social system has some norms of conduct. There can be no normless society. The norms are the socially approved ways of behaviour which the -members of a social system are required to observe. If these are violated, social system cannot function efficiently.
- (b) Mechanism of Social Control Since some individuals in society violate its norms, therefore, it is essential that requisite mechanisms be provided whereby the individuals may be compelled to observe these norms and the social system may function in a satisfactory manner. The mechanisms of social control may be formal and informal.
- (c) Interest towards Positive Action. The actors should willingly accept the social system. They should have no resentment against it. They should evince keen interest towards positive action.

iii) Cultural Pre-requisites

These pre-requisites are:

- (a) Language- The members of a social system should possess a meaningful language to communicate and express themselves. Without language no social system can operate.
- (b) Symbols The symbols also have a significant place in social system. According to Piper. "A symbol is essentially a material object or process which stands for a meaning beyond bare sensation. It represents man's supplement to animal response and signalizes his entrance to the space less, transcendental world of



meaning". A symbol is an object representing an invisible abstract and inaudible object, for example. God is represented by an idol, The lion represents bravery, the fox represents cunningness. The tribes, clans and nations adopt symbols which have importance in their individual and social life. The flag is a symbol of the nation. A leaf, a flower, an animal can become a symbol of a social system. A symbol must not be arbitrary but must be natural, i.e., it must convey as well as illuminate the idea.

- (c) System of communication. Lastly, every social system should have a system of communication. Social interaction acts through communication. The means of communication may be language, script, gesture, symbols, telephone etc.

24.4 Functions of Social System

Social system is a functional arrangement. It would not exist if it were not so. Its functional character ensures social stability and continuity. The functional character of society, Parsons has discussed in depth. Other sociologists such as Robert F. Bales too have discussed it.

It is generally agreed that the social system has four primary functional problems to attend. These are:

- i) Adaptation
- ii) Goal attainment
- iii) Integration
- iv) Latent Pattern-Maintenance

i) Adaptation:

Adaptability of social system to the changing environment is essential. No doubt, a social system is the result of geographical environment and a long drawn historical process which by necessity gives it permanence and rigidity. Yet, that should not make it wooden and inelastic. It need be a flexible and functional phenomenon.

Economy for its maintenance, division of labour for better production of goods and effective services, and role differentiation for job opportunity is essential. Durkheim in Division of Labour in society has given great attention to the role of division of labour and role differentiation as these make possible a higher average degree of skill than would otherwise be possible.

Lack of adaptability, very often has caused the social system to be challenged. It has caused revolution resulting in the overhauling of the system. The British system during nineteenth century showed remarkable adaptability. It responded



well to the mounting demands of change. Over the time our system has demonstrated the excellent sense of adaptability.

ii) **Goal Attainment:**

Goal attainment and adaptability are deeply interconnected. Both contribute to the maintenance of social order.

Every social system has one or more goals to be attained through cooperative effort. Perhaps the best example of a societal goal is national security. Adaptation to the social and nonsocial environment is, of course, necessary if goals are to be attained. But in addition, human and nonhuman resources must be mobilised in some effective way, according to the specific nature of tasks.

For example, there must be a process of ensuring that enough persons, but not too many, occupy each of the roles at a particular time and a process for determining which persons will occupy which roles. These processes together solve the problem of allocation of members in the social system. We have already touched upon the “need” for property norms. The rules regulating inheritance e.g., primogeniture-in part solve this problem.

The allocation of members and the allocation of scarce valuable resources are important, of course, for both adaptation and goal attainment. The difference between adaptation and goal attainment is a relative one.

The economy of a society is that subsystem which produces goods and services for a wide variety of purposes; the “polity”, which includes above all the Government in complex societies, mobilizes goods and services for the attainment of specific goals of the total society regarded as a single social system.

iii) **Integration**

Social system is essentially an integration system. In the general routine of life, it is not the society but the group or the subgroup in which one feels more involved and interested. Society, on the whole does not come into one’s calculations. Yet, we know as indicated by Durkheim, that individual is the product of society. Emotions, sentiments and historical forces are so strong that one cannot cut oneself from his moorings.

The working of these forces is best seen when society is involved in a domestic crisis or an external challenge. An appeal in the name of society, culture, heritage, patriotism, national solidarity or social welfare invokes quick response. Cooperation in effort is often demonstrative of integrating. It is the real basis of integration.



During normal times, the spirit of integration is best expressed by not disregarding the regulative norms. Abiding by them is essential, as otherwise, it will be the domination of might over right, of self over society, and the spirit of mutuality which is based on common welfare, will get eliminated. The command and obedience relation as it exists is based on rationality and order. If it is not sustained, the social order would break down.

In almost every social system, and in every system as large as a society, some participants, including whole subgroups, violate the relational or regulative norms. So far as these norms meet social needs, violations are a threat to the social system,

This necessitates the need for social control. "Social control" is the need for standardized reactions to violations in order to protect the integrity of the system. When there is dispute concerning the interpretation of relational or regulative norms, or concerning the factual aspects of conflicts of interest, there is need for agreed-upon social arrangements for settling the dispute. Otherwise the social system would be subject to progressive splits.

iv) Latent Pattern-maintenance

Pattern maintenance and tension management is the primary function of social system. In absence of appropriate effort in this direction maintenance and continuity of social order is not possible. In fact within every social system there is the in built mechanism for the purpose.

Every individual and subgroup learns the patterns in the process of the internalization of norms and values. It is to invest the actors with appropriate attitude and respect towards norms and institution, that the socialization works. It is not; however, merely the question of imparting the pattern, equally essential is to make the actor to follow it. For this there is always a continuous effort -in operational terms of social control.

There may yet be occasions when the components of social system may become subject of distraction and disturbance. Tension may arise due to internal or external causes and society may get involved into a critical situation. Just as a family in distress draws upon all its resources to overcome it, so also society has to overcome it.

This process of 'overcoming' is the management of the tension. Society has the responsibility, like a family, to keep its members functional, to relieve them of anxiety, to encourage those who would be detrimental to the entire system. The decline of societies has been very much because the pattern maintenance and tension management mechanism has often failed.



24.5 Mechanism of Social System

A social system is maintained by the various mechanisms of social control. These mechanisms maintain the equilibrium between the various processes of social interaction.

In brief, these mechanisms may be classified in the following categories:

1. Socialization.

2. Social control.

(1) Socialization:

It is process by which an individual is adjusted with the conventional pattern of social behaviour. A child by birth is neither social nor unsocial. But the process of socialization develops him into a functioning member of society. He adjusts himself with the social situations conforming to social norms, values and standards.

(2) Social Control:

Like socialization, social control is also a system of measures by which society moulds its members to conform with the approved pattern of social behaviour. According to Parsons, there are two types of elements which exist in every system. These are integrative and disintegrative and create obstacles in the advancement of integration.

24.6 Conclusion

Pitirim Sorokin and Talcott Parsons offer two distinct yet highly influential frameworks for understanding the social system. While both contribute significantly to sociological theory, their fundamental approaches to stability, change, and the very nature of society diverge.

Sorokin's theory is fundamentally dynamic and cyclical. He emphasizes the immanent nature of social change, driven by the internal logic and exhaustion of dominant cultural mentalities. Societies are constantly swinging between ideational and sensate extremes, with idealistic periods being temporary syntheses. His focus is on the cultural system as the primary driver of social integration and disintegration. He sees social change not as a progression towards an ideal state, but as an unending oscillation, with each cycle having its own unique characteristics but following a predictable pattern of rise and fall.

In contrast, Parsons' AGIL model is primarily concerned with social order and equilibrium. It provides a framework for analyzing the functional prerequisites that



any social system must meet to maintain itself and persist. His emphasis is on the interdependent parts of a social system (subsystems like economy, polity, community, and cultural institutions) and how they contribute to the overall stability and integration of the whole. While Parsons acknowledged change, his framework is often critiqued for its inherent bias towards stability and its less robust explanation of radical societal transformations.

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