APPROACHES TO STUDY POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Systems Approach, Structural-Functional Analysis and Marxism

SYSTEM APPROACH:

Systems analysis is the most explicit form of dealing with any system as a whole or in its wholeness. The concept of a system means that all the elements in the system are organically linked together and are mutually interdependent. Initially taken from biology, the concept of system as an organism has been replaced subsequently with the concept of a dynamic, self-sustaining system set against the back ground of a changing natural environment. Comprehensiveness, interdependence and boundary maintenance (with the environment) are the three main properties of a system. It is also conceived of as a coherent and endurable whole.

Inspired by its previous use in biology, anthropology, sociology and psychology, systems analysis in its various forms has been used by Easton, Almond, Deutsch and Kaplan in the analysis of political systems. Easton is credited with the introduction of the concepts of inputs and outputs of a political system. Deutsch concerns himself with how a political system 'steers' information and directs it into, or away from, particular channels of communication. Deutsch is influenced by cybernetics-the science of control and communication and he conceives of society as a machine. Almond links systems analysis to structural functionalism and development, and makes it fit

the needs of comparative analysis. All these attempts are part of a larger effort to unify natural and social sciences.

For political sociology, the relevance of systems analysis consists in being a way of ordering the study of politics by appreciating the interrelationship and interconnectedness of politics with other parameters. As a method, systems analysis marks a shift from analysis to synthesis. Classical science in its various disciplines (be it chemistry, biology, psychology or the social sciences) tried to isolate the elements of the observed universe (the method of analysis) in an attempt to understand them separately. Systems analysis starts the other way around. It weaves together the previous pieces of specialized knowledge into a coherent picture (the method of synthesis) and places special emphasis on the interrelationship between one element and the other in the belief that a part can be understood only as a part of the whole, and not as a part in itself. The observed universe is an interconnected and interdependent system of nature and can be appropriately approached by understanding systemic order and interdependence of elements. The world we live in is too inter-related and interdependent for nations, groups or individuals to act with indifference to their action's consequences for others, at home or abroad. Hence, the universe can be understood only in relation to its inner elements as well as the environment.

STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

The ideas of structural-functional analysis are spelt out by Gabriel Almond in his famous introduction to The Politics of the Developing Areas. It would, however, be worthwhile to trace functionalism to earlier contributors. The concept of functionalism refers to the social system as an organic body in which certain vital functions must be performed by different organs and structures in

order that the social system may maintain itself and survive. A social system, for instance, must perform recruitment and socialization functions so that a society is able to have its members in constant supply and that these members are socialized into common norms and values to maintain social cohesion. From this basic 'organismic' notion of a social system, there followed a number of ideas: (a) that the functions are necessary for the survival of a social system, and that therefore, (b) the functions are universal. The earlier version of functionalism, as associated with Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski in particular, emphasized three main principles: functional unity, functional universalism and functional indispensability. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the function of a social activity or institution is the contribution it makes to the total social life. Malinowski further maintained that every social institution or tradition fulfils some vital function, and every custom or belief therefore, is indispensable.

Robert Merton has subjected this version of functionalism to scathing criticism and provided necessary correctives. He first points out that the same social institution or item may have multiple functions, and that the same function can be diversely fulfilled by alternative items. The concept of a functional alternative, equivalent or substitute therefore, removes the commitment to, or the value of, particular social items as universal categories serving the entire society. Merton also introduces the concept of dysfunctions, and points out that some structures or institutions may indeed produce consequences harmful to the society. As he points out, functions are 'those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system', and dysfunctions, 'those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment'. He further adds that there is also the possibility of non-functional consequences, which are simply irrelevant to the system.

THE MARXIAN APPROACH

The Marxian approach, on the other hand, distinguishes itself not only as a revolutionary doctrine but as the one which seeks to revolutionize political analysis by its way of thinking about social, economic and political phenomena. Marxian analysis is rooted in dialectical and historical materialism according to which history progresses through a conflict between two classes in which society is perpetually divided. All past history', according to Marx and Engels, 'with the exception of its primitive stages, was the history of class struggles'. These warring classes are the products of the modes of production and of exchange. History is the record of class conflict between those who own the means of production and others who do not, and this class conflict is the central theme and motive power in politics.

Marx identified four broad stages through which society has evolved. These are the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and bourgeois stages. At each stage of development, the new material forces of production come into conflict with the existing and established relations of production, and related laws, ideas and morals, inducing change and progress. Each stage was characterized by antagonism resulting from a situation when forces of production outstripped the firmly established relations of production of an earlier stage of develop ment. This created disharmony between the modes of production and the existing social relations. Struggle follows conflict, and is resolved by the victory of the new and advanced forces over the old. Marx analyzed the contemporary situation as most disharmonious, because the Industrial Revolution had exposed the contradictions between modern technology and feudal social and political

organization. The rise of the bourgeoisie provided a balance between free enterprise and modern technology. This balance was however faced with inner contradictions between increasing technological efficiency and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the leaders of monopoly capitalism on the one hand, and growing pauperization of the working classes on the other. These trends, Marx predicted, would make the capitalist system collapse under the weight of its own inner contradictions which could be resolved only by eliminating private control of the productive forces.