

Call for Papers

Functional lines of thinking: potentials and shortcomings

Thematic Issue of Thesis Eleven

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Despite strong criticism, functional reasoning is still present in social theory and research. However, references often remain hidden. As a consequence, potentials cannot unfold, nor shortcomings be reflected. Starting from this consideration, our special issue aims to reconsider the potentials and shortcomings of functional lines of thinking in current sociology.

Using a selection of theoretical and methodological contributions from different perspectives, we aim to show how functional lines of thinking can contribute to overcoming problems of under-theorization in current social sciences, enrich theorizing and improve the capability to develop theoretical concepts from data. In doing so, we take up the current debate on heuristics and forms of theory building in the social sciences (Abbott 2004; Krause 2016; Swedberg 2015, 2017; Werron et al. 2023). Moreover, we highlight the relevance of functional lines of thinking to understand and conceptualize politically relevant and strongly debated phenomena such as climate change or digital transformation.

Functional analysis has a contested present and an uncertain future, but it certainly has a great history in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and sociology. Classical work such as that undertaken by Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown and later Parsons laid the foundations for viewing society as a whole and reflecting upon how various parts of society are related to each other. In doing so, these authors utilized functional arguments. From their perspective, everything that existed seemed to serve certain functions; nothing appeared redundant or replaceable. Since the 1970s, this sort of functionalism has been under attack. One major argument against it has been its lack of identifying mechanisms that might explain the

emergence and spread of what seemed to serve certain functions (Elster 1990). Another criticism addressed the conservatism inscribed in theory and methods (for an overview: Nassehi 2008; Stark 2009; Wortmann 2007). The main target of this criticism was the assumption that there are objective functions that must necessarily be fulfilled to keep a focal social system going. Opponents decried strong biases in identifying these functions.

Considering this strong, radical criticism, it comes as a surprise that the search for functions of observed social structures, practices and processes is still a central heuristic and widely used explanation schema in the social sciences. Functional arguments are endemic in various, if not most, research fields. Researchers think, for example, that a proper work/life balance increases productivity (a function) or that discrimination reduces the potential to exploit the skills of the workforce (a dysfunction). Current theorizing, by contrast, is more silent about functions, even though functional assumptions are deeply rooted in the concepts of several approaches. One simple example of an approach that tends to argue in a functional mode is the variety of capitalisms. Requirements for capitalist economies are the main issue here and researchers pay particular attention to alternative structures regarding, for example, the problem of capitalization (Hall/Soskice 2001; Whitley 2007). These researchers also discuss the side effects of specific structures, e.g., concerning inequality. Traces of functional arguments may even be found in contributions that explicitly distinguish and dissociate themselves from functionalism. The new institutionalism, for example, views itself as a cultural theory (Meyer/Rowan 1977), but when this approach is applied, functional arguments in particular can be observed when the focus is on specific organizational structures that are assumed to confer legitimacy and thus fulfill the function of securing external support (for an overview: Deephouse et al. 2017).

To sum up, we currently find an ongoing rejection, if not ignorance, of functionalism as a theory, whereas the use of functional arguments is widespread. Contrary to such duality, we aim to encourage a more nuanced understanding of functions and functionalism as a theory, method or heuristic. References to more recent contributions in philosophy and biology may be helpful here (Bauer 2008; Mahner/Bunge 2001; Müller 2010), but we are also well advised to take a look at the current enactment of functionalism in the social sciences. On the one

hand, we aim to make implicit functionalistic assumptions of different theoretical approaches transparent and reflect on their potential and shortcomings. On the other, we also discuss approaches that still explicitly stick to functionalism and for example, following a Luhmannian approach (Luhmann 1962; 1964), use functionalism for fruitful comparative analyses without setting a priori functions (Osrecki 2015; Kette 2021) or aim to utilize functional methods to compare and form theories (Rachlitz et al. 2024).

As a result of our project, we expect to contribute to identifying variants of functionalism ranging from more theoretical or methodological approaches to those that utilize functional lines of thinking more heuristically as a scheme to describe relations between social phenomena. At the level of theoretical development, there are many forms and aspects of theorizing (Krause 2016, Swedberg 2021). We ask specifically to what extent functional lines of thinking can enrich current forms and practices of theorizing, as well as support innovative approaches (Hedström/Ylikoski 2010, Krause 2016; Swedberg 2015, 2017, 2021; Werron et al. 2023).

We want to explore under what conditions functional lines of thinking can become a legitimate alternative to well-established forms of explanation in sociology such as causal or evolutionary explanations or interpretative approaches. We discuss to what extent functional analyses can be related to and combined with other explanations and which approaches might benefit from functionalism as a method or heuristic device. In this sense, our project may stimulate a process that contributes to overcoming the problem of under-theorization – a problem that is increasingly characterizing social sciences (Abbott 2004; Hinings/Greenwood 2002; Scott 2020; Swedberg 2015, 2017). Concerning the understanding of current research issues, we explore the potential of functionalism for supporting the analyses and interpretation of the massive amount of empirical data produced in highly specialized empirical fields. We also assume that the identification of functional lines of thinking in different research fields helps to relate empirical findings of distinct research communities to each other and thus contributes to a better exchange of data and knowledge.

The special issue aims to bring together contributions from established and younger

scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds. We would like to include articles devoted to theoretical and methodological reflection, as well as contributions that outline theoretical implications of functional lines of thinking that can be detected in relevant research fields.

Submission will follow a two-step process. Interested authors are invited to submit an **extended abstract (3-5 pages) by 31 March 2025**. Following acceptance of their abstracts, authors will attend a **workshop on 14-16 May 2025**. This will be an opportunity to improve the quality of each contribution and strengthen the coherence of the project as a whole. **Full manuscripts (6,000-8,000 words) must be submitted by 1 September 2025** and will be peer-reviewed in a double-blind process. The special issue will be published in 2026.

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Submission guidelines: <https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/THE>

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