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A DUBIOUS DISTINCTION? AN INQUIRY INTO THE VALUE AND USE OF MERTON'S CONCEPTS OF MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTION*

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While the concepts of manifest and latent function are commonly described in textbooks as "valuable" and "important," they are rarely used in sociological research. Merton's original formulation and discussion, together with subsequent criticism, is examined in the hope of finding an explanation for this paradox. Four different meanings of the manifest-latent distinction are identified together with a widespread tendency to replace the contrast between purpose and consquence with that between commonsense knowledge and sociological understanding. This practice is, in turn, related to an inability to accommodate normative and idealistic behavior into the scheme, a fundamental weakness which stems from its character as an unintegrated product of functionalism and action theory. This insight leads into a discussion of some of the larger problems surrounding the juxtaposition of an interpretative, phenomenological approach with that of functionalism and, while recognizing that there is a real need for such a unified perspective, concludes that Merton's manifest and latent function distinction does not meet it.

INTRODUCTION

More than thirty years after he first introduced the terms in the book *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), Merton's concepts of *manifest* and *latent function* are still cited in the literature of the social sciences, especially in sociology and anthropology textbooks, where they are commonly defined and illustrated (Bredemeier and Stephenson, 1962; Ogburn and Nimkoff, 1964; Beattie, 1964; Chinoy, 1967; Sergeant, 1971; Berger and Berger, 1972; and Kaplan and Manners, 1972). None of these references is critical, the majority being openly complimentary, variously defining the categories as "important" (Bredemeier and Stephenson, 1962:46), "valid" (Beattie, 1966:54), "useful" (Ruder, 1966:111) and "helpful" (Kaplan and Manners, 1972:58). By contrast, the judgments of theorists are more mixed with observations on fundamental ambiguities and weaknesses typically associated with a qualified approval (Levy, 1952; Spiro, 1961; Isajiw, 1968; Sztompka, 1974; and Giddens 1976 and 1979). These discussions are, however, noticeable for their brevity and characteristically constitute only a small part of a larger survey of functionalism. Isajiw, for example, although commenting on the lack of any extended treatment of Merton's distinction, nevertheless still devotes only four pages to its consideration.[1] Finally, this picture of textbook enthusiasm and critical near-neglect is rounded out by apparently total indifference at the level of empirical inquiry. For although one can find the words *manifest* and *latent* employed in sociological discourse, it is rare to find the concepts themselves employed in the research context. An examination of the index of *Sociological Abstracts* between April 1978 and June 1980 revealed that there wasn't a single entry under either "manifest function" or "latent function."

In subsequent editions of the book Merton claimed that the manifest-latent function distinction had proved of value in research and gave a brief list of references. What is notable about these,

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[1] In fact, the most extensive and critical discussion of these concepts has not been undertaken by a sociologist, but a philosopher (see Helm, 1971).

however, is that none can really be said to constitute an example of the use of the concepts as critical categories in an explanatory analysis. Most of the references are to works in which the terms are not even defined, but are employed in a loose descriptive sense only. Hence, it is merely the words manifest and latent function which could be said to have found a place in the sociologist's vocabulary rather than that the concepts themselves had found a home in sociological theory.

Naturally this raises an intriguing question: why, if these concepts are indeed so "important" and "helpful," are they hardly ever used by sociologists, and why has so little attention been paid to their explication and refinement? Could it be that this judgment of their value is wrong and the introductory texts misleading when they state that these concepts are significant for the discipline? Or is it that practicing sociologists are at fault for failing to exploit the potential of a powerful analytic tool? Either way the contrast between the general enthusiasm with which Merton's distinction is often presented to those new to the discipline and the virtual indifference shown by sociologists themselves is something of a mystery and suggests that an attempt should be made to assess the true worth of this classic dichotomy. Hence, in the following discussion Merton's original formulation will be closely examined, together with the commonly suggested critical refinements, with a view to making just such an assessment. In the course of this analysis, however, it becomes apparent that the difficulties encountered are not confined to questions of conceptual vagueness or ambiguity but have their origin in a fundamental and central issue in sociological theory, namely, that of the relationship between action theory and functionalism. Thus, as the argument progresses the focus is less on those matters specific to Merton's concepts and more on this fundamental and unresolved theoretical problem.

MERTON'S FORMULATION AND DISCUSSION

Merton defines manifest functions as "those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognised by participants in the system," while latent functions are similar consequences "which are neither intended nor recognised," (1957:51). Unfortunately, uncertainty surrounds the precise meaning to be given to this definition because Merton does not immediately follow it with examples but instead develops a general argument concerning its value and use. He acknowledges that he has taken over the terms from Freud and that the distinction which he is concerned to make has been "repeatedly drawn by observers of human behaviour at irregular intervals over a span of many centuries" (1957: 61), continuing by mentioning the names of a few of these and providing short quotations from their writings to illustrate the point. As such, this material does not provide examples of items of social behavior in which manifest and latent functions are identified so much as evidence that other writers have found occasion to contrast terms like "direct purposes" and "consequences which were never conscious." Where the writer has not used such terms Merton adds his own translation or explanation. These quotations, therefore, are merely given as evidence that "numerous other sociological observers have . . . from time to time distinguished between categories of subjective disposition ('needs, interests, purposes') and categories of generally unrecognised but objective functional consequences ('unique advantages,' 'never conscious' consequences, 'unintended . . . service to society,' 'function not limited to conscious and explicit purposes')" (1957:62). It is thus necessary to look at Merton's own discussion of the heuristic purposes of the distinction to encounter its application.

Here four examples of the use of the concepts of manifest and latent function are discussed. The first is a reference to the Hopi Indians and their rain dance; the second a discussion of The Hawthorn Western Electric Studies (the investigation conducted by Elton Mayo); the third relates to Thorsten Veblen's famous theory of conspicuous consumption; while the last, which is the most extended, is Merton's own analysis of the American

political machine, or "Bossism." Each is introduced in order to illustrate a different heuristic purpose of the distinction; for example, the first demonstrates how it can help to "clarify the analysis of seemingly irrational social patterns" (1957:64), while the second shows how it can "direct attention to theoretically fruitful fields of inquiry" (1957:65). Thus none of them actually serves as an exemplar of the paradigm for functional analysis which Merton set out so clearly only a few pages earlier. In consequence, the reader has to work hard, first to identify precisely the item which is subject to functional analysis and second to find the exact empirical reference for the term "manifest function."

Indeed, on considering these examples more closely one is struck by how little attention is given to identifying and specifying the manifest functions compared with the extended discussion of the attributed latent ones. In fact, the impression which Merton succeeds in conveying is that the question of what constitutes the conscious intentions of the actors concerned is not a problematic issue. However, even if, for the sake of argument, one were to accept that the manifest purpose of the Hopi in engaging in their rain dance is indeed to bring rain, it is necessary to reflect on what might be the manifest function in Merton's second example, that of The Hawthorn Western Electric Studies. Here he implies that the purpose of the investigation was to study the variable relationship between intensity of lighting and productivity and that at first investigators failed to establish any connection, only subsequently succeeding, when they moved the frame of reference, to consider the social consequences of their actions upon the self-images and self-conceptions of the workers, that is to say, when the focus of attention was shifted to the "latent social functions of the experiment."

It is not clear, however, that this example constitutes an exact case of functional analysis in the sense implied in Merton's own codification, for The Hawthorn Experiment could hardly be said to constitute "a standardised (i.e., patterned and repetitive) item, such as social roles, institutional patterns, social processes . . . etc." (1957:50). For this to be the case Merton would have had to focus his discussion not upon any one experiment but upon social, social-psychological, or industrial productivity experiments in general.[2] Had he done this he might well have concluded that the manifest function (presumably to add to the stock of knowledge) was indeed identical with the latent function which he identifies. However, the footnote at the botton of the page reveals that Merton's purpose in mentioning this study was not to illustrate functional analysis but to show "how an elaborate research was wholly changed in theoretical orientation and in the character of its findings by the introduction of a concept approximating that of latent function" (1957:66). What this implies is that the relevant contrast is not between the purposes of the Hawthorn Experimenters (whatever they might have been) and the consequences of their research, but between a theoretical scheme which does employ a concept of latent function and one which does not. Not that this entirely covers the point which Merton is making. For a concept which sensitized the researchers to the unintended consequences of their research would not have led them to their "discovery" had it not also been given a behavioral or social-scientific interpretation. Thus the conclusion to be drawn from this example is that Merton is contrasting "latent function," by which he means a sociologically aware, consequential style of analysis, with any other framework of thought, which is thus by default identified as the "manifest function."

Once it is realized that this is the real nature of the distinction employed, it becomes possible to perceive the other examples in a different light. Thus the third one mentioned, that of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, appears at first sight to refer to a standardized pattern of social behavior (i.e. the purchase of consumer goods) in which the manifest function is seen to be the

[2] Alternatively, some specific and regular action of the investigators would have had to be singled out as the "item" under examination and the conscious intention behind it identified.

purposes of the actors concerned: these being defined as "the satisfaction of the needs for which these goods are explicitly designed" (1957:69). Merton takes it for granted that these are the purposes of consumers, for he even inserts the phrase "of course" when making this claim. However, he then proceeds to describe this position as the "common-sense interpretation" and puts the term "manifest function" in brackets where Veblen describes this as the "naive meaning" given to the consumption of goods. In other words, the term manifest function is not being applied to the actual purposes of the consumers (these are not investigated) but to a particular view or theory of their purposes, one which is widespread throughout society. Furthermore, as the discussion progresses, it becomes clear that Merton is identifying this "common-sense view" of purchasing with traditional economic theory (he refers to changes "which the 'conventional' economist could not foresee," 1957:70) and contrasting it with a sociological and functionalist interpretation of consumer behavior.

The suspicion that Merton has abandoned the contrast between purpose and consequence is strengthened when one considers the last of the four examples which he examines, that of the American political machine. This is a frustrating discussion to follow because a superficial reading leads one to imagine that Merton is concerned to explicate the latent functions of Bossism in contrast to its conscious purpose (or manifest function). There is no mention, however, of what might constitute the purposes or intentions of the political boss and his henchmen, and the functions of the political machine are not contrasted with the aims and intentions of any group but with a popular attitude of moral condemnation. Only on closer reading does one discover that Merton considers Bossism itself to be a latent consequence of the constitutional system of government in America, arising as an unofficial, alternative structure to fulfill needs which the established organs of government either do not meet or fail to satisfy effectively. It is presumably for this reason that in his subsequent discussion of the functions which the structure fulfills for diverse subgroups he makes no use of the latent-manifest distinction. Therefore, this is mainly an exercise in demonstrating the valuable consequences fulfilled by "latent structures." The contrast with manifest structures is only referred to at the very beginning in order to differentiate the official organs of government.

Thus, although Merton defines the distinction between manifest and latent functions as that between purpose and consequence, in his subsequent discussion he generally employs the dichotomy to refer to the contrast between commonsense knowledge and sociological understanding. The reason for this would appear to be his desire to demonstrate the superior value of a sociologically aware functionalist perspective when contrasted with either popular interpretations or those deriving from another discipline. In fact, it is the cross-disciplinary approach which is Merton's main "mechanism" for generating insights into latent functions, commenting on, for example, the sociological consequences of items of behavior normally explained in an economic fashion (Veblen) or the sociological and economic consequences of items of behavior normally viewed as political (and condemned as such) as in the case of Bossism. No matter how valuable these insights may be, however, it is hard to see what exactly they have to do with "those objective consequences . . . which are intended and recognised by participants" (1957:51). One is thus forced to conclude that Merton largely abandons this original conception of manifest function, employing in its place a distinction between sociological and nonsociological forms of interpretation.

This latter distinction is simply a product of the conceptual scheme employed by the observer and is unrelated to the actor and his intentions. A shift in the perspective of the observer and what was previously "unrecognised" as a latent function of the behavior under study now becomes "recognised" as a manifest one (as in the case of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption), without the necessity of imputing any alteration in the awareness of the actors concerned. Manifest and la-

tent is indeed a distinction between the recognized and the unrecognized but from the observer's point of view, not the actor's. It is thus easily equated with a direct advance in scientific understanding as the previously unrecognized consequences of action become identified for the first time.[3] Confusion with the former distinction appears to arise because these contrasting conceptual and disciplinary schemes result in different meanings being attributed to patterns of behavior, meanings which are sometimes couched in the language of motive and intent. Hence the labeling of consequences as manifest and latent is easily confused with the imputation and nonimputation of motives and awareness to the people performing the behavior in question.

DIVERSE MEANINGS AND AMBIGUITY

An examination of Merton's discussion reveals another usage of the terms in addition to this contrast between popular knowledge and sociological understanding, for as already noted, in the course of his analysis of the American political machine he equates manifest with the formal and official aims of organizations and latent with the purposes fulfilled by unofficial or illegal ones. Not surprisingly, he has been followed in this by others, and several textbooks refer to the distinction between manifest and latent as equatable with that between "official" and "unofficial." Cotgrove (1967:34–35), for example, states unequivocally that this is how the contrast should be seen, while Lipset (1959:83) uses this understanding of the difference between the two terms to distinguish political sociology from political science. Finally, Ogburn and Nimkoff (1964:331) actually distinguish two senses of the term latent specifying the first as the "unexpected, unintended and unrecognised consequences of action," and the second as "*sub rosa*," that is to say, "unofficial social organizations which develop because of the failure of the official structure to satisfy the needs of particular subgroups."

Altogether there are at least four different meanings which Merton gives to the manifest-latent distinction. There is, first of all, that presented in the explicit formulation, i.e., the contrast between conscious intention and actual consequence. Secondly, as noted, Merton himself comes to use the dichotomy to refer to the difference between commonsense knowledge (or sometimes the perspective of another discipline) and sociological understanding. Thirdly, there is the usage which equates manifest with the formal and official aims of organizations and latent with the purposes fulfilled by unofficial or illegal ones. Finally, there is the suggestion that manifest and latent relate to different levels of understanding with the former equal to apparent or surface meaning while the latter concerns the deeper or underlying reality of the phenomenon in question. This final usage is only implicit in the original discussion, although it is unavoidable given the Freudian origin of the terms; but Merton has employed them in just this sense in a recent discussion of social structure (1976:36).

Merton is not the only sociologist to use these concepts in a vague and variable fashion or in a way which is at odds with their definition, as many writers appear to do when venturing to illustrate the two types. Berger and Berger (1972:179–81), for example, define manifest functions as those social processes keeping society together "that are deliberate and intended," while latent ones are "unconscious and unintended." They then go on to give education as an illustration of the difference:

> The manifest functions of education can be enumerated quite readily. Education, in the view of some, is concerned with the transmission of knowledge for its own sake. In the view of others, it is concerned with the transmission of knowledge that will have practical use for life. In either case, the functions of education are viewed as relating to individuals by themselves and their individual careers in life. Furthermore, education is supposed to transmit values or, as many parents put it when asked what they expect of the schools which their children

[3] This, of course, is exactly what Merton does in the case of The Hawthorn Experiment, but he also goes on to claim that "The discovery of latent functions represents significant increments in sociological knowledge" (1957:68). This, however, would seem to be true by definition.

> attend, to teach children the difference between right and wrong. Finally, education is supposed to form character, to develop certain socially desirable types of human beings.

This is a good example of the vague manner in which the concept of manifest function is typically handled. One can note in the first place that the item itself is so generally conceived that it is barely possible to follow Merton's prescription concerning the analysis of a "standardized" social or cultural item. If the example given had been "the classroom lesson" or "the examination," there might have been some possibility of specifying functions but "education" can cover all and any aspect of a wide range of formal and informal practices. Secondly, the discussion is actually limited to a listing of the opinions typically held by various (unspecified) groups of people. The link, whatever it is, between these opinions and the actual "objective consequences" of education is not explored, and yet manifest function has already been defined as the actual outcomes of education which are intended and recognized. If schools do not help to "teach children the difference between right and wrong," should this still be included in the list of manifest functions simply because some parents feel that it ought to be the aim of education? How in any case can an aim which approximates to an ideal ever coincide with the actual consequences of action? Finally, one might ask how it is that Berger and Berger, despite their confident assertion, know that these are the real intentions of persons engaged directly or indirectly with educational practices. Once again, it would appear that a shift has taken place away from intended and unintended outcomes to the contrast between widespread popular belief and a sociological perspective.

The intriguing question posed by this analysis is why, in view of Merton's clear definition of the concept of manifest function in terms of consciously intended and recognized consequences, does he (as well as many who have followed him) then proceed to employ it in a different sense and in particular to refer to the contrast between commonsense and sociology? Could it be because of some inherent conceptual problem? Or perhaps a fundamental difficulty concerning its application? Certainly the most common criticism directed at the scheme has been the observation that there is an intrinsic ambiguity in the definitions, for although Merton treats intention and recognition as if they were synonymous, they can and clearly do vary independently of each other.

This point has been made by Levy (1952), Spiro (1961), Isajiw (1968), Helm (1971), Sztompka (1974), and Giddens (1976) and has naturally led to the cross-classification of the two variables to yield four categories in place of Merton's original two. These four being intended and recognized functions, intended and unrecognized functions, unintended and recognized functions, and unintended and unrecognized functions. Of the two types generated the first is commonly treated as equivalent to subconsciously motivated acts while the second acknowledges the fact that people may recognize consequences post hoc which they never intended when embarking on the course of action. Unfortunately, agreement on the independence of the dimensions of intention and recognition and the consequent four functions does not extend to terminology. Generally, there is a desire to retain Merton's original terms for two of the four categories while coining new names for the other two; however, there is no consensus over which should be applied to which. Levy (1952:87–88), for instance, suggests following Merton in retaining manifest function for the intended and recognized category and latent for unintended and unrecognized while describing the two cross-types by the acronyms IUR (intended by unrecognized) and UIR (unintended but recognized). Isajiw (1968:78–82) also proposed retaining manifest for the intended and recognized category but suggests that latent should be used for both unintended categories (subdivided into recognized and unrecognized latent functions). However, his categorization is complicated by the introduction of subconscious intention as a separate class of effects. By contrast with both these approaches, Sztompka (1974:12–13) retains the names manifest

and latent to refer to the dimension of recognition, employing the straightforward labels "intended function" and "unintended function" for the remaining categories. Thus although there is a measure of agreement over the classification of the concepts, there is none over the labels to be attached to them, with manifest and latent being used to refer to (a) the original two categories identified by Merton, (b) the contrast between intended and unintended functions, or (c) the contrast between recognized and unrecognized functions.

This critical consensus does suggest that the linking of intention and recognition is one source of the difficulty encountered in any attempt to apply the dichotomy and hence may help to explain, if only in part, why there is a tendency for the criterion of commonplace knowledge to displace that of the real intentions of actors. However, the resolution of intent and recognition into discrete dimensions does not dissolve all difficulties, for the concept of manifest function remains elusive to delineate and confusing to employ. This strongly suggests that there is a much more fundamental problem, one arising from the essential character of the manifest-latent schema as a combination of functionalism and action theory.

A PRODUCT OF FUNCTIONALISM AND ACTION THEORY

A basic difficulty arises from the fact that the two theoretical perspectives are not coterminous; for although, as Merton observes, "the entire range of sociological data can be . . . subjected to functional analysis" (1957:50), the same is not true of action theory.[4] This, by its very nature, is only applicable to social behavior which is goal-directed or "voluntaristic." There is thus a gap between the two, for although one may impute functions to any standardized social or cultural item, one may not legitimately attribute purposes so universally.[5] The implication of this is that while the identification of manifest functions can always be complemented by the specification of latent ones, the reverse will not be the case; and it will be necessary, in any particular instance, to decide first of all not what the manifest function of the item is, but whether there is one, or more exactly, to decide whether the terminology of purposiveness is appropriate. Hence a major deficiency in Merton's distinction is the failure to allow for nonintentional subjective dispositions, and it is interesting to note that in his formulation of the functionalist paradigm he recognized the importance of including "concepts of subjective disposition" (1957:50) but then went on to assume that these were exhausted by the use of such terms as "motive" and "purpose." In an earlier paper he had noted that there were situations in which "adherents are not concerned with the objective consequences of . . . actions but only with the subjective satisfaction of duty well performed" (1936:903), but this important insight is ignored on this occasion. Naturally enough this leads him to make the old positivist error of treating nonrational action as if it were "irrational," claiming that latent function analysis can "clarify seemingly irrational social patterns," by which Merton appears to mean all that falls under the general headings of "tradition," "custom," and "superstition."[6] Specifically, he makes the claim that latent function analysis can explain those patterns of behavior which persist despite the fact that they fail to attain the conscious purposes of the actors concerned: that, in effect, the "failure" of manifest function is compensated for by the "success" of latent ones. Merton makes this assertion in the context of his discussion

[4] In fact, purposive action theory can be applied to an aspect of social behavior to which functionalism (at least the sociological variety) cannot. The isolated unit act does not constitute a standardized and repetitive item and hence is not appropriate for functional analysis, but can nevertheless be an object of study in action theory.

[5] There are, of course, forms of action and interaction theory, which, although concerned with the actor's subjective orientation to others, do not focus solely upon purposive or goal-directed behavior. However, it is quite clear from Merton's terminology (if not from the examples he discusses) that he has purposive social action in mind. His earlier paper "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action" (1936) is relevant here.

[6] It was, of course, precisely this error which Parsons (1937) was so careful to identify and avoid.

of the Hopi Indians' rain dance ceremony, but it has been echoed by others.

This argument is only made to appear convincing by the imputation of purposiveness to behavior which should more properly be viewed as rule-governed.[7] Thus the sociologist, having predefined the activity concerned as primarily goal-directed, is free to "invent" unfulfilled or "failed" purposes. The arbitrariness of this process can be seen if we compare Johnson's discussion (1961:66–67) of the incest taboo with that of Bredemeier and Stephenson (1962:45), for while in both analyses the manifest function of observing the taboo is declared to be a "failure" (thus opening the way to the unveiling of the "successful" latent functions), they cannot agree on what this is. For Johnson the primary purpose of obeying the taboo is to avoid congenital deformity, while Bredemeier and Stephenson speculate that people do not break the injunction against incestuous behavior because they wish to be virtuous and go to heaven. Neither of them, however, presents any evidence in support of these claims. In such instances the sheer inapplicability of the dichotomy as originally formulated means that the concept of manifest function can only be used at all by shifting its meaning to the commonsense justifications for a given practice, and it is these which are subsequently declared erroneous when judged against the standard of modern scientific knowledge. Thus Merton employs the understanding of contemporary meteorology to declare the Hopi's purposes to be unrealized, while Johnson invokes genetics to assert that the incest taboo does not function to avoid congenital deformity.[8] However, in neither case is there really any good reason for assuming that the actor's purposes are unrealized for the simple reason that it has not been established that the behavior in question should properly be viewed as purposive. The adjudged failure of manifest function is thus no more than the perceived inadequacy of the meaning commonly attributed to the behavior when viewed against some more scientific perspective. One can conclude from this that it is the limited applicability of Merton's original conception of manifest function which is a principal reason why it is so commonly redefined. Such a limitation is disguised by the juxtaposition of the words "manifest" and "function" in a seemingly unproblematic fashion.

While action theory essentially involves the division of behavior into the categories of ends and means, functionalism entails a perspective from which one evaluates the contributions of standardized social or cultural items to the postulated needs of given systems. Merton's attempt to join the two consists of assimilating the concept of means to that of structure and end to that of function. The resultant hybrid term — manifest function (latent function being merely the obverse) — is understandably replete with problems, for the blunt truth is that functionalism and the voluntaristic or means-end schema cannot be joined end-to-end in this simple manner without a considerable risk of terminological haziness and conceptual confusion.[9] For one thing, the introduction of the language of purpose and intent into what was meant to be a structural or system-functional form of analysis naturally increases the risks of running into the problem of teleology. At the same time, the application of the language of structure and function to the behavior of actors also increases the risk of encountering the problems of determinism and

[7] It may reasonably be objected that no action can adequately be described as merely purposive or rule-governed but that all human action is necessarily characterized by both features in varying degrees. The point remains, however, that the rule-governed ingredient is ignored by Merton in his formulation, while others, notably Winch (1970) (following Wittgenstein), have emphasized its central importance for social science.

[8] Bredemeier and Stephenson at least acknowledge that they are not in a position to judge the manifest function which they identify and therefore cannot, in principle, decide if the activity is a success or a failure.

[9] One of the features which distinguished Parsons' theoretic endeavors from those of Merton was the very fact that he was fully aware of these dangers and hence strove self-consciously to find a coherent and systematic basis upon which the two perspectives could be integrated. Although there may be some doubt about how far he succeeded in this aim, there can be none concerning his awareness of the issues involved. Indeed almost all of Parsons' writings from 1937 onwards deal with this problem in one form or other.

the treatment of people as mere cultural "dopes" (or dupes). Both these potential hazards are encapsulated within the rather confusing concept of a manifest function, that is, a purpose or goal deliberately and consciously chosen by an individual or group which at the same time serves to meet one or more needs of the system of which they are a part.

More important than these hazards, however, is the basic fact that while it may be possible to articulate the means-end and structure-function schemas together within the framework of a more abstract and all-embracing model of social action (much as Parsons has endeavored to do), it is clearly not possible to unite them in this direct fashion. For although items of social structure may be used by individuals or groups as the means to the attainment of their goals, just as the instrumental action of people may coincide with the maintenance of such structures, this does not preclude the possibility that noninstrumental action may also serve to maintain them. In this sense structure may be equated with the goals of actors rather than their means and the activity concerned an end in itself. Correspondingly, the goals of individuals and groups may coincide with the needs of systems, but here, too, there is no reason why action to attain these needs might not be purely instrumental, activity which from the actor's perspective is merely the means to some other goal. In this case functions become equated with means and not goals as the motives for action lie "beyond" the immediate satisfaction of system needs. These two situations correspond to the normative and idealistic orientations to action, and Merton's failure to allow for these in his scheme shows its fundamentally positivist assumptions. In effect Merton fails to incorporate the different forms of social action discerned by Weber (1947), treating all behavior as if it were Zweckrational and not recognizing the need to accommodate the Wertrational, Affectual, and Traditional forms. This is an especially serious omission since not only does this enormously limit the value and applicability of the concept of manifest function, but it is precisely these forms of behavior which have proved to be the most suitable for functional analysis.

THE PROBLEM OF FUNCTIONALITY

Even within the limited sphere of rational purposive action, however, Merton's concept is extraordinarily difficult to apply in a standard or systematic way. How, in relation to an item of behavior which has numerous consequences, is one to determine which were conscious and intended as opposed to those which were not? Unfortunately, sociologists do not seem to have regarded this as the complicated problem which it can be. Berger and Berger (1972) give the intention to learn sociology as a manifest function of a student's action in signing on for a sociology class, while the latent function of the same activity may be to get closer to a particular girl who has also joined that class. (This is only partially a latent function since it would appear to be an example of subconscious intention.) Obviously other intentions could be postulated as the manifest function in this case. Perhaps the student joined that class because sociology professors have a reputation for being generous in awarding grades or because of the outstanding reputation of that particular teacher. In either case, the learning of sociology starts to take on the appearance of a latent function of joining. But what if the student's parents were matchmaking and had succeeded in persuading him to join that particular class because they knew that a certain eligible girl had also enrolled? Now the original latent function has become a manifest one (though not from the student's point of view), and the learning of sociology is once again a latent function, although this time from the perspective of the parents. Clearly manifest and latent functions can be made to appear and disappear with ease merely by changing the perspective from which the action is viewed or by focusing on the different purposes served by it. Any one pattern of activity may thus be considered from any number of action perspectives, and which consequences are deemed intended or recognized will vary correspondingly. Even if the activity in question is examined from one perspective

only (say from that of an individual), motivations and awareness may be mixed or fluctuate over time. This enormous variability means that manifestness tends to reside in the eyes of the sociological beholders at least as much as in those of the actors, and while it makes the imagining of examples to illustrate the manifest-latent dichotomy exceptionally easy, it makes the establishment of their reality correspondingly formidable. It is perhaps understandable that sociologists should be drawn toward notions of popular understanding or, where applicable, formally constituted purposes, in the hope of finding something more fixed and reliable.

It might be though that one way of escaping from such intractable problems would be to invoke the functional part of the manifest function concept, to appeal, in effect, to the criterion of functionality as a means of deciding which consequences are of significance. After all, one of the reasons why the labels manifest and latent can be juggled with such ease is because the formal protocol of functional analysis is not being observed. Typically all that is specified is whether the outcome of action is recognized and intended whereas functional analysis requires that such outcomes be related to a system and its needs. Thus, instead of starting with a bewildering array of possible actors' intentions and attempting to establish which are realized and/or recognized one would begin by listing the actual functions subsumed by the behavior in question and then, having identified these, move on to discover which, if any, fall into these categories. The great advantage of this procedure is that although there are only a small number of possible specifiable functions for any social system relative to any one activity, there are innumerable possible motives and degrees of awareness. Such a strategy, however, requires that the focus is upon functionality and not mere consequence, a distinction which is rarely made. Thus in the case of the example mentioned above, learning sociology is not a manifest function of the student's act of joining a sociology class, it is merely the consequence of his doing so. What function this consequence could be said to satisfy is difficult to say without the prior specification of a system and its needs, but it could possibly be socialization if society is taken as the point of reference, or perhaps tension management with respect to his personality system if it means that he starts dating the girl in question. In neither case is the actual consequence of the action — having joined the class — itself a function, for there is a clear difference between a specific outcome and its significance for a larger system. Indeed, insofar as an actor's intention is to produce a real outcome it is logically impossible for that objective event to coincide with what is an abstract property of a conceptual scheme, although it is possible, at least in principle, that such an abstract property could constitute one of the reasons why that particular consequence was desired.[10]

This now becomes the crucial question to be resolved concerning the meaning to be attached to the concept of manifest function. Does it mean a situation in which the actor intends and recognizes his contribution to functionality, or does it refer to one in which merely the objective consequences of action are intended? It would seem that only the first could properly be called a manifest function, while the second — which we might call a manifest outcome — could hardly have much value for functional analysis. Merton's original definition is somewhat ambiguous on this issue. When he defined a manifest function as "those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognised by the participants in the system," did he mean that the participants recognize the consequences and no more, or did he mean that the participants recognize what follows from these in the sense of the contribution which they make to the adjustment or adaptation of the system? In fact, later in the discussion, Merton does define manifest functions as "those objective consequences . . . which contribute to its (person, group, etc.) adjustment or adaptation *and were so in-*

[10] This point has been made by Nadel. He adds the comment, "it seems to me to go against the accepted usage of 'function' to extend the term to consciously held purposes and aims" (1951:278).

tended" (1957:63, italics added), thereby apparently making the intention to add to functionality a necessary part of the concept although the sentence is ambiguous. Hence, to intend the consequence is not enough; it appears one must intend it because of its functionality. To do so, however, one must appreciate the significance of the outcome for the larger system's survival and have that as one's major purpose in embarking on the action.

This proviso clearly makes the identification of manifest functions a very difficult exercise indeed, as it could be said that people never really intend a function, for this is the sociologist's concept applied post hoc to behavior motivated by quite other considerations. It would appear that Merton is confusing two very different frameworks of analysis, the actor's and the observing sociologist's, and equating what are the outcomes of the first with the raw material for the second. Certainly, Merton fails to establish, in relation to any of the examples he cites, that what he calls the manifest function is a situation where the actor or actors concerned recognize and intend the consequences of their actions in the full sense of appreciating their significance in satisfying the needs of a specific system. Obviously, for this to have been true he would have had to demonstrate that they possessed the awareness of social scientists. This would seem to be a strong objection against using the term manifest function to refer to an intended but unrecognized outcome, as it would seem particularly unlikely that this degree of sophisticated awareness would be associated with motivations which are not fully conscious.

The problem of intending functionality can be approached from a different perspective if one takes Levy's (1952:84) definition of function as a starting point. For him a function can only be "a condition or state of affairs, resultant from the operation . . . of a structure through time." This would seem to imply that the specific activities of actors directed to the attainment of concrete goals cannot be equated with the operation of a structure in the fulfilment of functions. If a particular couple gets married in order that they might have a child, can their desire for a child be equated with the general function of procreation performed by the institutional structure of marriage? Just as the activity of any one individual cannot be equated with a patterned and standardized structure, so the outcome of that action cannot logically be equated with the complete function which that structure subsumes. One might call personally patterned activities structured (these would be habits) and in that sense equate the goals of individuals with functions performed for the personality system, but it is hard to see how individual actors can consciously intend social functions. This problem is not resolved by taking common or group goals as the point of reference, for the functions of social systems, when they are formulated by sociologists, are expressed in terms which do not resemble the real purposes of human beings. Terms like "adaptation," "integration," and the like do not have a specific enough denotation for actors to be able to make them the subjective-aim-in-view for their actions. Conversely, the real goals of actors are only made to appear to resemble the functional needs of social systems through a process of interpretative abstraction engaged in by the sociologist. Thus, although one may well be able to identify both intentions and functions, it is doubtful if one would ever be in a position to declare that they were identical. Unfortunately, most discussions of manifest function seem to proceed on the assumption that it is sufficient to establish that the objective consequences of action are recognized and intended. Hence the introduction of functionality actually makes the discernment of manifest functions a more difficult task than it was before, for if it is peculiarly difficult to establish exactly who intended and recognized which consequences, it is doubly difficult to establish exactly who intended and recognized their functionality.

The distinction between intention and recognition may indeed be very pertinent here, in that it will be much more likely that actors will be able to recognize the functionality of their action for some system — especially when it has been pointed out to them by the social scientist — than that they will intend it. For to intend func-

tionality is to presuppose an understanding of the system and its needs and how these can be met, thus necessitating a quite sophisticated knowledge of causal processes. By contrast a post hoc reconstruction of events and their implications is much more easily achieved.

THE PROBLEM OF INTENTIONALITY

As the consequences of action are so numerous and diverse and spread outwards in everexpanding circles, it is necessary in any consequential form of analysis to be able to invoke a criterion which will both limit the number investigated and provide some basis for assessing significance. If the emphasis upon functionality leads to a position in which one is increasingly forced to perceive manifest function as a contradiction in terms, then perhaps one can be more successful by pursuing the alternative path of relating the consequences of action back to the concerns of the actor. In other words, can the concept of manifest function be successfully redefined if the actor frame of reference is taken as the focus? Here the outcomes of action are related to the outlook and interests of the actors (or whoever was responsible for initiating the action), and hence Merton's use of the concept of intentionality becomes crucial.

As Giddens (1976) has observed, Merton's formulation of manifest function fails to allow for a distinction between intention and anticipation. Inevitably actors anticipate or foresee many more outcomes of their action than they necessarily intend. Thus a chess player may make a move with a clear intention or end-in-view, but at the same time he will have anticipated a large number of possible consequences of his actions which he cannot be said to intend. If any of these alternative outcomes occurs, it would be silly to describe them as latent functions of his conduct, since he had already considered the possibility of their occurrence. This is clearly not the same question as that of recognition in the sense in which Merton uses that term, which appears to be confined to post hoc assessment of action; for although it is probable that if an outcome was foreseen it will also be recognized subsequently, it is quite clear that what was unforeseen may indeed be recognized subsequently. Anticipation is thus an independent dimension of purposive action and needs to be differentiated from the concepts of intention and recognition as Merton identifies them.

The relationship of anticipation to the question of intention raises two issues not discussed by Merton but crucial to any discussion of purposive action. The one concerns the degree of constraint over behavior and the other relates to the problem of uncertainty. A condemned man can be said to "anticipate" his imminent death as he walks towards the gallows without the necessity of implying that he intends it. In this sense a good deal of self-conscious action involves outcomes which we anticipate but do not intend. As Helm (1971:52) observes, a man who digs his garden will probably become tired, but there is no suggestion that he necessarily intends to tire himself. In this sense, consequences of action may be anticipated with a high degree of probability and subsequently recognized as having occurred without there having been any real intention to bring them about. In addition to this, however, the presence of uncertainty in all action means that it is not easy to discriminate between intended and unintended effects. This is certainly the case where the element of chance is high. In a game like roulette, the gambler certainly may hope to win, but does he intend to? Can losing really be said to be an unintended outcome? It was certainly foreseen (if undesired), but how far can one actually be said seriously to intend the unlikely?[11]

It can be seen from this that distinguishing intended from unintended consequences of action is as problematic as determining the recognition of functionality.

[11] Helm (1971:52) notes a further ambiguity concerning "latent" (in the sense of unintended) consequences of action. This is the distinction between the unintended consequences of the outcome of action and the unintended "collateral" consequences of the action itself. It is these collateral effects or consequences intrinsic to the action itself which although foreseen are likely to be viewed as unavoidable rather than intended.

First, there is the question of which outcomes of action are foreseen by the actor as possible end-results of his action. Secondly, there is the question of which of these possible outcomes he deems probable (these we may describe as anticipated); and then, thirdly, we have to decide which of these anticipated outcomes (if any) are actually chosen as the intended consequences of conduct. Even here we need to recognize that some highly improbable outcomes may still count in the actor's reckoning when judging what actions to take: if desired these would be "long shots," if undesired, "risks."

Merton could not be said to have been totally unaware of these problems, for he discusses some of them in his earlier paper on the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action (1936). Unfortunately, few of those insights are apparent here where the difficulties surrounding the specification of free "rational" or "purposive" action are pushed into the background by the preoccupation with functionalism. This, of course, might not have mattered had Merton not decided to make the issue of conscious intention central to his concept of manifest function.

THE VALUE OF THE DISTINCTION

Returning to the original question of the value of the distinction, it is necessary first of all to separate this from the larger issue of the merits of functionalism. Although some of the difficulties which have been noted, such as specifying what exactly is meant by the concept of function, are commonly part of this larger critique, Merton's dichotomy is only loosely connected with these issues, as it rests primarily on the contrast between the manifest and the latent and is thus set more in an action theory than a functionalist context. Its fate is thus not intimately tied to that of functionalism in general.

Merton gave several justifications for inventing (or at least giving a specific name) to the contrast. The first of these was his expressed desire to eliminate what he saw as widespread confusion between the subjective categories of disposition and the objective ones of consequence and to mark the distinction with the introduction of two new terms. As we have seen, however, he cannot really be said to have achieved this aim, for he himself did not use these terms with much coherence or consistency and they have not in general been used with clarity by others. Indeed, his introduction of the ambiguous if not contradictory term manifest function has actually led to more confusion in this field, blurring the very distinction which he sought to make.

His second claim was that the distinction would aid both "systematic observation and later analysis" by directing observations toward "salient elements of a situation" and preventing the "inadvertent oversight of these elements" (1957:63). Obviously some doubt must be cast on this claim by the very fact that, with a few exceptions, sociologists have not widely employed his dichotomy in their research and especially not in the processes of "systematic observation." He then elaborates on what he sees as the heuristic value of this distinction and makes no less than four specific claims. Three of these we have already had occasion to dismiss. His argument, for example, that the use of these terms helps to clarify "the analysis of seemingly irrational social patterns" (1957:64) is based on the mistaken labeling of normative and idealistic behavior as "irrational"; while his claims that "the discovery of latent functions represents significant increments of sociological knowledge" (1957:68) and that use of the distinction "precludes the substitution of naive moral judgements for sociological analysis" (1957:70–71) are simply tautologies, as the very meaning which he gives to the difference between manifest and latent is that between commonsense knowledge or judgment and sociological understanding.

We are therefore left with his suggestion that the distinction "directs attention to theoretically fruitful fields of inquiry" (1957:65), by which he means that it is not enough for sociologists to "*confine* themselves to the study of manifest functions" (1957:65, italics in the original). This certainly seems a reasonable injunction, amounting in effect to the suggestion that investigators should examine the objec-

tive consequences of behavior and not merely the subjective dispositions of actors. But this is a strange argument to employ when justifying the introduction of a new pair of concepts into a *functionalist* paradigm, for functionalists are actually those social scientists who are least likely to make this mistake. Indeed, the greater danger is that they will confine themselves to the study of the objective consequences of behavior to the neglect of subjective disposition, and hence Merton would have had more reason to stress the opposite advantage for his dichotomy. That he did not do so reveals that this claim, like all the others, is not really an argument in favor of the distinction between manifest and latent functions but one in favor of functionalism itself. Indeed, it is Merton's primary concern to demonstrate the value of a functional style of analysis which appears to have prompted him to conceptualize the distinction in the first place, for it is not one which has any real value for functionalism proper. A thoroughgoing functional analysis has no need of such terms as manifest and latent, for as Nagel (1967) observes the category of subjective disposition has no special status, being merely one among many of the defining states of the system, and is thus not especially relevant to the specification of functions. Certainly Merton does not use his dichotomy as part of any detailed functional analysis but merely as a means of advocating functionalism in general.

CONCLUSION

Both Merton's original discussion of manifest and latent functions and that which one typically encounters in the introductory textbooks are, in essence, merely ways of illustrating the sociological perspective (understood as a consequential mode of analysis) by comparison with what is taken to be commonsense knowledge. The terms themselves have very little specificity, as the wide range of actual interpretations suggests, but they do serve to emphasize a contrast between "what is generally assumed to be going on" and "what the sociologist reveals is going on" and thus fulfill the pedagogic function of introducing the discipline. Unfortunately this contrast is frequently forced, involving as it does a certain amount of sleight of hand in which the complex real motives and understandings of people are disregarded in favor of oversimplified attributed ones. Thus, the concept of manifest function is mainly used as a kind of stooge or fall guy, set up in order that the subsequent unveiling of latent functions can be given the appearance of a significant insight, or even in Merton's case (in which he has been followed by others) so that sociology itself can be presented as an especially penetrating form of inquiry. In order that the concept can fulfill this role it is only vaguely defined and its content is not established but merely imputed. Clearly this practice is to be regretted for it gives a spurious significance to the analysis, helping to disguise the true level of understanding and contributing to the mystification of the discipline.

This does not mean that there might not be some situations where the manifest-latent function terminology could be usefully employed in a descriptive, if not analytic, sense. The tendency of anthropologists to use it when discussing the degree to which members of a society are aware of certain consequences of their action (e.g. Beattie, 1964; Spradley and McCurdy, 1975), is, in principle, acceptable (although the use of the word "function" would be better replaced with something like "beneficial outcome"). Here, shorn of the additional complexities of determining intention, the dichotomy becomes merely a general instrument in the sociology of knowledge, useful in the preliminary exercise of plotting consciousness. It may indeed have a particular value in this context as it lends itself to the study of changing awareness and especially to the processes of manifestation (See Schneider and Dornbusch, 1967). In this respect the concepts of latent and manifest are intimately related to the feedback mechanisms of trial and errror and the processes of discovery.

Merton does offer one other interesting justification, although less for a functionalist than a consequentialist style of

analysis.[12] This is the claim that the contrast helps to expose the seemingly paradoxical nature of social behavior: that is, the fact that behavior frequently has consequences very much the opposite of those intended, there being an ineradicable discrepancy between intention and result. This concept, reminiscent as it is of Weber's (1947) irony of history, does have the merit of relating directly to the original formulation and the setting of purpose against effect. It also serves to indicate the continuity between Merton's formulation of the manifest-latent distinction and his earlier interest in the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action. However, the link shows how Merton's enduring concerns had less to do with functionalism than with the study of the complex and paradoxical character of human conduct, and it is perhaps because his twin concepts allow commentators to draw attention to these features of social life that they have found favor. After all, the fact that all action will have some unintended and unrecognized consequences hardly seems worth pointing out and is not sufficient reason for coining a special pair of sociological terms. Neither is the fact that there is a difference between the formal, stated purposes of organizations and practices and informal ones. However, the fact that there is a basic irony in human conduct in which the consequences of an action tend to work against the very intentions which prompted it could be considered worthy of a neologism, and it is probably here that Merton's distinction may have heuristic value. Certainly there is irony in this case since the concepts he created have served less to clarify than to obscure and confuse.

Yet there could still be a larger purpose served by his efforts as this failure testifies to the importance as well as the difficulty of trying to unite functionalism and action theory. For even though Merton chose to work with "theories of the middle range" rather than follow Parsons in the effort to develop a general unified body of action theory, an analysis of his most famous pair of concepts reveals that his theorizing was also ultimately dependent upon the successful integration of the same crucial perspectives.

[12] Several commentators have observed that Merton's position is not strictly functionalist since he merely advocates a limited consequential form of analysis. See, for example, Rex (1961) and Mulkay (1971).

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