



Systemic Analysis of Politics in the Light of Reconstruction of Structural Functionalism of Jeffrey C. Alexander

Jarosław Nocoń

ORCID: 0000-0002-1202-7580

To cite this article please include the following information:

- Journal title: Polish Political Science Yearbook
- Volume number: 50
- Year of publication: 2021
- Published ahead-of-print

Example styles:

[APA Style]: Nocoń, J. (2021). Systemic Analysis of Politics in the Light of Reconstruction of Structural Functionalism of Jeffrey C. Alexander. *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 50(issue number), pages. <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy202139>

[Chicago Style]: Jarosław Nocoń, "Systemic Analysis of Politics in the Light of Reconstruction of Structural Functionalism of Jeffrey C. Alexander" *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 50, no. [issue number] (2021).

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy202139>

Published ahead-of-print



Final submission: 29 June 2021

Published online: 16 July 2021

Printed issue: 2021



Submit your article to PPSY →

Jarosław Nocon

Univeristy of Gdańsk (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0002-1202-7580

e-mail: jaroslaw.nocon@ug.edu.pl

Systemic Analysis of Politics in the Light of Reconstruction of Structural Functionalism of Jeffrey C. Alexander

Abstract: Applying systems analysis in political science research is still one of the important dimensions of political science methodology. Reconstruction of the functional model of the social system seems to be an attractive proposition for policy researchers. Signed by the name of Jeffrey Charles Alexander, the American version of neofunctionalism is one of the responses to the crisis of traditional forms of structural functionalism. The main purpose of the reconstruction of T. Parsons's theory was its revitalization consisting in restoring the possibility of its application in contemporary social research. The reinterpretation of the classical approach was to a large extent "forced" by harsh criticism of the current approach and focused especially on attempts to overcome the limitations contained therein, which manifested in the impossibility of correlation of functional theorems with newly developing research currents. Jeffrey Alexander restored relevance and emphasizes suitability for interpreting and explaining political processes and phenomena. Understanding the concept of functions and functional relations in the political environment allows for effective application in the analysis of contemporary political systems. Therefore, changing the method of functional analysis is a useful methodological tool in developing a political theory.

Keywords: *political system, political analysis, functional explanation*

Systemic analysis of politics in the second half of the 20th century was one of the more commonly used research approaches. During the period of greatest popularity, the concepts of David Easton, Gabriel Almond and Bingham G. Powell, or Talcott Parsons constituted an important basis for the ongoing research on politics (Blum, Maj, and Paruch, 2008, pp. 75-84). It seems that, unlike the institutional or cybernetic model of analysis, the structural-functional approach to research on the political system has found only a partial and relatively

limited resonance in the field of political science. One of the important reasons for this state of affairs was the sharp criticism of functionalism undermining its explanatory utility, especially in confrontation with the newly formulated concepts and methodological positions that make up the contemporary structure of the theoretical basis of social research.

Signed by the name of Jeffrey Charles Alexander, the American version of neofunctionalism is one of the responses to the crisis of traditional forms of structural functionalism (Nocoń, 2010). The main purpose of the reconstruction of T. Parsons's theory was its revitalization consisting in restoring the possibility of its application in contemporary social research. The reinterpretation of the classical approach was to a large extent "forced" by harsh criticism of the current approach and focused especially on attempts to overcome the limitations contained therein, which manifested in the impossibility of correlation of functional theorems with newly developing research currents (Alexander, 1998, p. 11). This researcher emphasizes the specificity of the neo-functional design, which, among others, Derek Layder notices: "the feature that decisively distinguishes the proposal of neo-functionalists from other approaches is the fact that they wanted to integrate tradition with modernity, while others rejected approaches altogether" (Layder, 2006, p. 210).

In this context, the achievements of neofunctionalism become a methodologically inspiring impetus to political sciences. This trend hopes that properly reading the classic authors' output is crucial for developing new theories and can also be a current and inseparable component of modern research. The success of this venture would mean that cognitively effective analysis of contemporary politics can be implemented using methodological tools developed under structural functionalism. However, as emphasized by J. C. Alexander, this does not mean the need to take over all functional and analytical instruments. The process of revitalizing T. Parsons's concept is not about consolidating and uncritical transfer of the classic's claims to contemporary analyses. The most important here are inspirations and ways to conceptualize research strategies whose analytical value has universal timeliness and cognitive usefulness. In other words, the achievements of the classics are a "flexible material" that can be shaped according to current research needs and give it new explanatory potential. This peculiar pragmatism of J. Alexander – also revealed in other aspects of his views – significantly hinders the unambiguous assessment of how the neofunctional project is changed, but still a continuation of the structural and functional tradition, and to what extent it is its modernization defining a new theoretical trend separate from the classical one.

Notwithstanding these difficulties with the classification of the achievements of neofunctionalists, it is worth taking a closer look at the major changes resulting from the reconstruction of the Parsons system model analysis and trying to assess to what extent the revitalization of a functional approach can be useful in research on political science.

Analytical Perspective. From Reductionism to Multidimensionality

One of the fundamental problems associated with the update of functional analysis has become its multidimensional character. It is a response to one of the more serious lines of criticism of T. Parsons's theory which maintains that in explaining the principles of systems functioning, this approach prefers the perspective of structural over subjective determinants. On this occasion, Jonathan H. Turner also emphasizes that the method of systemic explanation in terms of functional requirements is a tautology based on referencing countless subsystems whose operation is to meet the requirements of countless super subsystems. In this way, functional explanation also uses an unauthorized teleological perspective, where an unknown subsystem creates a causal premise for implementing requirements at the level of a known system (Turner, 2001, pp. 101-103).

Jeffrey C. Alexander, considering these critical arguments to be justified, also suggests that this explanation resulted from T. Parsons's attempt to comprehensively capture social regularities within a specific model of explanation, which was inevitably associated with the reduction of the perception of the subject of research. As examples of the reductionist reception of T. Parsons' theory, J. Alexander cites criticism of three researchers: Alvin Gouldner, Anthony Giddens, and Ralf Dahrendorf. According to J. Alexander, Gouldner assumed that Parsons defines power as limited to legitimation processes. On the other hand, Giddens suggests that Parsons failed to connect his abstractly understood political subsystem with current contradictions between interest groups. In turn, Dahrendorf argues that a functional concept in terms of politics, such as zero-sum interaction (in terms of power distribution), confirms the inadequacy of his system concept for analyzing political conflicts (Alexander, 1983, p. 88). The remedy to this drawback was introducing a multidimensional analysis, which in the simplest terms is expressed in the postulate of considering all possible aspects of social phenomena determined by various theoretical approaches in the research process. Thanks to this, in contrast to the structural-functional theory, the neo-functionalists' proposal is supposed to have an anti-reductionist character, expressed in the pursuit of the synthesis of diversity without changing the constitutive features determining the explanatory specificity of individual research approaches.

In this way, the neo-functional interpretation of multidimensionality, in contrast to the classic attempts at an integrative-syncretic accumulation of knowledge, emphasizes at the same time the lack of contradictions between individual aspects of research, even if the way of reception of a given phenomenon in the light of individual assumptions seems to exclude each other. Antinomical interpretations simply express the diversity of reception of a given phenomenon at its specific dimension and various analytical levels. They show a different dimension and should be assessed from the perspective of different criteria set by given research traditions. According to J. Alexander (1998, pp. 185-195), interpretations that allow including social life, taking into account all possible aspects of it, and at the same time creating the basis for attempts to find a way to explain and understand them, are

possible only in the framework of contemporary, post-positivist syntheses covering trends from hermeneutics to ethnomethodology. The multidimensional structure of knowledge obtained in this way refers to recognizing the subject of research in the context of many different manifestations of social life, comprehensively covering all its aspects. In the light of the neofunctional concept, this applies especially to problems determined by antinomies of action and structure (microanalysis and macroanalysis) of rationality and irrationality, social units and structures (individualism and collectivism).

Concerning system analysis, these assumptions have strict consequences in the form of striving to construct a general political model as open to various interpretations formulated by individual theoretical orientations. In this way, a systemic explanation should be poly-theoretical and should be the opposite of a mono-causal explanation. Systematic analysis of political activities should be conducted considering individual motivations and structural determinants that set the goals of the action and the practical significance of their consequences (Alexander, 1985, pp. 9-10). J. Alexander maintains that this form of reconstruction of T. Parsons's concept enables adaptation of functional analysis to use the achievements of contemporary theoretical currents.

A significant consequence of this reconstructive procedure is a departure from the analysis of specific system substructures and a focus on exchanging resources between its various segments as phenomena having more empirical references in social interactions. At the same time, the emphasis on system interactions is not so much a consequence of the development of the achievements of the functional approach classic, but rather an expression of a return to the previous version of system analysis, which enables a more complex and multi-dimensional approach. J. Alexander notes that the study of Parsons's achievements reveals that his theory of the social system is oriented around an exchange model (cross-system communication) that was designed in a structural-specific multi-faceted analytical perspective. Hence, the central point of the multidimensional analysis should be social interactions made against the background of the exchange of diverse resources, and systemic imperatives formulated in later papers are only one possible form of system specification at the level of theoretical models (Alexander, 1983, pp. 53-86).

Consequently, the neofunctional reconstruction, driven by the emphasis on a multi-dimensional approach, by abandoning the teleological method of recognizing functions, abolishes the principle of analogous isomorphism and the principle of assigning various forms of exchange of resources to specific subsystems. Thus, unlike in many other attempts to continue the tradition of functional analysis, J. Alexander does not attach much importance to the search for universal functions of the system and attempts to determine its constant structure. According to J. Alexander, it is done in favor of a realistic, but thus a more complex process of analyzing interactions between social system elements. Consequently, the sphere of politics here assumes a more open character and does not so much create a closed whole but instead is characterized by the political nature of relations between participants of exchange processes. In other words, it is a property of interactions occurring in various

and potentially in every sphere of social life. It is illustrated, for example, in how political activities are viewed from the perspective of two antinomies: coercion and legitimacy. In the light of the assumptions of neofunctionalism, the relations between these factors are a continuum, i.e., they express the same feature that constitutes the political nature of the processes of resource exchange in the social system. Meanwhile, it is a problem of contradictions between coercion and action based on a legitimate norm that is one of the important sources of different interpretations of politics and discrepancies in the delimitation of the political system in functional and conflicting theoretical approaches (Gibson & Scherer, 2007, pp. 13-14)

Justifying this analytical phrase, J. Alexander emphasizes that the focus on the AGIL scheme, as an interpretation of system analysis, becomes a source of misunderstanding prompting reductionist and conflated interpretations. They contribute to the unjustified criticism of T. Parsons's theory, understood as a static and idealized construction that cannot explain basic social contradictions (Alexander, 1983, p. 88). These misunderstandings are caused by the recognition of analytically separated subsystems as real components of the system structure that have their counterparts in the practice of social life. This direction of interpretation is a consequence of the assumption that the diversity of society (forms of exchange) inevitably leads to the institutionalization of the relatively autonomous spheres that make up its subsystems. In this way, a structure is formed in society, the component of which is the teleologically emerging political subsystem. Empirical research should therefore focus on the relatively autonomous sphere of "mobilizing the conditions necessary to achieve the given goals of society as a system", expressed in "maximizing the ability of society to achieve its systemic goals, i.e., collective ones" (Wróbel, 1990, pp. 1-3).

In addition, a basic function of the political system to maintain the normative order of the community is also implemented. This function, being a consequence of striving to achieve goals and corresponding values, is associated with imposing will, enforcing specific behaviors, using coercive measures, and maintaining the territorial integrity of society, which is the basis and the main reference point of the political system. In addition to this basic function of the political system, the function of maintaining the normative order of the community is also implemented. This function, being a consequence of striving to achieve goals and corresponding values, is associated with imposing will, enforcing specific behaviors, using coercive measures, as well as maintaining the territorial integrity of society, which is the basis and the main reference point of the political system (Alexander, 1983, p. 82).

Meanwhile, as J. Alexander argues, these subsystems are strictly analytical, and empirical references of system analysis should refer to real phenomena of exchange between its spheres. In other words, empirical research cannot analyze individual subsystems separately from others, just as one cannot simplify causal explanation by reducing it to one factor only. It means that isolating the political system based on the teleologically understood function of achieving goals and mobilizing resources is a procedure related to the conceptualization of the research area, and its application and operationalization at the level of social practice

should take into account the more complex nature of the relationship between political action and other areas of social life.

Subject of the Analysis. From the Political System to the Political Nature of the Action

Striving to construct a multidimensional model of the system and abandoning the analytical AGIL scheme, which was the focal point of the structural and functional diversity of the system, introduces a significant analytical barrier in the form of difficulties in isolating politics from other spheres of social life. In the classic approach, assuming the analytical division of the system structure according to system requirements, the political sphere includes interactions related to the organization and mobilization of resources aimed at achieving collective goals. These types of interactions are an essential function that delimits the political system from other subsystems. The specific and partly different status of politics is determined based on properties of the teleologically defined function of achieving goals as necessary for the existence of the social system. It seems that the idea of recognizing politics as a recognizable social subsystem, and especially its autonomous status distinguished based on a formal analogy to other subsystems, has become an inspiration for the formulation and application of functional system models in political analysis (Lidz, 2001, pp. 143-149).

The neofunctional concept does not have this analytical value. Politics is understood here as a form of interaction involving the exchange of resources between entities, and politics itself is expressed in the processes of giving social activities causative power necessary for the effective implementation of collective needs. J. Alexander proves that such a multidimensional interpretation can be associated with earlier works of Parsons, where the definition of power is closely related to the logic of exchange between elements of the system, used to characterize the relationship between coercion and legitimacy. Power here is instrumental and closely related to coercive relations and legitimization processes (Parsons, 1951, pp. 147-149). An individual or group has power when they can effectively implement their goals regardless of the attitude of other participants in the social system. J. Alexander emphasizes that these intentions are not necessarily directed against these participants, but they can also be implemented regardless of their attitudes (Alexander, 1983, p. 48).

Neofunctionalism, however, moving away from teleological recognition of functions transfers analytical concentration from structures to actions, or more precisely, their effects, which can be a real subject of empirical analysis. This aspect seems to be an important part of the neofunctional reconstruction, which in empirical research emphasizes a greater focus on the diverse consequences of action than its functionally determined goals. In this perspective, although politics can still be associated with power expressed in the ability to mobilize the resources necessary to successfully achieve group goals, it does not create a separate sphere of social life. However, it can be present in potentially every dimension. In other words, non-political action can produce politically committed consequences. Like

T. Parsons, mobilization is the process by which a particular individual or institutional entity gains significant control over resources that it did not control before (Etzioni, 1968, p. 388). However, these resources extend between the multidimensional impact continuum determined by coercion on the one hand and by legitimacy on the other, which may be present in various forms of social interaction and at different levels of exchange between subsystems.

In research practice, such a politics may include a broad catalog of forms of activity and resources. From institutionalized and measurable, such as funds spent on paying billboards or TV spots implemented by committees during election campaigns, to non-institutionalized and informal impact phenomena, such as activating personal commitments or personality inclinations for submissions that are difficult to grasp even in qualitative forms of measurement (Legg, 1973, pp. 2-6).

At the same time, the multidimensionality of the neofunctional approach also implies the need to perceive political subjectivity in a broad spectrum of micro-macro cross-sections. For example, the political nature of action may, on the one hand, result from individual motivations and the intentionality of the behaviors of individual actors, as determined by the subjective meanings and, on the other, be the consequence of the factors constituting the institutionalized patterns of actions constituting the phenomenon of power. In the first case, the genesis of politics can be seen as autonomous, independent, or analytically primary to the institution of power. In the second, politics is the result of coercion resulting from imposing specific forms of interaction resulting from the adopted vision of social order. In other words, one can conceptualize politics from the perspective of individualism and methodological nominalism and a holistic or methodological approach to realism.

In this context, consideration of actions may relate, for example, to various forms of political subjectivity. The range of possibilities here ranges from the actions of an individual actor, through groups and collective interactions, the actions of institutions, to the macro-structural constructions of the political system. However, an individual, social group, or institution has power only if the scope of the effective concentration of economic resources, support, and legitimization allows effective implementation of intended goals. Therefore, the element constituting the political area of the social system is the sphere of mobilization of these factors, which allows taking effective actions conditioning the implementation of group goals at various levels of an organization. Attempts to model this process taking into account two dimensions must, therefore, consider the specific analytical continuity of phenomena on the following line: structure – subjectivity – as well as: coercion – legitimacy.

The concept of determining the political nature of social action has a characteristic specificity of sociological approaches and is not the main criterion for identifying the subject of research but rather its contextual interpretation. The observation of Grażyna Woroniecka seems to be adequate here, which emphasizes that the ways of applying the concept of politics in the field of sociological research are most often associated with the multiplication of ambiguities and controversies arising from problems with determining

the scope of phenomena to fall under this term. “Politics appears in sociology usually as an element organizing the study of phenomena of a different (strictly sociological) nature and in its own way fulfills the second plan, but rarely does it become the central subject of analysis” (Woroniecka, 2001, p. 31). Such a profile of neofunctional interpretation significantly contributes to the entanglement of political science analysis with the sociological aspects of research on social interaction and especially in the theory of action.

Jeffrey C. Alexander sees the possibility of grasping at least partial autonomy of the political sphere, but its separateness is associated with the “active, combinatorial component” (Alexander, 1983, p. 91). According to the author of the neo-functional reconstruction, the peculiarity of political action illustrates an objective contradiction between the function of integration and resources allocation. Structural contradictions result in a disproportionate (about the needs) distribution of resources, which in turn causes polarization and disintegration processes. Under these circumstances, political leaders must produce, through normative persuasion, more extended (diffuse) support and appeal to more general integrating values. This action of political entities occurs most often in situations of tension and potential conflict between two impulses of entry (system needs), emphasizing integrating interactions. Hence, in the processes of electoral campaigns undertaken by parties, some issues are synonymous with a lawyer’s action for certain political activities. They combine the requirements generated by conflicting impulses from other subsystems at the higher level of the social system, creating a systemic need to legitimize actions caused by “higher necessity”. This process of dependence becomes the objective premise for separating politics from other areas of social life and recognizing it as a sphere producing power and validation for actions that are necessary for the existence of the whole system (Alexander, 1983, pp. 91-92).

However, it is easy to show here that the autonomy of the political sphere understood in this way, such as in the case of the subsystems identified based on functional imperatives, is strictly analytical and does not find application in attempts at empirical demarcation. In the practice of social life, legitimacy processes based on the identification of particular interests with more general values are integrally incorporated into the overall public activity. Politicality is only one of the features or aspects resulting from the adopted analytical perspective. In other words, at the level of empirical research, it is not possible to distinguish activities that have only political significance, and politics itself has no ontological separation from other spheres of social life. Therefore, the autonomy of politics is a direct consequence of conceptualization and is closely linked to the internal logic of its analysis rather than to empirically autonomous phenomena. Moreover, such an assessment is consistent with the neo-functional position assuming that in the practice of empirical research, isolating political action from the broader context of social activities does not have a clear distinction because the multidimensionality of social phenomena necessarily forces their interdisciplinary approach.

The references of the neofunctional perspective to applications in research practice mean that the basic subject of political science analysis is not so much a realistically separated

area of social life, but rather the political functions that are a feature of activities undertaken in its various spheres. From this point of view, just like the state institutions of power are considered through the prism of economic, organizational, or cultural conditions of their functioning, so other social institutions, e.g., religious or economic ones, have important political aspects that should be subject to political analysis. Therefore, empirical analyses do not have to focus only on strictly political institutions of power, but they can equally successfully examine the political aspects of other components of the social system. From a political point of view, the processes of normative validation of economic interests, distribution of influence in various forms of production organization, and informal hierarchy in groups may be important. In all these spheres, this feature of activities is present, which from the perspective of functional analysis, reflects the exchange of political resources with other spheres of social life.

For example, according to S. Eisenstadt, the influence of the political system on the activities of institutions from non-political spheres of social life is expressed in such phenomena as the definition of basic group goals that are implemented as organizational and legal priorities for action, the allocation of prestige, impact and the possibility of using legitimate coercion in various social groups, or the distribution of various benefits, benefits and entitlements – both individually and in groups (Eisenstadt, 1993, p. 7). In this context, the author notes that in every political system, there are such activities as legislative procedures covering activities determined by basic social goals and defining the principles of maintaining or changing the existing social order; administrative activities regarding the implementation of these basic rules in various spheres of social life as well as the organization of technical conditions necessary for their effective implementation; activities of political parties aimed at gaining social support and maintaining status in the political arena; legal activity focused on verification and legitimate application of these rules in individual cases resulting from the practice of social life.

It is important to emphasize here that, according to J. Alexander, T. Parsons's approach focuses not so much on the subject as on the very action always taken in a given situation. Situational conditions determine activities, giving them direction and organizational forms. The basic levels of situational analysis are personality, including psychological aspects of the activity (personality system), the cultural system determined by semantic patterns (cultural system), and behavior determinants resulting from the structural requirements and institutional determinants of social activities (behavioral organism) (Alexander, 1983, p. 79).

Politics of action can be a consequence here: internal impulses resulting from individual motivations, intentionally directing actions to their political consequences; external stimuli determined by the structural requirements for the organization and functioning of society (behavioral organism); cultural conditions of forms of group goals realization. All three levels of analysis of political exchange in social interactions are closely related and interrelated. For example, the pursuit of the legitimacy of the particular aspirations of individual social

groups is permanently embedded in a culturally defined system of values, which from the point of view of a given political system has the potential to mobilize support for the activities and the initiating group (Biernat, 2000, pp. 58-60).

Functions. From Teleology to Dialectics

Although the very formulation of the political system in the neofunctional interpretation becomes vague and blurred, the function remains the key concept necessary to analyze the sphere of politics. Moreover, it seems that in the light of the assumptions of neofunctionalism, not only does this concept rise to the rank of the main instrument of analysis, but also it enables effective references to more empirically oriented research. Although neofunctionalists do not deal directly with the methodological characteristics of functions, based on the reinterpretation of functional theory of action and the multidimensional knowledge model presented earlier, one can implicitly deduce a way of understanding this concept and the possibilities of its application for political analysis.

As already indicated, in the light of neofunctional reconstruction, the concept of function is recognized significantly different than in the analysis of structural functionalism. Talcott Parsons understands functionality as a means of contributing to an element, part or process, to maintain or achieve a state in which it can function properly and undisturbed (Parsons, 1972, p. 37). This teleological interpretation essentially sets out the basic criteria for the traditional analysis of structural functionalism. It includes an analytical perspective focusing on the interactions between individual system components that enable the implementation of its constitutive processes, which are the efforts to maintain balance and stability. At the same time, equilibrium means a state in which there are no significant changes in the relationships between individual system segments in the absence of external impacts. When considering system dynamics, this property more often refers to the concept of homeostasis, which means the ability to achieve relatively stable states of equilibrium and stability of the system at changing external and internal conditions, as well as the development of the system at a higher level of activity (Plano et al., 1982, p. 65). In turn, system stability is understood to mean the ability to automatically eliminate disturbances until they are eliminated after some time. It means that the system will be steady under any initial conditions and zero forces over time, but not necessarily to the same as before.

Therefore, the concept of function is perceived here as a derivative of needs or requirements that must be implemented if the system is to exist in the real environment. Specific forms of requirements generate the internal structure of the system, shaped based on functionally separate and interconnected subsystems. In turn, individual subsystems of the wider whole must be assessed not only in mutual relations with each other but also in the context of their contribution to satisfying the requirements of existence. According to J.H. Turner, while almost all research programs referring to functionalism make such assumptions, individual functional concepts also show significant differences in quantity

and quality of basic system requirements in a universal dimension. As a consequence, they usually introduce different types of system functions and internal structure. For example, Spencer identifies three requirements that each system must implement, i.e., integration, regulation, and distribution. Meanwhile, E. Durkheim and Radcliff Brown only talk about integration and Niklas Luhmann about reducing complexity. Thus, there is a significant variety of functional approaches here, although they all emphasize implementing these requirements by subsystems. Such diversity and lack of conceptual and analytical consistency naturally inspired the arguments of criticism, negating the method of explanation referring to taxonomy at the level of functional requirements of the system and the classes of subsystems correlated with them (Turner, 2001, pp. 121-103).

Aiming to overcome this analytical drawback, Jeffrey Alexander emphasizes that balance should be seen in a multidimensional perspective, both in a static and dynamic understanding, so integration in system analysis can only be seen as a potential possibility, and the analysis should also take into account the phenomenon of deviation, tension, and conflicts. This approach is a logical consequence of diversity within the system, which is recognized as an important property (form) of change and a source of tension and contradictions, taking into account the perspective of individualism (Alexander 1985, pp. 9-10). Aiming to overcome this analytical drawback, Jeffrey Alexander emphasizes that balance should be seen in a multidimensional perspective, both in a static and dynamic understanding, so integration in system analysis can only be seen as a potential possibility, and the analysis should also take into account the phenomenon of deviation, tension, and conflicts. This approach is a logical consequence of diversity within the system, which is recognized as an important property (form) of change and a source of tension and contradictions, taking into account individualism (Alexander & Colomy, 1990, p. 47). Social systems differ in culturally conditioned patterns of exchange, the structure of their organization, the degree of integration, and the extent of contradictions, tensions, and conflicts. Hence, the neo-functional analysis strongly postulates the need to include these phenomena as important elements contributing to the system's dynamics and social change.

Such perspective justifies changing the perception of functions and moving away from their analysis in the perspective of system requirements. Functions of actions are not equated with their impact on the balance and integrity of the system. The function is rather perceived as a result of intentionally oriented action but not necessarily as the goal of achieving it. It means that the function should be seen more in a causal perspective than in the teleological perspective, and its significance refers to a comprehensive approach to the overall effects of actions taken in the social system. It is expressed in a specific type of relationship between at least two entities, phenomena, or processes related to mutual influence or the role they play to other structural components of the system. Such reinterpretation and inclusion of contradictions and conflicts in social studies have allowed, among others, to refute criticism of structural functionalism, arguing that this concept defines the social system mainly

through the consensus (order, mechanisms of its maintenance and regulation of social deviation), which is why it is hermetically closed to the social change.

Jeffrey Alexander also postulates not to include specific functions in universal taxonomic models. A specific exchange model may take various forms in social practice, depending on the shape in specific historical situations and cultural circles. It means that the principles and mechanisms that determine political action are not ahistorical, as would result from some interpretations of systemic imperatives in Talcott Parsons' theory. Although exchange and its political functions already existed at the initial stage of forming societies organized in the most primitive social systems, they did not yet have a holistic and structurally diverse character and thus functionally diverse forms. It is only with the organizational development and differentiation of the segments of the social system that the structure of exchange and resource mobilization processes become more complex and related to its other elements. J. Alexander emphasizes the need to consider the diverse scope of the institution's adaptation to the social environment in the economic, political, or normative dimension. It means that the scale of their functionality may have a different degree in individual areas of social life, which implies the need to perceive the effects of action in a dynamic perspective, both in eufunctional and dysfunctional scope. Such a reconception of the concept of a function contains features of dialectical logic, which is also revealed in other solutions proposed by J. Alexander. Function means a relationship that can take on eufunctional or positive (goal achievement) or dysfunctional or negative (undesirable effects), and even combine these contradictions. M. Mahler and M. Bunge illustrate this property and analyze the neofunctional understanding of function in biological sciences. The equivalent of the function is adaptation, which can be associated with both aptation (eufunctionality) and malaptation (dysfunction). The authors cite an example of the use of such interpretation in medicine. It is a situation in which the human body adapting to a sudden change in the ambient temperature (adaptation determined by the function of thermoregulation) increases the secretion of sweat, which results in inhibition of body temperature increase (aptation), but at the same time exposes the body to dehydration (malaptation) (Mahler & Bunge, 2001, pp. 76-79). This parallel highlights the usefulness of multidimensional interpretation of functions that, when applied in political science, allows us to capture the polymorphic structure of phenomena occurring in the political sphere of social life (Nocoń, 2010, pp. 262-278).

Application. From Model Explanation to Abstract Reflection

Critics of neofunctionalism quite unanimously emphasize that the consequence of great importance for the popularity and dissemination of this approach in research practice are difficulties with empirical or historical references of this type of analysis. In research carried out at lower generalization levels, its effective applications are limited to designing institutional changes and analysis of reevaluations of the conscious (Joas, 1993, p. 209; Barber, 1993, p. 13).

System analysis after neofunctional reconstruction is not a research method. All three previously outlined ways of reinterpreting the structural approach of functionalism highlight the difficulties and limitations of using this analytical perspective for applications in empirical research. Neo-functionalism, treated as a set of analytical directives, can, however, be a useful concept in looking for correlations between different research approaches at a higher degree of generalization of theoretical reflection. Moreover, by accepting the neofunctional knowledge model, this concept creates an interesting plane based on which it is possible to combine empirical research results obtained using various research methods with highly abstract theoretical models. From a methodological point of view, this property of the neofunctional design can be an attractive proposition for representatives of broadly understood post-positivism, including postmodernist trends. The strategy of reconstruction of structural functionalism itself can also be a model example of using the achievements of classics for contemporary theoretical research.

References:

- Alexander, J. (1983). *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*. University of California Press.
- Alexander, J.C. (1985). Introduction. In J.C. Alexander (Ed.), *Neofunctionalism. Key Issues in Sociological Theory*. Sage.
- Alexander, J., & Colomy, P. (1990). Neofunctionalism Today: Reconstructing of a Theoretical Tradition. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *Frontiers of Social Theory: The New Synthesis*. Columbia University Press.
- Alexander, J. (1998). *Neofunctionalism and After*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Almond, G.A. (1990). *A Discipline Divided. Schools and Sects in Political Science*. Routledge.
- Barber, B. (1993). *Constructing the Social System*. Transaction Publishers.
- Biernat, T. (2000). *Legitymizacja władzy politycznej. Elementy teorii*. Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Blum, W.T. (1971). *Theories of Political System: Classics of Political Thought and Modern Political Analysis*. Prentice Hall.
- Collins, R. (1985). Jeffrey Alexander and the Search for Multidimensional Theory. *Theory and Society*, 14, 877-892.
- Easton, D. (1993). The Idea of a Political System and the Orientation of Political Research. In J. Farr, & R. Seidelman (Eds.), *Discipline and History. Political Science in United States*. University of Michigan Press.
- Eisenstadt, S.N. (1993). *The political System of Empires*. Transaction Publishers.
- Etzioni, A. (1968). *The Active Society. A Theory of Societal and Political Process*. Free Press.
- Gibson, J.E., & Scherer, W.T. (2007). *How to Do System Analysis*. John Wiley and Sons Publication.
- Giddens, A. (1990). Robert K. Merton. *On Structural Analysis*. In J. Clark, C. Modgil, and S. Modgil (Eds.), *Robert K. Merton, Consensus and Controversy*. The Falmer Press.
- Joas, H. (1993). *Pragmatism and Social Theory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Layder, D. (2006). *Understanding Social Theory*. Sage Publications.
- Legg, K.L. (1974). *Patrons, Clients and Politicians. New Perspectives on Political Clientelism*. University of California Press.

- Lidz, V. (2001). Language and the „Family” of Generalized Symbolic Media. In J. Trevino (Ed.), *Talcott Parsons Today: His Theory and Legacy in Contemporary Sociology*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mahler, M., & Bunge, M. (2001). Function and Functionalism: A Synthetic Perspective. *Philosophy of Science*, 68(1), 75-94.
- Maj, P., & Paruch, W. (2008). The Concept of “Political System” in Political Science Research in Poland – Aspects and Controversies Related to the Concept’s Definition. *Politics and Society*, 5.
- Nocoń, J. (2010). *Między tradycją a modernizacją. Przeobrażenia badań politologicznych w świetle neofunkcjonalizmu Jeffreya C. Alexandra*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The Social System*. Free Press.
- Parsons, T. (1969). *Politics and Social Structure*. Free Press.
- Parsons, T. (1972). *Szkice z teorii socjologicznej*. PWN.
- Turner, J.H. (2001). Can functionalism be saved? In J. Trevino (Ed.), *Talcott Parsons Today: His Theory and Legacy in Contemporary Sociology*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Woroniecka, G. (2001). *Działanie polityczne. Próba socjologii interpretatywnej*. Oficyna Naukowa.
- Wróbel, S. (1990). Przywództwo polityczne i władza polityczna w ujęciu T. Parsonsa. *Studia Nauk Politycznych*, 1-3.