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Commentary and Debate

COMMENT ON GANS'S "THE POSITIVE FUNCTIONS OF POVERTY"

On behalf of functional analysis, Gans (1972) has set out to accomplish two objectives: (1) to demonstrate the usefulness of functional analysis; (2) to show that functional analysis, rather than having a conservative bias, is ideologically neutral. His essay "The Positive Functions of Poverty" (1972) seems to me to have accomplished just the opposite of these objectives; it is a convincing example of both the uselessness and conservative bias of functional analysis.

With respect to the first objective, Gans has simply demonstrated (if we accept his rather impressionistic evidence as I am doing for the sake of concentrating on theoretical points) that poverty benefits the nonimpoverished. We are told that poverty exists because it is "functional" for the nonimpoverished; or, put in the reverse, the eradication of poverty would be mostly "dysfunctional" for the nonimpoverished.

The mere ascription of "functional" or "dysfunctional" does not, however, constitute functional analysis. If we accept, as Gans does, Merton's definition (1949, p. 50) of function—namely, "those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system; and dysfunctions, those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system"—Gans's essay has not really pursued the main purpose of functional analysis—namely, the discussion of function and dysfunction from the standpoint of system adaptation or adjustment.

Contriving his own version of functional analysis, Gans has elected to reject the term "system," but more important, he has also failed to use the terms "adaptation" or "adjustment" or some equivalent of the terms. Consequently, he has failed to discuss how poverty affects the capability of a system (or group) to adapt or adjust; more specifically, he has not explored the ultimate question of whether the persistence of poverty has enabled the nonimpoverished to adapt or adjust to their social circumstances and environment. This is the crux of functional analysis.

Through his failure to carry forth a truly functional analysis of the effects of poverty, and considering that this was his avowed intention, Gans has demonstrated through example the uselessness of functional analysis. The point of the essay is that poverty does benefit in very practical and observable ways the nonimpoverished groups. The question of whether this benefit helps groups adapt or adjust as systems, whether it helps (in Parsons's terms) to maintain "equilibrium" or to enable the fulfillment of "functional prerequisites," is a moot question in Gans's essay. (And to commend Gans in an incidental way, I think it should be a moot

question for other sociologists. The terms of functional analysis are vague, reified, incapable—as Gans points out in reference to “system”—of satisfactory empirical application; they are metaphorical, being taken mostly from the biological sciences; and they are based on the questionable assumption that something in the social world resembles a system, a function, an adaptation or adjustment.)

Though not really doing functional analysis, Gans does embrace its liberal conservatism. His overriding moral imperative is the preservation of social order. When it comes down to the crunch of having to serve the welfare of people or of the existing social order, Gans proposes alternatives in the interest of the latter. For example, the poor should continue to do the “dirty work” that cannot be eliminated, only at better wages; or, on the matter of serving as a reference point for the status and mobility aspirations of others, the poor should be given 75% of the median income rather than the current 40% rate.

Gans’s alternatives center around the idea of giving the poor more money. Even the question of power can be answered mostly with money, for (1972, p. 286) “increases in income are generally accompanied by increases in power as well.” He concludes (1972, p. 288) that well-balanced functional analysis “can take on a liberal and reform case, because the alternatives often provide ameliorative policies that do not require any drastic change in the existing social order.”

We are finally told that the conclusions of functional analysis need not differ from those of radical sociology. This understanding of radical sociology is astoundingly naïve. Of course, radical sociologists would not disagree that poverty benefits in many ways the nonimpoverished. But from the Marxist analysis of class struggle and dialectical materialism, the persistence of vast discrepancies in material well-being is a foregone conclusion. The central issue is not that of giving the poor a little more money but of asserting democratic control over the productive instruments and resources of a society which would be classless. While Gans and other liberal sociologists attempt to perpetuate the welfare state and put forth alternatives which “do not require any drastic change in the existing social order,” radical sociologists recognize that we all remain in poverty—if not economic poverty, certainly social, cultural, and spiritual poverty.

As a scientific method of study from which realistic alternatives or remedies can be drawn, functional analysis is useless for radical sociologists. Whereas it does suggest (in an overly vague, abstract, and metaphoric way) how societies or groups adapt and adjust, maintain equilibrium, fulfill functional prerequisites, etc., it has virtually nothing to say about maladaptation or maladjustment, the permanent disruption of equilibrium in a given system, the disintegration of society—in short, about the condi-

tions necessary for the drastic or revolutionary change radical sociologists are seeking.

Most radical sociologists recognize functional analysis to be a liberal polemic against revolutionary change which originated at Harvard University during the 1930s. As a result, they have little use for functional analysis and no use for the ideological conservatism of a would-be functionalist such as Gans.

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REPLY TO HANSON

As a critic of functional analysis, Hanson is surprisingly orthodox, for the first part of his comment accuses me of failing to "carry forth a truly functional analysis." According to Hanson, such an analysis must use Merton's definition (1949, p. 50), must include the terms adaptation and adjustment, and must analyze functions and dysfunctions "from the standpoint of system adaptation or adjustment," and by his criteria I have obviously failed. As I indicated in my article, however, I chose to define functions and dysfunctions as the observed consequences which are positive or negative as judged by the values of the groups and aggregates under analysis (Gans 1972, p. 276), but all of my deviations from Hanson's conception of functional analysis were supported by or borrowed from Merton's 1949 article. The one exception is my omission of adaptation and adjustment, but as I noted in my article (Gans 1972, p. 276, n. 4), Merton has more recently written that "dysfunction refers to the particular inadequacies of a particular part of the system for a designated requirement" (Merton 1961, p. 732).

Subsequently, Hanson engages in a confusing dialectic. After criticizing me for failing to do a truly functional analysis, he argues that I "have demonstrated through example the uselessness of functional analysis," and then commends me for eschewing a systems-centered analysis. I do not understand why my analysis exemplified the uselessness of functional analysis when I did not, according to Hanson, do a truly functional analysis in the first place, and why I am then praised for not doing so.