However, as societies develop, the kinship system loses these functions—Parsons calls this structural differentiation. This is a gradual process in which separate, functionally specialised institutions develop, each meeting a different need. Furthermore, he also sees gradual change occurring through moving equilibrium. As a change occurs in one part of the system, it produces compensatory changes in the other parts. In this way society gradually changes from one type to another.

Merton also contributes a useful distinction between ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ functions. He uses the example of the Hopi Indians who perform a rain-dance with the aim to magically produce rain in times of draught—this is its manifest (intended) function. However, the ritual may also have an unintended or latent function—such as promoting a sense of solidarity in times of hardship, when people might be tempted to look after themselves at the expense of others.

Conflict theorists such as Marxists criticise functionalism for its inability to explain conflict and change. This inability arises partly out of the organic analogy that organisms are relatively stable systems in which all the parts work together for the common good. Marxists argue that society is not a harmonious whole, rather it is based on exploitation and divided into classes with conflicting interests and unequal power. Conflict theorists see functionalism as a conservative ideology legitimating the status quo. They argue that its focus on harmony and stability rather than conflict and change helps to justify the existing social order as inevitable and desirable. Critics argue that this approach legitimates the privileged position of powerful groups who would have the most to lose from any fundamental changes in society.

Similarly, an example of an internal critique of functionalism comes from Robert Merton, who discusses 3 key assumptions of Parsons: dispensability, functional unity, and universal function. The central point behind Merton’s criticisms is that we cannot simply assume, as Parsons does, that society is always a smooth-running, well-integrated system.

To conclude, functionalism has a variety of strengths and weaknesses. Although Ian Craib argues that Parsons’ theory has its faults, he says that it is a theory of society as a whole and this is a large strength. However, critics argue that functionalism is a conservative ideology that neglects conflict, exploitation and change, and has an over-socialised view of individuals.