Evaluate the functionalist explanation of the role of the family in society.

The functionalist explanation of the role of the family is that family has an important role in society particularly the nuclear family, which is the norm in most societies. The nuclear family became the norm in Britain after the industrial revolution because of the changes in the work structure (people moved from the agricultural industry to working in factories) (The kin-ship aspect of the nuclear family isn’t as emphasised as before). This can be compared to the norm of the extended family in south Asian societies because the changes in the work structure has been slow and family values are still more conservative. This trend shows from the functionalist point of view that the role of the family is dynamic and adapts to the changes in society.

In 1949 a functionalist sociologist Murdock identified four functions of the family, these functions were; control of sexual behaviour, reproduction, economic contribution and primary socialisation. These functions were simplified in 1956 by another functionalist Talcott Parson into Primary socialisation and the stabilisation of adult personalities. This shows that functionalists only focus on the harmonious roles of the family and may disregard issues like cheating in a relationship.

Furthermore, the New Right ideologists would agree with the functionalist’s views of the role of the family but emphasise the role of economic cooperation, because traditionally the role of the man as a ‘bread-winner’ would ensure that a woman is provided for and therefore didn’t depend on the welfare state. However, this role isn’t carried out by single parent families as often the women is ‘married to the state’ meaning she is receiving benefits to provide for her child and herself. This proves that the nuclear family is ideal for the New right ideologists similar to the functionalists because they believe that the money invested into the welfare system could be better spent on other institutions.

However, Marxists sociologist would criticise this view of the role of the family because they would argue that the role of the family is to ensure the continuity of the capitalist system, where through primary socialisation children learn to accept their status in society and therefore do not question their oppression as they enter the ruling class once they grow up. Zaretoskey (1997) said that a man can be ‘the king of the castle’ when he comes home from and thus the frustration from a long day of work is relieved. Therefore, showing that the stabilisation of adult personalities isn’t a good function in working class families because it may delay the revolution Karl Marx thought we will have.

Another conflict theory that criticises the functionalist explanation for the role of the family and considers family to be ‘dysfunctional’ are feminists. Feminists believe that the family is set up to oppress women by socialising children into gender roles, where girls are socialised into the expressive role and men are socialised into the instrumental role and therefore continues patriarchy (men dominated society). Women are not paid for their work of child care and domestic chores. A study conducted in sept 2017 shows that if women were paid for the extra chores they do compared to men they would earn £103 more per week. Also, Anne Oakley a feminist would argue that women who now go out to work have a dual burden because they are having to maintain a career and still do the same house hold work as they did previously. This can be supported by the triple shift theory by Duncombe and Marsden (1995) where women have a job, do house work and child care.

In conclusion the functionalist explanation of the family is one that can not be disregarded, just because of its criticisms because even the conflict theories agree that some of the roles of the family within society are essential.