Notes on Functional Explanation

**Functional explanation:** The thesis that a social institution or practice exists or persists within a society because of the *benefits* that it confers upon society or certain groups within society.

**Marx’s use of functional explanation:** Social institutions and practices of the “superstructure” (political, legal, or cultural institutions) assume the form that they do because this benefits the ruling class by reinforcing, stabilizing, or reproducing capitalist economic relations.

**Potential problems of functional explanations:** Functional explanations imply that the effects of certain social practices (their “benefits”) are part of what explains their causation. How can effects (which occur after the event) be a cause of something happening? There are several logical possibilities whereby effects can be part of the cause of some event or situation.

**Some possible mechanisms underlying functional explanations:**

1. **Intentional action by human agents (Marx’s most frequently cited mechanism).**

   Example: Capitalists intentionally use their money and power to lobby government so that state policies will be adopted that favor the interests of large corporations and the rich.

   Example: Capitalist owners of the mass media intentionally intervene to censor news stories that are critical of capitalism or that present a favorable image of alternative economic systems.

2. **Natural selection (similar to evolutionary explanations of the “survival of the fittest”).**

   Example: The U.S. Senate is disproportionately comprised of capitalist millionaires because of the competitive advantage that great personal wealth has in financing expensive political campaigns. These capitalists naturally favor pro-capitalist policies. Candidates without access to such wealth are rarely elected and their policy preferences are thus excluded from public consideration.

   Example: Non-commercial media outlets presenting alternative political viewpoints will be marginalized or driven from the market by commercial media outlets that can underprice them and produce a glossier product because they are subsidized by advertisers.

3. **Negative feedback (similar to self-regulating cybernetic systems, e.g., a thermostat).**

   Example: State governments that adopt policies that are unfavorable to capitalists will confront a spontaneous outflow of corporate investment (creating problems of job loss and declining tax revenues) until more pro-capitalist policies are adopted.

   Example: Media professionals who produce programs that are deemed politically controversial or that threaten vested economic interests will encounter negative repercussions (angry letters, flak from pressure groups, cancellations by advertisers) that cause them to censor themselves to avoid such hassles and advance their careers.