

The individuals are the limbs of the society and behave as the cells of the body. Discuss this statement with the help of organismic theory in sociology. Explain how this theory helps in addressing the profound question of relationship between individual and society?

Answer

Organismic Theory & How It Addresses the Relationship Between Individual & Society

1) Introduction:

The organismic theory in sociology attempts at explaining the crucial relation between individuals and society by calling individuals "the cells" in the vast organismic structure of the society. This theory goes to extreme lengths to draw analogies between society and a biological organism. In this analysis, the main status is conferred to the society. As Herber Spencer

says:

"He exists in it and it in him?"

2) Propositions of Organismic Theory:

i) Society as an Organism

The earliest proponents of this idea were Plato and Aristotle. Plato, in particular, used 3 divisions to explain the similarity between organisms and society.

Societal Components

Related Attributes

Rulers

Warriors

Artisans

Wisdom

Courage

Desire

} All attributed to human soul.

ii) Individuals as Limbs and Cells of that Organism

While early theorist drew analogies between society and living organisms, 19C. sociologist went to great lengths to elaborate this similarity between the two. They propounded that society is an organism and

individuals are its functioning parts just like there are cells in a body that work to support the entire organism.

a) Developmental Similarities

According to Herbert Spencer, a society develops like an organism. According to him, there are 2 distinct stages

- Germ Stage: just like a simple organism, the society at this stage consists of simple and similar parts.

- Specialization Stage: As the organism grows, the cells differentiate and specialize their function, the same happens within a society.

"As society grows in complexity, division of labour follows."
— H. Spencer

b) Mutual Dependence of Social Components as the Limbs of an Organism

According to Spencer and Bluntschli, the dependence of society on its individuals is like that of a living organism — the injury of one part is felt by

other parts too and affects the overall functioning of the society.

c) Wear and Tear of Cells and of Society.

Just like all living organisms, a society is also prone to wear, tear and eventual replacement of its parts-

d) Structural Analogies by H. Spencer.

The analogy given by Spencer further proves that individuals are the links of the society and act as cells in it.

Organismic System	Structural Analogy (by Spencer)	Example
Digestive System	Sustaining System	Workers in agri and manufacturing districts
Cardiovascular System	Distributary System	Wholesellers, Retailers, Bankers, Steamship
CNS	Regulatory System	Government Functionaries

3) How it explains relationship between individuals and Society:

The theory tries to reconcile the differences between individuals and society by answering profound questions like

- Q1) In what ways an individual is related to a society?
- Q2) Is this relation on equal basis?
- Q3) What about individual freedom?

To answer all these questions, this theory picks a side — the side of the society.

i) Individuals exist in and within society

By allotting the role of functioning components (cells and limbs) to the individuals, the theory clearly allots a role to the individuals — This explains the role of the individuals within society.

ii) Dependence is ingrained in human nature

In its attempt to justify the position of individuals within society, this theory propounds that dependence is intrinsic nature of humans; something they cannot live without.

iii) Mutual Dependence of Individuals and Society

The theory also posits that the dependence of both individuals is not one-sided; it's a mutual relationship. The structure and functions of society are actually the actions and motives of its individuals.

"The structure of society becomes the structure of our own consciousness."

— Peter L. Berger

4) Criticism:

While organismic theory does a great job of creating a sentiment of harmony between individuals and society, its obsession with "society as an organism" sometime fails.

to explain the unique position of individual in a society. In short, this society theory fails at explaining the independent life of an individual. In reality cells do not have an independent life, individuals do.

5) Conclusion:

The organismic theory does a great job at trying to answer the question of the relationship between individuals and society. It fits individuals in the societal structure by assigning them the role of cells within the societal organismic structure. In doing so, it helps to create a sense of harmony and mutual dependence between the two.