

GATE SOCIOLOGY XH C6 NOTES

B : Structural-Functionalism and Structuralism

B.1 BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI

Bronislaw Malinowski, a brilliant Polish scientist turned anthropologist, founded the functionalist school in Britain. This marked a turning point in the history of sociology because under Malinowski's leadership, functionalism was firmly grounded into the directly observable and scientifically collected information (also referred to as empirical reality) about society and its institutions.



PRECURSORS OF MALINOWSKI

18th-Century Moral Philosophers

- **Thinkers:** David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson (Britain); Montesquieu, Condorcet (France).
- **Idea:** Sought the origins of human institutions and universal laws of society by looking at "primitive" societies.
- **Method:** Purely deductive armchair philosophy. They collected no empirical evidence, instead basing theories on the prevailing cultural norms of their time.
- **Significance:** Established human societies as a valid, scientific subject of study, laying the groundwork for modern sociology.

19th-Century Evolutionists

- **Thinkers:** Charles Darwin (biology), Sir Henry Maine, J.F. McLennan, E.B. Tylor, L.H. Morgan, Sir James Frazer.
- **Idea:** Inspired by Darwinian evolution, they argued all human societies pass through identical, unilinear stages of development (e.g., promiscuity to patriarchy; magic to religion to science).
- **Method:** Compiled extensive but haphazard secondary data from missionaries, travelers, and colonial administrators.
- **Critique:** Heavily criticized by later scholars for being purely conjectural, ethnocentric, and evaluative. Famous armchair anthropologists like Frazer never actually met the people they wrote about.

The Diffusionists

- **Idea:** Argued that human progress occurred through the transmission (diffusion) of cultural traits from one group to another, rather than independent evolution.
- **Extreme Views:** Scholars like Elliot Smith and W.J. Perry claimed all human civilization originated from a single source (ancient Egypt) and spread outward—a theory Malinowski heavily criticized.
- **Significance:** Pioneered ethnology (comparing cultural traits across regions) and mapped the geographical spread of human societies.

The Birth of Social Anthropology (Early 20th Century)

- **The Shift:** A rejection of speculative historical reconstruction in favor of studying contemporary societies for their own sake.
- **Methodology:** Introduction of rigorous, first-hand **ethnographic fieldwork** (participant observation). Anthropologists were now required to live among the people they studied for extended periods.
- **The Pioneer:** Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), an intensive study of the Trobriand Islanders, became the gold standard for this new scientific approach, effectively launching modern British Social Anthropology.

CONCERN WITH DATA COLLECTION

The Shift to Scientific Fieldwork

- **The Problem:** 19th-century scholars (mostly lawyers and philosophers) relied on unverified, secondary data to reconstruct human history.
- **The Solution:** 20th-century scholars (mostly trained natural scientists) insisted on testing theories through direct, first-hand observation.
- **Practical Drivers:** Colonial administrators and missionaries needed accurate socio-cultural data to govern and convert local populations effectively.

Early Milestones

- **Franz Boas (1883-84):** Conducted fieldwork among Eskimos and American Indians, emphasizing the absolute necessity of learning the local language.
- **Torres Straits Expedition (1898-99):** Led by A.C. Haddon, this multidisciplinary expedition established professional fieldwork training.
- **Solo Expeditions:** Scholars like W.H.R. Rivers (*Todas of India*, 1901) and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (*Andaman Islands*, 1906-8) published detailed accounts of specific cultures.

Malinowski's Revolution

Bronisław Malinowski transformed anthropological data collection into what is now known as **participant observation**.

- **The Location:** He lived in the Trobriand Islands for a total of two years (between 1915 and 1918).
- **Total Immersion:** He isolated himself from Europeans, pitching his tent directly among the native huts to observe daily life continuously.
- **Language Mastery:** He discarded pidgin-English and interpreters, mastering the native dialect within three months.
- **Theoretical Impact:** He didn't just passively collect facts; he developed specific fieldwork techniques to uncover the underlying principles of societal organization, leading directly to his theory of **functionalism**.

CULTURE AS A FUNCTIONING AND INTEGRATED WHOLE

Meaning of Culture

- Malinowski viewed **culture as a functioning whole** consisting of interconnected parts.
- Culture is a “**vast apparatus**” through which humans deal with concrete problems of life.
- It includes both **material and non-material elements**.
- Culture is **learned, shared and transmitted** between individuals.

Components of Culture

Malinowski identified three broad components:

Component	Includes
Material culture	Implements, tools, consumer goods, physical artefacts
Human activities/customs	Customs, practices and social organisation
Social & ideological elements	Social institutions, beliefs, ideas, values and traditions

Culture is almost everything connected with **human life and action**.

Malinowski vs Tylor

- **Tylor:** Culture is a “**complex whole**” including knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, etc.
- **Malinowski:** Culture comprises **inherited artefacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values**.

Main difference

- **Tylor → Complexity of culture**
- **Malinowski → Wholeness and functioning of culture**

Malinowski went beyond merely listing cultural elements and asked: **What function does each cultural element perform?**

Functionalist Approach

- Culture should be studied as an **integrated and functioning whole**.
- Every custom, belief or institution has a **function/use** within the cultural system.
- Cultural practices help in **maintaining the continuity of the whole culture**.
- Culture should be studied “**in its own right**” and as a **self-contained reality**.
- Malinowski opposed approaches that explained cultures mainly through:
 - **Evolutionism** → placing cultures on an evolutionary scale.
 - **Diffusionism** → explaining cultures through geographical spread.

Fieldwork Method

Malinowski is associated with the development of **intensive fieldwork/participant observation** in anthropology.

Three types of data**1. Statistical documentation**

- Concrete evidence about institutions and customs.
- Collect people's descriptions and observe actual cases.

2. Observation of everyday behaviour

- Observe what people **actually do**.
- Maintain an **ethnographic diary**.
- Record exceptions and variations from formal rules.

3. Ethnographic statements

- Collect:
 - Narratives
 - Folklore
 - Typical statements
 - Magical formulae
- Helps understand **native mentality/thought**.

Important distinction

What people say	What people do	What people think
Statements/descriptions	Actual behaviour	Beliefs, narratives, mentality

A good fieldworker must understand the **gap between these three**.

Function and Human Needs

- Malinowski understood **function as use**.
- Cultural institutions and practices exist because they help **satisfy human needs**.
- Therefore, his functionalism has a strong connection with **psychology**.
- Different cultural elements are interconnected because they contribute to the functioning of the cultural whole.

Criticism of Malinowski**Kuper's criticism:**

- Malinowski emphasised relationships between different cultural elements but allegedly **lacked a clear notion of the system**.
- He described individual parts and their connections but did not fully explain the **underlying structure/essence of the cultural system**.

Example

Describing how **arms → shoulders → neck** are connected does not by itself constitute a complete **theory of anatomy**.

Theory of Needs

Meaning

- Malinowski explained culture and social facts through his **Theory of Needs**.
- Developed mainly in ***A Scientific Theory of Culture (1944)***.
- **Need = conditions necessary for the survival of the individual and the group.**
- Culture develops mechanisms to **satisfy human needs**.
- Needs are related to both **individual survival and social survival**.

Biological Impulses

Malinowski identified basic biological impulses and their cultural/physical satisfaction:

Impulse	Act	Satisfaction
Breathing	Intake of oxygen	Elimination of CO ₂
Hunger	Eating	Satiation
Thirst	Drinking	Quenching
Sex	Sexual activity	Satisfaction
Fatigue	Rest	Restoration of energy
Somnolence	Sleep	Awakening/restored energy
Bladder pressure	Urination	Removal of tension
Colon pressure	Defecation	Abdominal relaxation
Fright	Escape	Relaxation
Pain	Avoidance	Return to normal state

Three Types of Needs

A. Basic Needs — Primary Determinism

These are essential for **individual and group survival**.

Basic Need	Cultural Response
Metabolism	Commissariat / food supply
Reproduction	Kinship
Bodily comforts	Shelter

Safety	Protection
Movement	Activities
Growth	Training
Health	Hygiene

Biological needs → Cultural responses.

B. Derived Needs — Secondary Determinism

When humans live in society, satisfying basic needs creates additional **social/cultural requirements**.

Derived Need	Cultural Response
Maintenance of cultural apparatus	Economics
Regulation of behaviour	Social control
Socialisation	Education
Exercise of authority	Political organisation

Basic needs → Social life → **Derived needs**

Culture therefore creates mechanisms for maintaining and organising society.

C. Integrative Needs — Integrative Imperatives

These provide **unity, continuity and meaning** to social life.

They include:

- **Tradition**
- **Norms**
- **Values**
- **Religion**
- **Art**
- **Language**
- **Symbolism**

Important transformation:

- **Habit → Custom**
- **Child care → Training of next generation**
- **Impulse → Values**

Malinowski therefore considered **symbolism and values central to human culture**.

Primary vs Secondary Determinism

Primary Determinism

- **Biological needs → Cultural responses**
- Example: **Hunger → Food production/economic arrangements**

Secondary Determinism

- **Social life → Additional cultural requirements**
- Example: **Need for social order → Social control**

Malinowski did **not** argue that culture simply satisfies biological impulses.
Culture also **regulates and limits** biological impulses.

Thus: **Biological impulse → Cultural regulation → Socially acceptable behaviour**

Example: Sexual impulse is regulated through **kinship, marriage and social norms**.

Importance of Theory of Needs

- Provides a link between **biology and culture**.
- Explains why cultural institutions exist.
- Helps compare different societies.
- Provides an **empirical framework for fieldwork**.
- Connects **social structure and cultural institutions** with human needs.
- Shows that different institutions perform different functions.

PYQs CONNECT

GATE XH C6 2024 Q : Select the option that has the correct pairing of author and concept.

Author	Concept
L : Bronislaw Malinowski	Q ; Sociological imagination
M : Erving Goffman	R : Imponderabilia of everyday life
N : Claude Levi-Strauss	S : Matrimonial strategies
O : Pierre Bourdieu	T : Generalized exchange
	U : Social performance

EXPLANATION : Bronislaw Malinowski famously coined the term "**imponderabilia of everyday life**" to describe the subtle, routine, and mundane aspects of daily behavior that an ethnographer must capture through participant observation (matching **R**).

Malinowski's Essay on Baloma

Malinowski studied the **Trobriand Islanders** through fieldwork. He lived among the people of **Omarakana and Kiriwina** and learned their local language. This helped him understand their culture closely.

Malinowski found that **magic was an important part of everyday life**. People used magical practices in many activities, especially **gardening and agriculture**.

The **garden magician (towosi)** had an important role in agricultural activities. People believed that his magical practices helped in the success of their gardens.

The magician collected different **herbs and plants** from places such as the seashore, woodland and scrub areas. He collected them before sunrise.

After collecting the herbs, the magician placed them on mats and **chanted magical spells over them**. These herbs were then used in garden ceremonies.

Malinowski observed that the community **highly valued the garden magician**. Agricultural work was difficult to imagine without his cooperation.

To get Monthly Magazine Join Telegram
Telegram link : [Click here](#)
Visit Website : www.sociologus.com

SOCIOLOGUS



Copyright Notice

© 2026 Sociologus.com. All Rights Reserved.

All content published on **Sociologus.com**, including articles, study materials, notes, question papers, solved papers, PDFs, graphics, designs, logos, and other original educational resources, is protected by applicable copyright laws.

No part of this website or its content may be reproduced, copied, republished, modified, distributed, uploaded, or commercially used without prior written permission from **Sociologus.com**, except where permitted by applicable law.

You may share links to our original pages for educational and informational purposes, provided proper credit is given to **Sociologus.com** and the original source is clearly referenced.

Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution of our original content may result in appropriate action under applicable laws.

© 2026 Sociologus.com — All Rights Reserved.