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# A Sociological Interpretation of Aminata Sow Fall's The Beggars Strike

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*Mark Beeman*

## A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF AMINATA SOW FALL'S *THE BEGGARS' STRIKE*

**A**MINATA SOW FALL'S NOVEL, *The Beggars' Strike*, is an account of a fictional strike in a West African Society. In this story state bureaucrats, who think beggars discourage tourism from the West, decide to rid the city of begging. The policy is implemented through police tactics of harassment, physical abuse, and imprisonment of beggars. This unbearable situation prompts the beggars to organize a strike in which they refuse to return to the city streets to receive donations. The novel portrays the beggars as an integral part of the society's social structure, and their removal creates profound disruptions in people's everyday lives. Fall's novel constructs a paradigmatic framework to help the reader understand how begging fits into West African society.<sup>1</sup> This view is particularly informative for Western readers who may believe that begging is marginal or dysfunctional.

In this paper I outline the two major macrosociological views of society: conflict theory and structural functionalism. I argue that Aminata Sow Fall presents the institution of begging from a point of view consistent with the structural-functionalist sociological approach.

### THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Efforts to develop a comprehensive macrosociological explanation of society have tended to cluster around two basic paradigms: structural-functionalism and conflict theory. Structural-functionalism draws from the classic work on mechanical and organic solidarity of Emile Durkheim (1964) whereby modern society is conceived as a system operating much like an organism with interdependent components. Contemporary structural-functionalism is largely defined by the works of Parsons (1951), Merton (1968), and Davis and Moore (1945). The contemporary version emphasizes stability, functional integration, equilibrium, and value consensus. Dahrendorf argues that the structural-functionalist view of society can be stated in four basic tenets:

- (1) Every society is a relatively persistent, stable structure of elements.
- (2) Every society is a well-integrated structure of elements.

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(3) Every element in society has a function, i.e., renders a contribution to its maintenance as a system.

(4) Every functioning social structure is based on a consensus of values among its members (1959:161).

Structural-functionalists do not view society as a static structure, but they clearly emphasize recurring patterns and the functional contributions made by interrelated elements of the system. This tendency to concentrate on the stable features of the social system gives a one-sided presentation of society's dynamic character. Lockwood (1957) argues that society consists of both stability and instability, and that the functionalist portrayal of the social system consisting of equilibrium, value consensus, and integration ignores disequilibrium, interests, and conflict. Talcott Parsons, the author of the most comprehensive presentation of structural-functional theory in the twentieth century, has been criticized for his failure to give adequate attention to the instability of society, especially since his model is promoted as being "exclusively valid" (Dahrendorf, 1959; and see Lockwood, 1957).

The contemporary response to structural-functionalism has come from conflict theory. Classic statements emphasizing the conflictive nature of social systems have been derived from Marx's analysis of the dialectical nature of historical change and from Weber's analysis of class, status and party (Marx, 1964; Weber, 1978). Popular contemporary statements in the conflict tradition have been developed by Dahrendorf (1959), Lenski (1966), and Collins (1975). For the purposes of this analysis I will focus on Dahrendorf's summary of the most basic tenets of the conflict approach:

(1) Every society is at every point subject to processes of change; change is ubiquitous.

(2) Every society displays at every point dissensus and conflict; social conflict is ubiquitous.

(3) Every element in a society renders a contribution to its disintegration and change.

(4) Every society is based on coercion of some of its members by others (1959:163).

Comparing both approaches it appears that structural-functionalism and conflict theory contradict each other tenet for tenet, but a strong argument has been made that these two approaches emphasize different and important aspects of the same society. Lenski (1966) had actually gone beyond this point by arguing that sociology was in the process of synthesizing elements of both approaches into an integrated theory. Despite this optimistic view, conflict theory and structural-functionalism continue to remain separate approaches. Dahrendorf (1959) indicated that certain social phenomena may be explained more adequately by either one or the other of the approaches, not equally by both. It generally appears that sociologists tend to commit themselves to just one of these approaches when analyzing social phenomena, and they do not appear to let the social phenomena determine their approach; the commitment seems to be made to the theory first. Hence, for whatever reasons, macrosociological research has tended to fall into

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either one theoretical camp or the other.

If one has relatively comprehensive information about some social phenomenon, both the conflict theorist and the structural-functional theorist can use the same data to produce analytically distinct interpretations of the phenomenon consistent with their theoretical positions.<sup>2</sup> However, if one does not have the original data, but only the secondary analysis, one's access to that social phenomenon may be limited to the view of society employed by the analyst.<sup>3</sup>

In using the novel as a source for sociological analysis, at least two possibilities exist. First, the subject of the novel may be described in such a complete and detailed manner that both the structural-functionalist and the conflict theorist could make separate sociological interpretations of the same material.<sup>4</sup> Second, the novel may be organized so that it already reflects the author's view of society. In other words, the sociological "data" in the novel may be selected so as to support one particular societal view.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of *The Beggars Strike* it is my contention that Aminata Sow Fall, while presenting features which touch on both sociological approaches, has generally presented her subject matter from a societal view consistent with the structural-functionalist perspective.

**STABILITY VERSUS CHANGE**

As stated earlier, conflict theory emphasizes the dynamics of change in society while structural-functionalism emphasizes the more stable aspects of the social structure. The conflict tradition advocates a historical analysis of its subject matter because by definition social dynamics and social change are processes which cannot be understood by focusing only on one point in time. Indeed, one of the criticisms that was made of the structural-functionalist theory was its inability to account for social change (Coser, 1977).

Fall's novel is not about the dynamic, changing nature of begging in West Africa—in fact, only two historical references to the institution of begging are made. The first is given by the secretary, Sagar Diouf. In this passage she is explaining to her boss, Keba Dabo, who works for the department of Health and Hygiene, why he should not try to eradicate begging:

"You know, Keba, you're wasting your time with the beggars. They've been here since the time of our great-great-grandparents. They were there when you came into this world and they'll be there when you leave it. You can't do anything about them" (Fall, 1986: 14-15).

The historical reference claims that begging is a long-standing, stable feature of West African society, and will remain so. Thus, early on in this novel Fall hints that an institutional shift will not take place. There is, interestingly, a second, brief historical reference which hints at the changing nature of the social structure and its effect on begging. In the following quotation the beggar, Nguirane Sarr, emphasizes the differences between the present and the past, when he was a young boy in his village:

"The city changes people. . . . It lures them in and destroys them . . ."  
"Begging," Nguirane continues, "was not considered a curse then. It was quite natural for those who found themselves obliged to beg, and it was considered a duty for those who gave" (Fall, 1986:62-63).

After this brief insight Nguirane Sarr is immediately ridiculed by another beggar and he retreats from this discussion. Had Fall chosen to focus on the theme of a changing society's impact on begging, she would have added a historical dimension to the subject. As it is, she prefers to make her points by developing her story within a given social structure set in the present.

Although Fall's novel does not focus on the dynamics of historical change, one may argue that a type of social change is evident through Dabo's pressure to remove the beggars from the city. However, as has been already noted, the structural-functionalist framework does not claim that society is static, just that it is relatively stable. According to functionalist theory exogenous forces can create strains within social systems (Parsons and Shils, 1951; Parsons, 1964). In *The Beggars' Strike* the pressure to remove beggars from the city originates outside the internal dynamic of the social system in the form of foreign currency and the values of those who bring it. The Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene, Mour Ndiaye, who is responsible for removing the beggars explains to his marabout<sup>6</sup> the reason why they must go:

Well, you see, nowadays, people who live a long way away, in Europe and the United States of America, White people especially, are beginning to take an interest in the beauty of our country. These people are called tourists. You know, in the old days these White people came to rob and exploit us; now they visit our country for rest and in search of happiness. That is why we have built hotels and holiday villages and casinos to welcome them. These tourists spend huge sums of money to come here, there are even special societies over in Europe who organise these journeys. And when they visit the cities they are accosted by beggars and we run the risk of their never coming back here or putting unfavorable propaganda to discourage others who might like to come . . . We are the ones who are responsible for the destiny of our country. We must oppose anything which harms our economic and tourist development (Fall, 1986: 18).

The resulting internal social strain is personified in the character of Mour Ndiaye who is responsible for making the city more presentable to tourists. The change Mour Ndiaye oversees and his assistant, Keba Dabo, engineers is not a structural change at all, but a cosmetic change. Their commitment is not to eliminate the institution of begging, but to hide beggars from tourists. Mour Ndiaye argues that the beggars "are a running sore which must be kept hidden, at any rate in the Capital" (Fall, 1986: 2). Keba Dabo's solution is to transport beggars who are "persistent offenders" to a village two hundred miles away. As this novel progresses it becomes apparent that as long as beggars are not on the city streets, they are not targets for Keda Dabo's initiative. Begging will thus remain a stable feature in this social system—a view consistent with structural-functionalist theory.

**INTEGRATION VERSUS CONFLICT**

The structural-functionalist theory emphasizes that the elements of society are well-integrated while the conflict theory emphasizes elements in conflict and dissensus. Fall presents elements that are both integrative and conflictive in her novel, but in the final analysis I believe she is stressing how the institution of begging is integrated into West African society.

We have already seen how begging is depicted as a traditional feature of society in Fall's novel. The practice, for most, constitutes a means of survival. Many suffer physical disabilities and generally they do not have other economic opportunities available to them. Basically they view begging as an economic transaction—an exchange of a service for money. After the strike makes them conscious of the demand for their services, the beggars raise their prices. The following passage describes the observations of Mour Ndiaye's servant, Sally:

To listen to the conversations exchanged, the complaints at having to travel so far to make their donations, she realises that the shortage of beggars is causing a considerable inconvenience to a part of the population; she sees sick people, pale and haggard, who have dragged their suffering this distance in order to make the sacrifice which may perhaps help them to be restored to physical and mental well-being. She sees luxurious cars, with all their windows closed, speeding down the sandy track that leads to "the beggars house." She hears the laments of people of modest means who condemn the ever-increasing demands of the beggars: "They really go too far! They don't care a damn for what the Holy Scriptures lay down. Can you imagine their cheek! The amount prescribed for a donation is seven lumps of sugar or a candle, and here are these ladies and gentlemen demanding to be offered anything up to two pounds of sugar of a really thick blanket that's not been patched (Fall, 1986:53).

Here the reader realizes how well-integrated the beggars are into the social system. Usually, integration involves some type of complementary or reciprocal role-expectations.<sup>7</sup> Fall's view of the beggars providing a service for remuneration clearly places them in a reciprocal relationship with the donors.<sup>8</sup> According to the beggar, Nguirane Sarr:

the contract that links every individual to society can be summed up in the words: giving and receiving. Well then, don't they, the poor, give their blessings, their prayers and their good wishes? (Fall, 1986:21)

Interrelated roles involve mutual expectations on behalf of the role players. One method of demonstrating how important these expectations are to maintaining the social order has been to violate them (Garfinkle, 1967). Fall quite cleverly utilizes a similar tactic to demonstrate the importance of beggar/donor expectations for the social order of a West African society. By creating a violation of expectations, i.e. denying the legitimacy of the institution of begging and driving the beggars from the city streets, Fall

illustrates the disruptive effects that reverberate throughout the social system. The sick, the wealthy, and those of modest income all are tied to the institution of begging. Even people who hold high positions in the government, such as Mour Ndiaye, will be adversely affected by the disruption of begging. This demonstration of how the institution of begging is integrated into the social system is consistent with structural-functionalism.

One could argue that the strike of the beggars emphasizes conflict. Strikes, after all, are weapons of conflict. Fall, however, is concerned about the lack of respect for traditional values by the forces of economic development in West Africa. But the strike is not used by Fall to demonstrate the forces in society struggling for social change; it is primarily a device to illustrate why society should respect the contribution begging makes to the social system. In other words, the message is not that the beggars will transform the social structure, but that they are an integral part of the status quo.

This fictional strike is unlike a real strike in the sense that the beggars do not actually stop performing their services; they continue to take donations, but donors must put up with the inconvenience of traveling to the outskirts of the city to make their offerings. Thus, unlike striking workers who withdraw their services until an agreement with the employer is reached, the beggars are not negotiating. Rather, they are demonstrating their worth. It also appears unlikely that in contemporary West Africa beggars would form a united organization capable of coordinating a major strike. I am quite certain that Fall does not believe the beggars of West Africa would engage in organized action against the government. Fall, however, believes begging is an important institution for West African society, and the strike is her device for demonstrating this point. This emphasis on institutional integration more than conflict leans in the direction of the structural-functionalist approach.

## **FUNCTIONAL VERSUS DISINTEGRATIVE ELEMENTS**

In the conflict view, elements of society work to break down the social structure in order to create social change. Begging is not a disintegrative element in Fall's novel, and, in fact, there is no analysis of societal elements which break down the social structure. Fall does, however, present elements of the urban social structure which seem to lack respect for traditional values. Keba Dabo represents such a force, but he is no challenge to the social system. Rather, he is a bureaucratic representative of it.

An important issue is whether the strike by the beggars is a disintegrative element for the social structure in this novel. Social scientists have analyzed strikes as disintegrative elements for existing social structures. For example, Dahrendorf (1950) found the 1953 building-workers' strike in East Germany was a disintegrative element which produced social change. However, Fall's strike is militating against change. The beggar's strike is a device to return a system which is not respecting traditional values back into equilibrium, balancing economic and bureaucratic expansion with time-honored tradition. The strain created on the social system by Keba Dabo, Mour Ndiaye, and those interested in the economics of tourism is consistent with Parson's notion of "vested interests," and the beggars' strike fits into Parson's concept of "reactions" to strains in the system:

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Because of the problem of vested interests, as we have called it, we may assume that the introduction of the change in the relevant part of the system imposes strains on those actors in other parts on which the change impinges. The reactions to these strains constitute the tendencies to re-equilibrium of the system, that is, to the elimination of change and the restoration of the state of the system before its introduction (1951:496).

Another major point of this novel is the functional relevance of begging, in other words, how begging contributes to the maintenance of the social system. This point is made by demonstrating that the lack of accessibility to beggars is dysfunctional (i.e. the lack of begging is harmful to the smooth functioning of the social system).

The dysfunctional nature of not having beggars readily available is demonstrated by Fall in the plight of Mour Ndiaye. Mour Ndiaye, who orders the beggars to be removed from the city, is instructed by his Marabout to sacrifice a bull, divide it into seventy-seven portions, and distribute them to beggars throughout every district of the city. This sacrifice is necessary for Mour Ndiaye to fulfill his political ambition of becoming vice president of the republic. But because the beggars have gone on strike, Mour Ndiaye is unable to distribute his sacrifice. His anxiety finally compels him to seek out the beggars at their retreat, at the home of Salla Niang. Placed in the position of entreating the beggars to return to the city, Mour Ndiaye is humiliated and ridiculed. Despite reassurance from Salla Niang that they will return the following day, the beggars refuse to accept Mour Ndiaye's sacrifice. He is pushed to physical and mental exhaustion, his family life suffers, and he ultimately fails in his bid for the vice-presidency.

Fall informs the reader that Mour's dependence on beggars is the rule, not an exception in this West African society. Just as Mour Ndiaye's life is disrupted in his efforts to gain the beggars' cooperation, so too are crowds of alms givers forced to deal with them on their own terms. Begging, then, provides an important function for the social system—it helps maintain the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of the system's participants to ensure that they are able to perform their obligations adequately. Just as members of a society would suffer if a medical institution withdrew its services, so too is suffering caused by the withdrawal of begging.

The following passages illustrate the important functions of begging. Salla Niang, who encourages the strike says:

Our hunger doesn't worry them. They need to give in order to survive, and if we didn't exist, who would they give to? How could they ensure their own peace of mind? They don't give for our sake; they give for their own sake! They need us so that they can live in peace (Fall, 1986:38).

In a very short time you'll see that we are as necessary to them as the air they breathe. Where will you find a man who's the boss and who doesn't give charity so that he can stay the boss? Where will you find a man who's suffering from a real or imaginary illness and who doesn't believe that his troubles will disappear the moment a donation leaves his hands? Where will you find an ambitious man who doesn't think that the magic effects of charity can open all doors? (Fall, 1986:39)



Unlike a conflict perspective which may focus on how inequality is created and reinforced by powerful groups, functionalists argue that inequality is necessary and functional for the social system (Davis and Moore, 1945). The same notion of functional inequality is promoted in Fall's novel, as evidenced by the following remark by the beggar, Nguirane Sarr, who in this passage is responding to the problem of why some people are obliged to beg while others are not: "Well, if you go on trying to find these reasons you'll go stark-staring bonkers; you just have to look at your hand: are your five fingers all equal?" (1986:63)

In effect, his logic avoids the problem of the causes of begging by arguing simply that inequality and begging exist and that they are functional. This kind of reasoning has led to serious criticisms of functionalism. Collins, for example, writes:

we ask for the causes of a given phenomenon, the functionalist answer points to its consequences, the functions it serves for society. This appears to be an illogical mode of causation, since an event happening at one time is explained by consequences happening at a later time (1988:55).

Like the functionalists, then, Fall is not concerned with how begging came to be or why inequality persists.<sup>9</sup> The main point for Fall is that begging serves an important function for society.

## COERCION VERSUS CONSENSUS

Conflict theory emphasizes that social structure is based on powerful members of society coercing less powerful members. Functionalism, on the other hand, emphasizes value consensus as the basis for the social structure. Fall includes both coercive and consensus components in her view of society, but by and large the emphasis is on the latter.

Coercion manifests itself through the actions of Keba Dabo and Mour Ndiaye who direct the forcible removal of beggars from their customary begging locations. Mour Ndiaye and Keba Dabo are able to implement their plan as representatives of the state which controls the "legitimate" use of violence.<sup>10</sup> In the words of the beggar, Nguirane Sarr:

All the beggars are afraid now. They are being ceaselessly hunted down without respite. They are afraid and they suffer physically, but that does not stop them from returning to their strategic points every morning; they are drawn back as if by a magnet, armed only with the hope of being able to rely on the speed of their legs to escape from the stinging blows of the policemen's batons, or of hiding in some nearby house when the round-up parties come by (Fall, 1986:20).

In another context Fall lucidly portrays Mour Ndiaye and the beggars as conflicting forces engaged in a power struggle. After Mour Ndiaye realizes he needs the beggars' help his marabout reminds him that he has been "waging war" against the beggars. Upon considering the outcome of this war Mour Ndiaye admits to himself that "the balance of

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power had been reversed" (1986:66).

These images are more consistent with the conflict view of society than the structural-functionalist view. But these images taken out of context give a somewhat distorted picture of this novel's theme. There was not a constant battle, but only a single meeting between Mour Ndiaye and the beggars. At this meeting Mour Ndiaye pleaded with the beggars to return to the city, but they refused. Other than this one encounter the beggars were unaware of Mour Ndiaye's dilemma. Thus, while elements of conflict exist, the main theme is not the struggle between two powerful groups. The beggars withdrew their services from the city to show how much they were needed, and the extent of this need was illustrated through the misfortunes of Mour Ndiaye.

Is there support for the functionalist notion of value consensus in *The Beggars' Strike*? On the surface it appears that this novel is about conflicting values. The characters who personify the conflict of values are Mour Ndiaye and Keba Dabo. However, as socio-logical research has demonstrated, it is not uncommon for some elements of society to go against the established norms. These "deviant" elements may actually serve the function of reaffirming the maintenance of acceptable social boundaries.<sup>11</sup> If it can be shown that the forces opposing begging are deviant, then it is possible that the deviance helps illustrate the social boundaries in this society. In other words, by realizing what constitutes deviance, we also become aware of acceptable normative behavior and values.

In my view, Fall depicts Keba Dabo as a deviant. The officials under his authority, his secretary, and even his boss, Mour Ndiaye, find his values at odds with values of the rest of society. In a meeting with his department Keba Dabo explains that beggars must be removed from the streets because begging is not dignified. He argues that beggars should be convinced that the act of begging is degrading. To this the officials in his department respond: "But Monsieur Dabo, it would be a complete waste of time. They won't even listen to us. They'll think we've gone out of our minds in fact!" (Fall, 1986:13)

When Keba Dabo explains to his secretary, Sagar Diouf, why he must purge beggars from the city, Sagar finds him "absurd." In general, Sagar Diouf found Keba Dabo to be "a rather peculiar person, who doesn't react like other people" (Fall, 1986:47). Nevertheless, "one had to accept him as he was" (Fall, 1986:49). Ultimately Sagar Diouf confronts him directly to tell him his values are out of place: "Well, Keba, it's like this; you can't live divorced from your own times and the society you belong to. It's not for nothing that people say that when you're in Rome you must do as Rome does" (Fall, 1986:75).

Even Mour Ndiaye finally tells Keba Dabo that they have gone too far in removing the beggars from the city. Much to the disconcertion of Keba Dabo, Mour Ndiaye admits that those who have been brought up with the idea that giving to beggars can relieve their problems, will not give up such beliefs readily.

Keba Dabo's deviant values about begging are based on his irrational fear of the beggars themselves. Fall describes him as being obsessed with removing beggars because "he's constantly afraid of meeting one and he has this choking sensation in his

throat if one should unfortunately cross his path" (1986:14).

While Keba Dabo is irrational and deviant, his values with regard to begging remain consistent. However, Mour Ndiaye, the other character in the novel responsible for the anti-begging policy, is not consistent in his views on begging. Mour Ndiaye is caught between his role in promoting "economic progress" and the values he learned from childhood. In a discussion with his marabout he defends removing the beggars from the street. His defense centers on three points: hygiene, tourist development, and changing times. All are really rationalizations for Mour Ndiaye to pursue his own bureaucratic advancement.

Whether or not the times have changed, Mour Ndiaye's own beliefs have not. Despite his proclamations about the need to rid the city of beggars, Mour Ndiaye is tied to the tradition of giving. It is part of his socialization, part of what makes him a member of his society. When he tries to defend his anti-begging stance his marabout responds, "The City is dehumanising you" (Fall, 1986:17). But later, when he realizes how important the beggars are to him, he explains to Keba Dabo:

We are men, Keba; if a man found himself today in a critical situation, faced with an insoluble crisis, and he had been instructed to make an offering as the only means of salvation, what do you think he would do? Just imagine the anguish of this man who had been brought up from his most tender childhood to believe that he could gain relief from all his fears, all his apprehensions, all his nightmares, his dreads, by giving three lumps of sugar, a candle, a length of material, in a word all kinds of objects to beggars! Can one chuck all these beliefs overboard in one night? (Fall, 1986:74)

Mour Ndiaye, then, not only has spelled out the general belief system of society, he has shown himself to be inextricably bound to it. Keba Dabo, on the other hand, is viewed as a deviant by his society, as someone whose deviant values help define where the appropriate boundaries for social values exist.

Mour Ndiaye, Sagar Diouf, the marabout, the assistants to Keba Dabo, and even the beggars themselves all contribute to defining the value consensus presented in this novel. The themes of this value consensus are primarily that begging is an integral component of the social structure, that the relationship between alms givers and beggars is an exchange relationship, and that begging is functional for this social system.

Two other important themes are also present in this novel, but they do not receive as much support. The first is that giving is associated with the concept of humanness. This reinforces the notion that a value consensus exists, for who wishes to be identified as inhuman?

The second is that begging is tied to religious values. This religious theme is present in several ways. First, it is the religious leader, Serigne Birama Sidibe, who directs Mour Ndiaye to make a sacrifice to the beggars in order to achieve his wish of becoming vice-president of the republic. This is reinforced by a second marabout, Serigne Kifi Bokoul, who also insists that Mour Ndiaye give a similar sacrifice to the beggars of the city. Second, through the words of Sagar Diouf we learn that religion teaches people to help

the poor. Third, from the perspective of the beggars Nguirane Sarr proclaims, "That's what religion states: when we beg we just claim what is our due" (Fall, 1986:61). And fourth, Nguirane Sarr also reveals that, before he went blind, he started begging as part of his childhood studies with his marabout.<sup>12</sup>

These religious themes, however, remain in the background of Fall's novel. The primary theme rests on the notion that begging is a form of exchange. The beggars' emphasis on their exchange function is what prompts some of the alms givers to complain that the striking beggars demand too much and no longer care for the words of the Holy Scriptures.

In summary, while some elements of coercion are presented in this novel, the emphasis is on the underlying value consensus in the society. Begging is generally seen as an integral component of the social system, even to Mour Ndiaye who acts against his basic values under the pressure to advance in the government bureaucracy. Keba Dabo, who is the only character who believes that begging is wrong, holds values which deviate from those generally adhered to by the rest of the society. His deviant values provide a point of reference for Fall to delineate the value consensus of the greater society.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that Aminata Sow Fall presents begging in a West African society from a point of view consistent with a sociological paradigm. While elements are presented which may be analyzed from both conflict theory and structural-functional theory, her presentation generally is consistent with the latter.

The following features of *The Beggars' Strike* support the societal view of the structural-functionalist approach: 1) Begging is presented as a long-standing, stable institution in West Africa. A historical reference is made to the unchanging nature of begging. 2) Strains on the social system come from exogenous sources; in this case removing beggars is an attempt to appease tourists from Western industrialized countries. 3) This novel focuses on the present social system, not on historical systemic changes. 4) Begging is viewed as an institution well-integrated into the larger society based on reciprocal relations. The beggars exchange a service for remuneration. 5) Fall uses the strike as a device to demonstrate the disruptions that would occur if the beggars did not fulfill their expected obligations to the society, thus revealing their firm integration into the social system and their functional importance. 6) Begging functions to maintain the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of members of other sectors in the social system. 7) Inequality is presented in this novel as a functional feature of the social system. 8) The society is characterized by a general agreement among its members that begging is an important functional element in the social structure. The one character that opposes this view is considered a deviant. His deviance helps to define the general value consensus about begging that exists in the rest of the society.

Structural-functionalism has been criticized for its conservatism; rather than explaining the nature of inequality and power in society, it tends to provide a defense of the status quo (Tumin, 1953; Mills, 1959; Gouldner, 1970; Collins, 1988).<sup>13</sup> Is this also a fair criticism of the view of society presented in *The Beggars' Strike*? In one sense it

is. Fall stresses the importance of traditional values in society, values she fears some members of the society do not appreciate. She is not concerned with the fact that beggars lack resources; rather she is concerned with the fact that they lack the respect they were traditionally given.

In another sense Fall presents a challenge to the conservatism in the structural-functional approach. Structural-functionalism's conservatism is linked to a commitment to advanced industrial societies, although the same commitment is not extended to societies which are nonindustrialized. In Parson's (1964) functional analysis, pattern variables have been used to distinguish the values of traditional and modern societies. Consistent with this theme proponents of the "modernization" approach have argued that the "traditional" values of people in nonindustrialized societies impede economic development (McClelland, 1961; Hagen, 1962; Inkeles, 1969; Bauer, 1976). Critics have found this approach to be characterized by Western ethnocentrism and simplicity, and the main premises are contradicted by historical evidence (Portes, 1973; Valenzuela and Valenzuela, 1978; Webster, 1984; Banuri, 1987). Fall finds the source of anti-begging sentiment in efforts to promote economic development by attracting Western tourists. In this light her defense of the institution of begging can be viewed as resistance to the imposition of values from the West and in opposition to the eurocentrism of the modernization approach.

For the sociologist who is interested in understanding the social structure of different cultures, for the researcher who is interested in developmental policies which are compatible with local traditions and needs, literature can provide valuable insights. Beyond its ability to broaden our understanding of the world beyond our own lived experiences, literature may also provide us with specific socio-political concepts and paradigms. While citizens from the United States may hold the view that beggars are generally pariahs, Fall forces her readers to consider a different perspective. Sociologists who strive to understand the social structure of West Africa should consider this perspective also, and to develop a better understanding of where sociological research on begging should proceed, they might well consider literary sources as a place to begin.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of literary authors constructing paradigms to explain political and social behavior see Spegele (1971).

<sup>2</sup> This may happen when data previously analyzed by a theorist from one perspective is reanalyzed by a theorist from another perspective. For example, see the analyses of community power in New Haven by Dahl (1961) and Domhoff (1978).

<sup>3</sup> The term "limited to" may seem pejorative here, but this is only meant to convey that the reader will not have adequate information to analyze the social phenomenon from the alternative approach. A good analysis of data from either approach should enhance the reader's understanding of the subject under investigation.

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper I have only focused on the two popular macrosociological interpretations of society. However, a variety of interpretations may be done from socially relevant data. For example, the novel has been used as a data source for constructing life histories (see Denzin, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Obviously, these are not exhaustive possibilities. The data provided in the novel, just as with other sources of data, may not be at all appropriate for macrosociological analysis.

<sup>6</sup> The marabout is a Muslim teacher and holy man who is often asked for advice on practical matters by Senegalese.

<sup>7</sup> According to the functionalists Parsons and Shils the role is the "most significant of social structures" (1951:23). They argue that roles are based on complementary expectations. Gouldner (1970) contends that Parsons' analysis tends to focus on complementarity, but he erroneously uses the terms "complementarity" and "reciprocity" as synonyms. According to Gouldner complementarity is produced by "the same set of moral values," whereas reciprocity "implies each party receives something from the other in return for what he has given him" (1970:240-41). In Fall's novel, the relationship between the beggars and the alms-givers is characterized by both complementarity and reciprocity.

<sup>8</sup> This reciprocal relationship does not necessarily need to be viewed as a fee for service transaction, although this is the image Sow Fall presents. For examples of reciprocal obligations in gift giving see Mauss (1967).

<sup>9</sup> In at least one other novel this issue is addressed. In *Xala* Sembene Ousmane (1983) gives the example of begging as a consequence of villagers being pushed off their land by more powerful members of the society.

<sup>10</sup> According to Max Weber, "the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence" (Gerth and Mills, 1978:78).

<sup>11</sup> For discussions of how deviance functions to reaffirm social boundaries see Durkheim (1947). For an illustration of this see the historical case study by Erikson (1966).

<sup>12</sup> This type of begging is only mentioned in passing in *The Beggars' Strike*. For a detailed description of begging as part of a student's education at the Koranic school see Kane (1972).

<sup>13</sup> Parson's work in the early 1950s was particularly susceptible to this type of criticism. For a review of literature which addresses Parson's overall theoretical contributions see Sciulli and Gerstein (1985).