

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MODERNIST DEVELOPMENTS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

#### STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism was influenced by the schools of phenomenology and of Gestalt psychology, both of which developed in Germany between 1910 and the 1930s. Phenomenology is a school of philosophical thought that attempted to give philosophy a rational, scientific basis. Principally, it is concerned with accurately describing consciousness and removing the separation that had traditionally existed between subject and object of human thought. Consciousness is always conscious of something, and that picture cannot be separated from the object or the subject but is the relationship between them.

Gestalt psychology maintains that all human conscious experience is patterned, emphasizing that the whole is always greater than the parts, making it holistic. It fosters the view that the human mind functions by recognizing or creating structures.

Structuralism developed as a theoretical framework in linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Saussure proposed that languages were constructed of hidden rules that practitioners know but are unable to articulate. In other words, although we may all speak the same language, we are not all able to fully articulate the grammatical rules that govern why we arrange words in the order we do. However, we understand these rules at an implicit, as opposed to an explicit level, and we are aware when we use these rules correctly when we are able to decode what another person is saying to us.

**Claude Levi-Strauss** is widely regarded as the father of structural anthropology. In the 1940s, he proposed that the proper focus of anthropological investigations was on the underlying patterns of human thought that produce the cultural categories that organize worldviews. He believed these processes do not merely create culture, but operate within culture. His work was heavily influenced by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss as well as the Prague School of structural linguistics which includes Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Troubetzkoy. From these he derived the concept of binary contrasts, later referred to in his work as **binary oppositions**, which became fundamental to his theory.

In 1972, his book *Structuralism and Ecology* was published with the principles of what would become structural anthropology. In it, he proposed that culture, like language, is composed of hidden rules that govern the behavior of its practitioners. What make cultures unique and different from one another are the hidden rules participants understand but are unable to articulate. So the aim of structural anthropology is to identify these rules. He maintained that culture is a dialectic process: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Levi-Strauss proposed a methodological means of discovering these rules through the identification of binary oppositions.

The structuralist paradigm in anthropology suggests that the structure of human thought processes is the same in all cultures and that these mental processes exist in the form of binary oppositions.

Some concerns have been expressed as to the epistemological and theoretical assumptions of structuralism. The validity of structural explanations has been challenged on the grounds that structuralist methods are imprecise and dependent upon the observer. The theory of structuralism is primarily concerned with the structure of the human psyche and it does not address historical aspects or change in culture. This synchronic approach, which advocates a "psychic unity" of all human minds, has been criticized because it does not account for individual human action in history.

Materialists object to structural explanations in favor of more observable or practical explanations based on scientific inquiry. In any form of responsible inquiry, theories must be

falsifiable. Structural analyses do not allow for this or for external validation and cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny.

Folk stories, religious stories, and fairy tales are the principle subject matter for structuralists because they believe these reveal the underlying universal human structures, the binary oppositions. For example, in the story of Cinderella, some of the binary oppositions include good versus evil, pretty versus ugly (Cinderella versus her two stepsisters), clean versus dirty, and so on. Because of this focus, the principle methodology employed is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics originated as a study of the Gospels, and has since come to refer to the interpretation of the meaning of written works.

Though there are few anthropologists today who are structuralists, structuralism was highly influential. Structuralism also continued the idea that there are universal structuring elements in the human mind that shape culture. This concept is still pursued in cognitive anthropology which looks at the way people think in order to identify these structures, instead of analyzing oral or written texts.

## IMPORTANT THINKERS

**Claude Lévi-Strauss** (1908 to 2009) “Father of Structuralism;” born in Brussels. He gained a law degree from the University of Paris. He became a professor of sociology at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil in 1934. It was at this time that he began to think about human thought cross-culturally and otherness when he was exposed to various cultures in Brazil.

**Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857 to 1913) A Swiss linguist born in Geneva whose work in structural linguistics and semiology greatly influenced Lévi-Strauss.

**Roman Jakobson** (1896 to 1982) a Russian structural linguist. He was influenced by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and worked with Nikolai Trubetzkoy to develop techniques for the analysis of sound in language. His work influenced Lévi-Strauss while they were colleagues at the New School for Social Research in New York.

## MARXIST ANTHROPOLOGY

Marxism is essentially an economic interpretation of history based primarily on the works of **Karl Marx** and **Frederich Engels**. Marx was a revolutionary who focused his efforts on understanding capitalism in order to overthrow it. The rationale for the development of capitalism and the need to move towards communism is developed fully in *Capital* (1867), but introduced in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Marx, whose orientation was largely materialist and historicist, framed his analysis around four central points: the physical reality of people, the organization of social relations, the value of the historical context of development, and the human nature of continuous praxis.

As far as anthropology is concerned, the foundation work is Engels' **The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State: In Light of the Investigations of Lewis H. Morgan** (1884). Lewis Henry Morgan's materialist focus had lead Marx to making extensive notes on *Ancient Society* (1877), which Engels would later expand into his book of 1884. Both of these men were influenced by Louis Henry Morgan and his model of social evolution based on material concerns. Morgan proposed that societies moved from more primitive to more civilized stages of development. The Marxist version of this resulted in transitions of stage from primitive communism, through feudalism and capitalism, to communism; stages are judged in terms of the modes of production which dominate each stage. Marx did not see these stages as progressive steps that every culture must progress through, but as being the development of historically contingent communities and their modes of production.

Marxist anthropology came about through the works of Marx and Engels and their followers. It developed as a critique and alternative to the domination of Euro-American capitalism and Eurocentric views in the social sciences. When Darwin put forward his theory of Natural

Selection in *The Origin of Species* (1859), Marx took the argument to be self evident and intuitive to his understanding of both the natural world and humanity's role within it.

## RELEVANT IDEAS

**Base and Superstructure** —The base consists of the forces and relations of power that are influential on a community. Superstructure is the political, economic and legal organization of the structure. Alongside superstructure is an ideological structure.

**Labour** —This is productive labour, the work needed to sustain production and go beyond the level of the immediate producer. Labour is the sum of the work of the individual through the means and subject of labour. It disappears in the product becoming the value of the product.

**Means of Production** — The means of production include both the technology or tools with which production is completed and the raw materials that are transformed during production.

**Class** — Classes are groups consisting of those individuals who share the means of production with the forces of production. Class divides societies because some possess production through ownership of the means of production and some do not. The rise of private property and the state is the source of these class distinctions. Dialectical materialism states that these class distinctions lead to social solidarity through a collective consciousness.

## DISCUSSION OF MARXIST ANTHROPOLOGY

Marx did not leave a clear methodological framework for his philosophy. One of the basic methods of Marxist anthropology is to try to find a class structure in societies around the world and examine the ways in which they interact. Marx focused on this kind of ethnographic research with individual case studies. Attention has also been paid to the ways in which cultures resist the spread of capitalism. Marxism is dedicated to examining the modes of production present in any society and there may be more than one present. The Marxist framework can be used to examine the developments of some societies at various stages. However, there is no one unifying method or vision in Marxism.

Marxism in anthropology has served to raise a number of questions in anthropological thinking. It has resulted in several other approaches in anthropology, including cultural materialism and cultural ecology.

It has also added to the efforts of feminist anthropology and has had a number of influences on archaeology. Feminist and Queer Anthropology see the linguistic differentiation between genders as an example of a power struggle imposed by structure. Links between gender, sexuality, language, and class power have been explored. The lasting legacy of Marx is this increased awareness of the broader impact of class structures.

The main criticism of Marxism is that it is not particularly anthropological in nature, as it has little interest in culture and ethnography. Marx, however, completed many case studies on the successes and failures of specific cultures and social groups when creating his philosophy. When anthropologists applied it to anthropology, it looked less and less like Marxism. In anthropology it has been limited by its inability to deal with culture as a distinct and irreducible order of signs and meanings. A second major criticism is that Marxism has no particular unified aim or method. Finally, a problem that Marxism faces is in the evaluation of societies that do not possess any classes. How and why did „primitive communism“ change without a conflict of classes? In many societies, kinship, religion, and ethnicity have provided stronger connections than class.

## IMPORTANT THINKERS

**Karl Marx** (1818-1883) is often called the most successful social scientist of all time. Born in 1818, Marx lived during a period that allowed him to document the ways in which capitalism and the rise of industry influenced class structures. As a Jewish born Prussian, Marx experienced social divisions from an early age, despite his family being of notable wealth. His time at the University of Bonn and the University of Berlin led him to explore philosophical inquiries relating to the emancipation of man from religious and political structures. Understanding changes in society through material concerns led Marx to identify production as being at the heart of class differences. By looking at capitalism in a holistic fashion, Marx developed a theory of change based around the need for social classes to become equal as the modes and relations of production changed. Marx emphasized that the central component of the worker's revolution was not philosophical concerns, but action. He was one of the first true social scientists and with Durkheim and Weber, one of the most influential social scientists in history.

**Friedrich Engels** (1820-1895) was Marx's colleague and friend who aided Marx in the establishment of his theories on society and continued to work on Marxist ideas after Marx's death. Engels experienced the plight of English workers as a young industrialist with his own factory. His views, published in his first major work, **The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844** (1844), allowed him to define the working-class as the origin of social action.

**Gramsci, Antonio** (1891-1937) was one of the leading figures in Marxism before World War II and an Italian communist who formulated the idea of **hegemony**. He is considered one of the greatest Marxist philosophers of the 20th Century. Gramsci saw human history as being key to the Marxist agenda of social change and that nature only mattered where it interacted with mankind. Gramsci modified the materialist concerns of traditional Marxism with his own socialist theories. The concept of cultural hegemony was articulated by Gramsci in order to explain why the revolution had not occurred. Gramsci was imprisoned for his ideas during Mussolini's reign and died in a prison hospital.

## HISTORICISM

Historicism is an approach to the study of anthropology and culture that dates back to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It had two distinct forms, diffusionism (See Chapter 3) and historical particularism. These approaches are most often associated with Franz Boas, but were actually developed earlier by diffusionists who wished to offer alternative explanations of culture change to those argued for by social evolutionists. Historicism assigned particular significance to the specific context of culture, such as an historical period or geographical location. It placed great importance on the contextualized interpretation of data, as well as a relativistic point of view and rejected the universal, interpretations of the social evolutionists.

An historical approach was needed for the study of culture change and development in order to explain not only what happened and where but also why and how. Diffusionism was the first approach devised to achieve this type of historical approach to cultural investigation and was represented by two distinct schools of thought: the German school and the British school.

The British school of diffusionism argued that all of culture and civilization was developed only once in ancient Egypt and diffused throughout the rest of the world through migration and colonization. The German school developed a more sophisticated historical approach to socio-cultural development. To account for the independent invention of cultural elements, the theory of culture circles was utilized. This theory argued that cultural traits developed in a few areas of the world and diffused in concentric circles or culture circles. Thus, worldwide

socio-cultural development could be viewed as a function of the interaction of expanding culture circles with native cultures and other culture circles.

Historical particularism was an approach popularized by Franz Boas as an alternative to the worldwide theories of socio-cultural development promoted by both evolutionists and extreme diffusionists, which he believed could never be proved. Boas argued that detailed regional studies of individual cultures had to be undertaken to discover the distribution of culture traits and to understand the individual processes of culture change at work.

## RELEVANT IDEAS

**Independent Invention** is the principle which holds that similar aspects of civilization developed by different peoples in different areas at different times. Some diffusionists used the “psychic unity of mankind” concept to explain independent invention, others argued that independent invention occurred extremely rarely because humans are inherently uninventive.

**Culture Area.** Adolf Bastian first developed the culture area concept. It was further developed by later scholars from a number of different theoretical schools and used as a tool for cross-cultural analysis as a means of determining the spread of cultural traits. The term is used to characterize any region of relative cultural and environmental uniformity, a region containing a common pattern of culture traits.

**Culture Circle** is a term created by the German diffusionists to serve as a methodological tool for tracing the spread of cultural elements from a culture area in an attempt to reconstruct the history of culture development.

**Psychic Unity of Mankind** is used to refer to a common set of modes of thinking and characteristics that transcend individuals or cultures.

**Cultural Relativism.** In the context of historicism cultural relativism holds that the beliefs, customs, practices and rituals of an individual culture must be observed and evaluated from the perspective in which they originate and are expressed. This is the only way to truly understand the meaning of observations and place them in historical context.

**Culture and Personality** is associated with Ruth Benedict and her book, *Patterns of Culture* (1934). For her, culture is like an individual in that it is a more-or-less consistent pattern of thoughts and behaviour. These patterns take on the emotional and intellectual characteristics of the individuals within the society. They may be studied to gain insight into the people under investigation.

**Culture Configuration** was a concept developed by Ruth Benedict to assist in explaining the nature of culture. A culture configuration is the expression of the personality of a particular society. It is the sum of all the individual personalities of the society, a sort of societal psychological average. Differences in cultural configurations are not representative of a higher or lower capacity for cultural development but are instead simply alternative means of organizing society and experience.

Historical particularism is an approach to understanding the nature of culture and cultural changes of particular people. It is not a particular methodology. Boas argued that the history of a particular culture lay in the study of the individual traits of a particular culture in a limited geographical region. After many different cultures have been studied in the same way within a region, the history of individual cultures may be reconstructed. By having detailed data from many different cultures as a common frame of reference, individual culture traits may be identified as being borrowed or invented. This is essential in reconstructing a particular culture’s history. Boas and his students stressed the importance of gathering as much data as possible about individual cultures before any assumptions or interpretations are made

regarding a culture or culture change within a culture. They are responsible for taking anthropology away from grand theories of evolution and diffusion and refocusing its attention on the many different cultures and varieties of cultural expression. The interplay of countless factors that influence culture and culture change received more attention. The emphasis on the importance of the collection of data has paid dividends for modern scholars. The vast amount of information generated by their investigations has provided raw information for countless subsequent studies and investigations, much of which would have been lost to time had 'oral cultures' not been recorded.

Criticism of historical particularism has arisen over the issue of data collection and the fear of creating large-scale macro theories. Boas' insistence on the collection of data fell under attack by some of his own students. Some saw the vast amounts being collected as a body of knowledge that could never be synthesized by the investigator. Furthermore, if the investigator was reluctant to generate macro theories on cultural development and culture change, what was the point of gathering so much work in such detail?

Ethnographic research dealing with modern processes such as colonization and globalization is now more important. Instead of asking people about their past, some anthropologists have found it more important to study the cultural processes of the present.

## **IMPORTANT THINKERS**

**Franz Boas** viewed culture as a set of customs, social institutions and beliefs that characterize any particular society. He argued that cultural differences were not due to race, but rather to differing environmental conditions and other 'accidents of history.' Cultures had to be viewed as fusions of differing culture traits that developed in different space and time.

**A.L. Kroeber's** view of culture is best described by the term superorganic, that is, culture can only be explained in terms of itself. Culture is an entity that exists separate from the psychology and biology of the individual and obeys its own set of laws.

**Ruth Benedict** (1887 – 1948) defined culture as basic ways of living and defined a particular culture in terms of a unique culture configuration or psychological type. The collective psychologies of a certain people make up their particular culture configuration, which is determined by the collective relationship, and nature of a culture's parts.

## **MAIN POINTS**

### **Structuralism**

- A Structural Approach describes the patterns, systems and ways of life. It examines beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, symbols and artifacts.
- It understands culture to be an expression of the deep structures of language that lie outside the intentions of speakers.
- It is synchronic in approach and focuses on the structures of cultural relationships at a given moment.
- It asserts the specificity of culture which cannot be reduced to another phenomenon.

### **Marxism**

- A Marxist approach examines the material relationships of production in a culture using the concepts of base and superstructure, labour, means of production and class.

- A variation on the Marxist approach is that based on notions of hegemony derived from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. This approach examines the power relationships within a society and how mass culture operates to maintain existing power relationships.

### **Historicism**

- An historicist approach consists of diffusionist theory (See Chapter 3) and an historical particularist approach which emphasise the context of a particular culture and reject the macro theories of the diffusionists.
- Its main concepts are independent invention which holds that similar cultural traits and behaviours could be independently developed by different cultures without contact with another culture, and cultural relativism which holds that a culture must be studied in terms of the perspective in which that culture originates.

### **SEMINAR EXERCISES**

- Choose an anglophone subculture, such as punk or football fans or another. Analyse it structuralist way in terms of its beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, symbols and artifacts.
- Analyze the language of a particular anglophone fanzone on the web of a media star in terms of the language that fans use about their idol.
- Find out what you can about work in a call centre. Use your data for a Marxist analysis of the relationship between employers and employees.
- Watch a favourite Anglophone comedy series. How much does the series reinforce existing social relationships. Identify any common-sense assumptions the programme shares between different classes. Is there any criticism of existing society?
- Examine a British or American institution such as the monarchy or the presidency. Identify what is culturally special about this institution?
- Examine a British version or an American version or a Slovak version of a talent show such as superstar or its siblings. What besides the language is particularly British or American or Slovak about the show? Look at body language, clothes, style or the little monologues of the contestants.

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