

October 26, 78.

RESPONSE PAPER (2)"THE STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALIST PARADIGM"

It has been said "there is no such thing as functionalism" if one is looking for one simple tidy definition. Rather it should be understood as "an episode in the history of anthropology; an episode which makes up with the richness of scientific debate for what is lost in conceptual tidiness of definitions". (Jarvie 1973:3)

1. STATEMENT OF THE STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALIST (SF) PARADIGM.(a) The Context.

The Unilineal Evolutionary Paradigm was discredited early this century due to the methodology of the model and the questioning of its implications, together with the rejection of a colonial mentality. The base of the paradigm in logic rather than accurate data, and the conflicting evidence of new field studies led to the rejection of the historical diachronic approach to cultural study, and an emphasis upon the synchronic organic perspective of the SF paradigm. This emphasis meant that the SF school put great importance upon intensive field experience in ethnographic study. The SF approach was introduced through the publication of two books in 1922. Malinowski published Argonauts of the Western Pacific from his fieldwork in Melanesia, and Radcliffe-Brown The Andaman Islanders. The roots of SF lie in french sociology and particularly the thinking of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Using an organic perspective of society he emphasized that the basic units were the "social facts" so that roles, offices, institutions etc existed independently of the individuals in the society itself. These social facts must be explained by social principles. Thus from his analysis of Totemism for example, he concluded that the function of religion was to reaffirm society and man as a social being. Durkheim believed that society maintained a steady state through the integrating relationships between the social units. The combination of "function" with "social structure" led to the term SF.

(b) The Basic Assumptions.

The SF paradigm seeks to provide answers to the questions:

- How can we explain cultural phenomena?
- How is social order possible?
- How is social order maintained?

In seeking to answer these questions the basic assumption of SF is that "social systems maintain themselves for significant intervals of time in a

steady state during which a high degree of cohesion and solidarity characterizes the relationships among its members" (Harris 1968:515). This means that -

- (i) Society is viewed as an organism which operates through the inter-relationship of the social institutions or systems of which it is composed,
- (ii) Cultures therefore have clear boundaries,
- (iii) The approach to culture must be from a holistic perspective in which cultural traits are seen as linked together in an integrated whole,
- (iv) Every custom exists to fulfil a purpose and so all customs have a living current meaning for members of a society,
- (v) Cultural traits must therefore be explained in terms of their social significance by the functions they serve within society - although proponents disagreed on the specific nature of the concept of function,
- (vi) Social harmony and continuity exist, and these can be explained,
- (vii) Conflict and change were essentially viewed as undesirable.

(c) Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

Malinowski, in 1922, in Argonauts of the Western Pacific, applied these assumptions to his investigation of the kula trading ring. He concluded that this custom "welds together a considerable number of tribes, and it embraces a vast complex of activities, interconnected and playing into one another, so as to form one organic whole" (1922:83). He was asking what the social significance of this custom was, or what was its function in society? His answer was that it served the specific function of welding society together into an organic whole. In his later study of magic he explained that apparently irrational beliefs were perfectly reasonable when understood in terms of the function magic performed. Magic relieved anxiety about the uncontrollable elements of the future, its function was "to ritualize man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear" (Malinowski 1954:90). Malinowski believed that all cultural practices existed because they met some need. He defined "need" very much in terms of the individual. These included biological needs like food, housing, and reproduction, along with psychological needs like a sense of security, status, and reducing anxiety in crisis. Through their social institutions and customs he believed people adapted to their environment and satisfied their personal needs; "Each need gave rise to an institution, and the institution was made up of various layers. To carry out the necessary need satisfying activity there must be a material apparatus; this is deployed by a social unit, with its appropriate rules of organization and procedure; and the whole complex is

finally legitimized by a mythical charter " (Kuper 1973:44).

also by Gluckman, Leach etc.

Radcliffe-Brown had a much greater intellectual influence than Malinowski, but his field work was inferior. Brown was also much more of a disciple of Durkheim's emphasis that social facts were objective phenomena that existed in distinction from individuals, and exercised constraint upon their behaviour. The object of study was the social system, which were systems "of real relations of connectedness between individuals, or more properly, between individuals occupying social roles, between persons" (Kuper 1973:70). Brown vehemently rejected the reduction of the explanation of function by Malinowski to the level of biological and psychological needs. He believed that social structures must be explained by social principles. "He defined function in terms of social needs, as the way in which customs linked to and reinforced other customs and thereby strengthened social integration" (Heibert 1976:76). Through study of the common characteristics and range of variation in societies, he hoped to formulate generalizations or social laws. He was not merely a functionalist, but also a structuralist, in that he was concerned with the relationships between social systems, specializing particularly in kinship. An important later modification of SF was Merton's distinction between "manifest" and "latent" functions (1949).

2. A BRIEF CRITIQUE OF THE STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALIST PARADIGM.

A number of criticisms have been raised against SF as an explanatory theory, although as a method it is widely accepted in the study of cultures as wholes.

(a) In 1935, Lesser said that SF had gone too far in its repudiation of the diachronic approach. Explaining cultural traits by function does not answer the "why" of origins, but only the "how" of operation. The perspective of history cannot be excluded.

(b) In 1948 Gregg and Williams made three criticisms. First, if social institutions function to satisfy men, this allows no possibility of value judgements upon their rightness or efficiency. Second, what evidence is there for the concept of harmony? Is it not possible that societies tend to disequilibrium and change? SF fails to adequately explain change. Third, there are no universal standards of value or morals. Whatever is, is right. This leads to cultural relativism and the justification of all institutions because they maintain the society balance.

(c) Also in 1948, Gluckman criticised Malinowski for ambiguous use of the term function, and failure to see social life as a system. He also stated that he did not believe SF could be used to discover universal laws.

(d) In 1951, Murdock reiterating some of the above also criticized SF for its failure to focus sufficiently upon culture as the central concept of anthropology.

(e) In 1958, Gellner said SF obscured the truth that some things are more functional than others, and he distinguished between SF as a doctrine and as a method.

(f) In 1963, Brown attacked the false reasoning of the SF theory. Is it correct to explain social institutions from the harmonious state they supposedly produce, or from their root causes?

(g) In 1968, Jarvie said SF did not allow for the values and beliefs of people in their explanation.

(h) Also in 1968, Harris emphasized that much social change is not explainable in terms of the social structure. What about external events or changes in the environment?

3. SOME MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM.

(a) SF has been an important factor in the development of the Church Growth School and the homogeneous unit principle. In providing a basis for understanding the groups of society it has enabled missionaries to develop multi-individual people movement approaches.

(b) SF has also been important in focusing on the decision making process of societies and therefore assisting in the development of a strategy to bring people to decision in a meaningful way.

(c) SF has stressed the inter relatedness of society and therefore made missionaries more aware of the total cultural situation of the people they are attempting to reach, and provided a method for the study of society, and effective communication of the gospel.

(d) SF has also raised the issue of the importance of seeking functional substitutes where people turning to Christ may want to reject some aspect of culture clearly judged by Scripture. Functional substitutes avoid cultural voids.

(e) SF has also helped missionaries to have a holistic view of conversion and discipleship and recognize the importance of relating the Lordship of Christ to every aspect of the cultural matrix.

(f) SF with its stress upon the organic nature of culture has provided a framework for understanding the ramifications of change throughout the entire cultural spectrum.

cfr source of Jarvie
 1963: -

(g) SF emphasizes the importance of mission and church structure relationships.

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I apologise that the Bibliography is not in alphabetical order

*This is a very clear, concise statement on all
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might cite sources a reference.*

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