

STRUCTURALISM AND SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

By Dr. Abderrahmane AZZI
Professor of Communication
University of Algiers

The attempts to relate structuralism to other perspectives in sociology is suggestive not exhaustive and a comparison event at the level of individual authors can be a subject for many analyses. This attempts sets some (*) grounds for a constructive dialogue between structuralism and sociology through a contrast between structuralism and the perspectives of functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology that incorporate the traditional and the contemporary approaches in sociology.

The works of a number of structuralists have directly or indirectly dealt with themes prevailing in functionalism (Levi-Strauss), conflict perspective (Althusser and Barthes), and phenomenology (Foucault). The work of Levi-Strauss in part is based on a critique of functionalism. The functional perspective, according to Levi-Strauss, can be questioned on two counts: (a) the assumption that every element of society has a function, and (b) the belief that the structure of society is to be observed directly as a surface phenomenon. The element, says Levi-Strauss, is independent from function. The cause that brings the element into existence is independent from the function of such element. The functional perspective does not distinguish between the function and the consequence of something and often takes for a cause what is only a consequence (4, p. 99). Thus, Malinowski and Durkheim analyzed totemism in the context of the function of such phenomena and concluded that totemism exhibits a

(*) See Abderrahmane AZZI, *Structuralism and Its Contribution to Sociological Theory*, Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, NTSU, USA, 1985.

concern with natural species because the latter supply man with needs, giving rise to intense emotions (Malinowski) and maintaining social solidarity (Durkheim). This analysis, says Levi-Strauss, is tautological. A phenomenon exists because it has a function (s), and it has a function (s) because it exists. The functional perspective is deterministic. Thus, if a given mythology confers prominence to a certain character, say an evil grandmother, it will be claimed that in such a society, grandmothers are actually evil and that mythology reflects the social structure and social relations of that society. Levi-Strauss suggests to say that society functions is "a truism", and to say that everything in society functions is "an absurdity". The structure of cultural phenomena does not manifest itself at the surface level, says Levi-Strauss. The surface level is a manifestation of a deep structure that remains unconscious. Thus, totemism is a distinct phenomenon governed by an unconscious structure : the attempt to overcome contradictions between nature and culture. The field of functional anthropology tended to provide a conservative interpretation of cultural phenomena and lend support to the existing social arrangement with little regard to the influence of power and structure of domination.

Althusser and Barthes accept the main thrust of the conflict perspective : that cultural phenomena closely relate to the distribution of power and to the social and economic condition of a society. Althusser, however, questions such perspectives on a particular thesis : the nature of the relation between economy and ideology. The conflict perspective asserts the moving forces of history are economic conditions. The deepest causes of social change are the forces of production that are reflected in the relations of production. The economic conditions give rise to cultural superstructures consisting essentially of ideological justification for the existing relations. This assertion is deterministic and based on a misunderstanding of Marx's text, says Althusser. The relation between the economic and the political, ideological, and scientific spheres of a system is less determinant because of the relative autonomy of each sphere and the mutual influence that these sphere exercise upon one another (Althusser).

Symbolic interactionism presents some difficulty, for this perspective emerged in a different cultural milieu with interest in socialization and self-development and remained a distinct and independent perspective vis-à-vis structuralism. The exception to this is probably the work of Lacan that comes close to the concerns of symbolic interactionism, particularly his theory of the mirror stage and the three orders of self development. The structuralist perspective and symbolic interactionism can be compared using as a frame of reference Lauer and Handel's assumptions of symbolic interaction. The following comparison and contrast is thus suggested: (a) Symbolic interaction emphasizes social interaction through which individuals construct social reality. The structuralist perspective emphasizes cultural phenomena such as myth, literature, art, and texts in general that have an independent existence and must be studied as such; (b) Symbolic interaction emphasizes interdependence between the individual and society. Thus, "the meaning of events can be changed by the creative actions of individuals and the individual may influence the complexity of meanings that comprise his or her culture as well as being influenced by it" (3, p. 16). The structuralist perspective de-emphasizes the importance of the individual. The distinction between language and speech seems to come close to symbolic interaction's assumption of the interdependence between culture and the individual, but structuralists maintain that the action of individuals is governed by unconscious structures of their cultural phenomena; (c) The concept of "meaning" in symbolic interaction is regarded as "the product of a continuous interpretive process" among individuals in social interaction (3, p. 16). The structuralist perspective suggests the object of analysis is not "meaning", but structures. The perspective postulates that the emphasis is on the relations among words, rather than the relation of each word to the object it designates. That is, the emphasis is not on the meaning of the word, but on the patterns the words form. Thus, if there is a meaning to be found in myth, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into its composition, but in the way those elements are combined; and (d) Symbolic interaction suggests, "Social life is unique in that the use of symbols has emerged within it" (3, p. 22). Thus, symbols, as representations of something else

that provide meanings, are necessary for the process of communication and interaction. The structuralist perspective views language as a system of signs whose signification remains unconscious. Language is a chain of signifiers. The signifier and the signified are interrelated and the task of the analyst is to underlie what the sign signifies. The one structuralist whose work comes close to the concern of symbolic interaction is Lacan who argues that the development of self depends on the extent to which the individual becomes part of the symbolic order prevailing in society. The symbolic order is validated by the community of signifiers (individuals) or what symbolic interactionists would call social interaction. Lacan brings the unconscious to the domain of sociological inquiry and argues that the "id" does not pertain merely to instincts, but also to the symbolic order in society.

The field of phenomenology is questioned on its basic assumption that the object of inquiry is man's subjective and lived experience and on the attempt to account for the transcendental condition of thought through the logical analysis of consciousness as such (Foucault). The object of structural analysis is not man who thinks, but the structure of language which "speaks in and through him." As Merleau-Ponty puts it, social facts "are neither things nor ideas, but structures" (2, p. 307). Merleau-Ponty probably is one of the few phenomenologists who recognized the necessity to shift away from the study of man as the subject of experience to the study of the objective structures of language.

The attempt to advance a comparison between structuralism and the different perspectives in sociology is not an easy task. These perspectives not only pertain to a variety of intellectual origins and traditions, but also are less unified perspectives incorporating sub-approaches that often deviate from the path of the perspective in question. The different themes and concerns of structuralism often are not explicitly examined or made thematic by the perspectives in question. Here, an attempt was made to present the position of each perspective on the basis of its essential propositions and without violating its main thrust. The notion of comparison is possible at the level of generalization.

The aspect of generalization often is made at the expense of detail and carefully delineated accounts. This generalization, however, is necessary, the more detail one seeks to acquire, the more it is difficult to compare and generalize. Here, the basic assumptions, the propositions, of structuralism are used as a frame of reference for such comparison. (Table one).

The functional perspective regards language as a part in a complex setting of social interaction, and not a distinct system of its own. The different cultural phenomena consist of social interaction that incorporates an interdependent mechanism of personality, system, and culture. These phenomena are “systems in which all the parts depend on each other and work together to create equilibrium” (7, p. 75). Cultural phenomena as structures in themselves are analyzed “in terms of the functions they perform in a social-cultural system” (7, p. 14). The perspective omits the analysis of the unconscious. Merton attempts to provide an account for the latent and manifest functions of institutions, but these remain consequences and not unconscious elements governing the institution. The perspective maintains that a social pattern is best understood not in terms of its historical origin, but on the basis of the function that such pattern provides in a society. The perspective disregards history. The process of change in any part “is seen as leading to a certain degree of imbalance” (7, p. 14). Power is “embodied in political institutions that solve the functional imperative of goal attainment” and is necessary for the safeguard of social order (7, p. 122). The social forces in a society tend to determine the behavior of individuals. These forces vary cross culturally and are relative. These social forces exist to perform functions necessary for the existence of a given society. The empirical observations are studied in themselves and for the purpose of generalization that provides a macro-level interpretation of social structures.

TABLE ONE

STRUCTURALISM AND THE DIFFERENT THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY (1)

Ass. (*)	Structuralism	Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interactionism	Phenomenology
I	Cultural phenomena (CP) are systems of language, language is an independent entity and is studied as such.	Language is an element of social interaction and a facilitating mechanism for "real" structures of society.	Language is necessary for both class and false consciousness, but not an independent structure.	Language is a system of symbols through which people construct social structures and social reality, but not a system of its own	Language and speech in part explain intersubjective communication, but language is not a system of its own.
II	CP are systems of signs, a sign is a unit of a signifier and a signified.	CP are products of social interaction in complex settings encompassing personality, system, and culture.	CP are closely related to the economic base of society.	CP are meaningful entities resulting from patterned symbolic interaction.	CP are typification resulting from the construction of meaning in everyday life.
III	CP are manifestations of structures, a structure is characterized by totality, transformation, and self regulation.	CP are structures in themselves and are studied as such.	CP often are reflections of the relations and contradictions that exist in the economic realm.	CP are dynamic processes whose content depends on a give-and-take relations between the individual and society.	CP are essential structures which are dependent on activities and meaning in the life world.
IV	The underlying structures of CP are unconscious, the unconscious however, is accessible through linguistically mediated form.	The perspective does not provide an explanation for the unconscious.	The closest concept which may relate to the unconscious is "false consciousness" or "alienation" which results from manipulation of power.	Unconscious aspects of interactions are viewed only tangentially as the absence of reflecting.	The perspective does not provide an explanation for the unconscious.
V	Structural analysis emphasizes the synchronical aspects of CP.	The perspective emphasises the interdependence of the different parts of the system, but disregards history.	The synchronical and the historical analyses are equally important.	The emphasis is on the interdependence between the individual and society, but the position of the perspective in relation to history is not clear.	History exists as the performed typification resulting from the consciousness of predecessors.

(*) assumptions.

(1) From Abderrahmane, p. 212.

STRUCTURALISM AND THE DIFFERENT THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

(continued)

Ass. (*)	Structuralism	Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interactionism	Phenomenology
VI	Historical transformations reflect shifts and discontinuities.	The perspective subscribes to an orderly process of evolution, i.e., from mechanically structured to organically structured society.	The perspective advocates social change. The question, however, remains as to whether radical change is a logical process of development or a rupture with previous stages of development.	The process of social change takes place through social interaction between individuals in relation to institutions.	Social change results from changes in consciousness which in turn brings about change in social typifications.
VII	The object of study is not man the possessor of meaning, but structures of which man is the fabricator.	The objects of study are social institutions which mold and determine individual behavior.	The objects of study are dialectical processes between groups and other cultural elements.	The object of study is social interaction of which unique individuals construct their institutions.	The object of study is the world of experience constituted by consciousness.
VIII	CP are closely related to power.	Coercion is generally viewed as necessary for social control and the maintenance of social order.	CP are closely related to power.	The position of the perspective in relation to power is not clearly delineated, although the perspective often exhibits sensitivity to power.	Power is treated tangentially as effect of reification.
IX	The criteria underlying the study and the structure of CP are universal.	CP are relative.	CP are both relative and universal.	CP are relative.	CP are both relative and universal.
X	Empirical observations are only a necessary bridge to the unconscious structures of CP.	Empirical observations often are studies in and for themselves or for the order of generalization.	Empirical observations are studied to account for the underlying relations that pertain to the economic realm.	The empirical observation of symbolic communication is both the data and the end of the analysis.	Empirical observation can only occur as aspects of the consciousness of individuals, that it, from "inside," rather than "outside," the observed experience.

The conflict perspective views language as necessary for the development of class consciousness or the creation of false consciousness, although the notion of whether language is a superstructure is a controversial theme within the perspective. The legal, political, and cultural “superstructures” are “ultimately a product and reflection of underlying economic relationships” (7, p. 94). The closest concept that comes close to the unconscious is false consciousness “whose main purpose and effect is to legitimize and maintain the position of those currently in control” (7, p. 94). The unconscious and false consciousness refers to a system of thought developed to perpetuate and preserve the interests of the elite. This can ultimately be overcome when the powerless develop consciousness that discloses the true character of these obscure systems. The unconscious is broad and incorporates a variety of systems such as the contradiction between nature and culture, the “id,” the signifiers, the episteme, and problematic. The perspective regards the different spheres of social life such as the economic and the ideological spheres as interdependent (synchronically) that can be understood in terms of their historical position and origin (historically). The social system is characterized by conflict, competition, opposition, and social change. The notion of whether radical change evolves as a logical development and an accumulation of contradictions or a rupture with previous stages of development is not clearly delineated. The objects of study are mechanisms such as power that underlies social relations among groups and between groups and other cultural elements. The different aspects of cultural phenomena, regardless of their cultural context, are closely dependent on the economic base, but the nature and the mechanism by which a social system is maintained vary cross culturally and through history. The empirical observation are necessary accounts for social reality underlying economic relations in a society.

Symbolic interactionism maintains that language is a “vehicle of meanings” (1, p. 6). Language is “not only a means of communication (and thereby important in interaction), it is also a symbol system basic to human thinking” (1, p. 5). Language is a means of communication and a means of representing situations

to and reflecting on them; mind and interaction are both symbolic processes. This language, as a vehicle of significant symbols, is not, however, a system of its own. The focus of the perspective is on social interaction, a phenomenon that links the person to others and to which one must look for the evidence of social structure. The perspective emphasizes the interdependence between the individual and society. This interdependence accounts for the dynamic aspect of social interaction and social change. The position of the perspective in relation to history is not clear, although a suggestion is made that “roles are not to be viewed as the spontaneous creation of individuals at a given time, but the culmination of a long development” (1, p. 12). Power is present in social interaction, but often is not made thematic. The different social structures are constructions and, thus, are relative. The empirical observations are ends in themselves and mostly relate to symbolic communication and meanings.

Phenomenology postulates that language cannot be separated from consciousness nor can consciousness be separated from language (6, p. 21). Language is necessary for intersubjective communication based on “reciprocity of perspectives” (1, p. 24). Cultural phenomena are typifications resulting from the construction of meanings in everyday life. The process of social interaction involves taking the attitude of the other and this depends on the other acting in typical (i.e., typifiable, understandable) way. “Typifications are flexible, reflecting the specific, momentary interest of the participant, every shift entailing a change in typification” (1, p. 29). These typifications are essential structures that are understood through phenomenological techniques such as epoch, bracketing, and imaginative variation. The object of phenomenological study is the life world “as given in the immediate experience”.

The life world designates a “total sphere of experiences of an individual... encountered in the pursuit of pragmatic objective of living” (6, pp. 114-115). The aspect of history relates to the performed typification resulting from the consciousness of predecessors. This aspect also relates to time as an experience (in contrast to clock time) and relevance that designates “the

importance ascribed by an individual to selected aspects, etc. of specific situations and of his activities and plans" (5, p. 320). The empirical observations occur as aspects of the consciousness of the individual, that is from "inside" rather than from "outside" of observed experience.

The structuralist perspective is not merely an instance of that healthy theoretical pluralism, but a distinct perspective that questions basic tenets of functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology and proposes a new orientation in the study of cultural phenomena. This orientation incorporates linguistic principles, psychoanalytic theory, and Marxism. The perspective in particular makes basic contributions to sociology: the postulation that cultural phenomena are systems of language and must be studied as such, and the view that the structures of such phenomena are unconscious. The structuralist examines process such as deep structure, power, myth, ideology, and historical shifts, all of which are sociological in character. The structuralist ought to take its place as a major theoretical perspective in that rich, and complex system of knowledge known as sociological theory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Ashworth, P.D., *Social Interaction and Consciousness*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1979.
2. Edie, James M., "Was Merleau - Ponty a Structuralist?" *Semiotica*, IV (Fall, 1971, 297-223.
3. Lauer H. Robert and Handle, H. Warren, *Social Psychology: The Theory and Application of Symbolic Interactionism*, Boston, Mass, Houghton Wifflin Company, 1977.
4. Levy-Strauss, *Le Totémisme Aujourd'hui*, Paris, Plon, 1962.
5. Schutz, Alfred, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, edited and with an introduction by Wagner, Helmut R., Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970.
6. Wagner, Helmut R., *Phenomenology of Consciousness and Sociology of the Life World*, Alberta, Canada, The University of Alberta Press, 1983.
7. Wallance, Ruth A. and Wolf, Alison, *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1980.