

The founding fathers of structuralism



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الخلاصة

أصبح تطور المذهب البنوي تاريخيا، و فكرته المعتمدة حاليا في العلوم الاجتماعية كانت جذورها في مختلف المساهمات لعلماء الاجتماع أمثال أوجست كونت و دور كايم و كلود ليفي سستروس وسوسر و غيرهم . اعتقد ، بضرورة إبراز جهود هؤلاء العلماء الذين يعتبرون الآباء للمذهب البنوي ، و منها يمكننا أن ندرك كيف استطاع المذهب البنوي ان ينتشر لدى المختصين في العلوم الاجتماعية كمنهج بديل للمثالية و الوجودية والظاهرية .

Structuralism has been developed historically. The idea of structuralism which is adopted nowadays among social scientists has its roots in the contributions of the previous social scientists like August Comte, Durkheim, Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Vicoetc... I believe that it is necessary to outline the efforts and contributions of those pioneers of structuralism so that we can examine how this new tendency has been accepted by a lot of social scientists as an alternative methodology to existentialism, phenomenology and idealism .

The fathers of structuralism:

According to Bottomore and Nisbet (1979), August Comte (1798-1857) was the first systematic structural thinker in French sociology. In order to show his structuralist option, they focused on some examples of his theoretical positions which are reflecting a certain structural approach. Comte had been very antipathic to the conceptual atomism or individualism in any form. He referred particularly to the “metaphysical”

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thinking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as being the source of the atomistic individualism along with the psychological associationism of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. In the book of Positive Philosophy, Comte demonstrated that each science flows historically in structure and aims from its predecessor, including sociology. In the same book he wrote: "Our real business is to analyse accurately the circumstances of phenomena and to connect them by the natural relations of succession and resemblance". (Quoted in Bottomore and Nesbit, 1979 p.560)

He continued by saying that "no social fact can have any scientific meaning till it is connected with social fact" .(p 561)

Bottomore and Nisbet (1979) argue that the best item in Comte's structuralism may be observed in his famous "Law of Three States". It is as they qualify it an abstract and generalized structuralism which Comte was seeking in man's past and present. Comte's idea of the three states consisted in the nature of civilization which is developing from a first period characterized by theological modes of thought to a second phase dominated by philosophical or "meta-physical" forms of thought and the third stage where positive thinking is imposed .(p 562) Bottomore and Nisbet (1979) pointed out in the end that "no one ever worshipped system and structure more than August Comte" .(p 562)

One of the pioneers of the idea of structuralism was the Italian Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). He published a book called The New Science in 1725, but it passed unnoticed at that time .

The idea proposed in The New Science by Vico was simply a "natural" science for human society similar to the science developed by Galileo, Bacon and Newton. The master key of the New Science lay in Vico's discovery that the so-called "primitive" man possesses in fact an inherent "poetic wisdom" and reveals himself to be not just an ignorant and barbaric human but responds to his environment intelligibly and manifests his responses and communications in the forms of symbols and myths .

The implication of Vico's conclusion was that early societies had their own foundations for their social institutions, and their responses to reality were not "primitive" but were simply responses of a different order whose functions were serious, cognitive ones .

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Vico concluded from his observations of ancient people that were creating myths which were shaping their societies. This means that men have: “created themselves” and that “the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind” .(quote in Hawkes, 1977, p 13)

As man constructs the myths, elaborates social institutions and virtually constitutes the whole world as he perceives it, he constructs himself in doing so. This process is based on the continual creation of recognizable and repeated forms which are known as the process of structuring .From Vico’s point of view, this process was inherent, permanent and a characteristic of human being. (Hawkes ,1977 p 14)

Hawkes (1977) argues that Vico is like the existentialists. He considered that there is no pre-existent, “given” human essence and there was no such pre-determined “human nature” .Vico was also in agreement with the Marxist theory because he seemed to argue that a certain form of humanity is imposed by a particular social relation and systems of human institutions. (Hawkes, 1977 p 15)

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) is France’s preeminent sociologist after August Comte. He had contributed a lot for the edification of structuralism in French sociological thought. Durkheim had influenced with his thoughts and methodology a lot of social scientists like Claude Levi-strauss, Marcel Mauss, Maurice Halbwachs, Radcliffe-Brown and Basil Bernstein. Bottomore and Nisbet (1979) argue that “Livi-strauss has never been other than outspoken in his admiration for Durkheim” .(p 565)

Durkheim had convinced the contemporary social scientists of the usefulness of the structuralist insight in social inquiry .

To illustrate Durkheim’s structural perspective, Bottomore and Nisbet (1979) draw attention to the definition of the scope and method of sociology which Durkheim had written in his Latin Dissertation on Montesquieu published in 1892. He said: “if social science is really to exist, societies must be assumed to have a certain nature which results from the nature and arrangement of the elements composing them, and which is the source of social phenomena” (quoted in Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 566)

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Durkheim was like Comte, very critical of analytical individualism. He expunged psychology from the world of sociology because he believed that psychological explanations of social phenomena are most of the time false .

Due to the intellectual style of Durkheim, most of his readers for a long time accused him of creating a “group mind” of a limitless “social determinism”. and failing to recognise the existence of individual human beings .

Durkheim had certainly accepted from Comte the idea that society has an independent existence regarding the drive of instinct or effect of individuals .He accepted also from Comte the idea that society can be analysed only into wholes or structures which are themselves social and not individuals .Also, Durkheim and Comte agreed on the fact that social phenomena have as much reality as do physical facts. (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 566)

Durkheim’s dynamic structuralism had been outlined in the two major works: The division of labour (1893) and forms the Elementary of Religious Life (1912) .The first example in Durkheim’s structuralism was the treatment of contract as a part of a large system or structure. He conceived the idea of precontractual foundations of contract, that is, the whole institution of inherited traditions, rules and understandings, which are the basis for a modern contract. He said: “in sum, a contract is not sufficient into itself, but is possible only thanks to a regulation of the contract which is originally social”(quoted in Bottomore and Nisbet . 1979 p 567) .

Another more radical example of Durkheim’s structuralist way of thinking is seen in his interpretation of the “Categories of the Mind”. The categories are the ideas of causation, space, force, time and so on, all of which are helping man to assimilate and order sensory impressions. Durkheim was very critical of Kant’s point of view that these categories were innate, instinctive and closely attached to the human mind .He was more critical of Hume’s earlier explanations that men’s ideas of cause, time, mass and so on is the outcome of an accumulation in the individual’s life of experiences and observations .Durkheim argued that we must consider that categories are the result of the society’s dominance over the individual from the very earliest times. He said that: “it is the

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very authority of society, transferring itself to a certain manner of thought which is the indispensable condition of all thought" (quoted in Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 568) .Therefore, Durkheim was always avoiding the individual explanation of categories to the social ones which make us feel that he was more totalitarian than individualistic .

The final example of Durkheim's structuralism was the treatment of the incest taboo .(1) Here as well, Durkheim held the view of the social origin of the incest taboo. He vigorously rejected the biological and psychological explanations which could provoke the incest. Durkheim explored the origin and continuation of the incest taboo when he pointed out that the taboo has a relation with the ancient principle of exogamy (2) which is originally totemic. The totemic system is based on the fact that there is "a collective subordination of the members of the totemic group to the sacred essence represented by the totemic plant or animal" (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p569). Durkheim suggested here that exogamy was the foundation of the society and the taboo of incest had the the exogamic group function to "prevent any profanation of the totem of the exogamic group by any forms of uncleanness, whether pertaining to food, drink or sex". (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 569) Therefore, the act of

(1)Sexual intercourse between two persons commonly regarded as too closely related to marry. (dic)

(2) The custom or cult of marrying a person belonging to another tribe .(dic)of incest is a kind of prevention from profanity that could reach the totem of the exogamic group .

If we come to the conclusion about Durkheim's structuralism we can say that Durkheim, as well as Comte, always dropped the explanations which begin with biological aspects of the race or the individual, or have any connection with climatic, geographical, or other non social areas of life. or focusing on masses of particulars. Durkheim believed that all these kinds of explanations are far away from the sociological method .He stressed the fact that sociologists must set any element of human life for investigation in the larger context so that they can start a scientific explanation. and this context must be at once social and structural (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 570) .

There are some famous sociologists who have been influenced by Durkheim's structuralism. We can cite as examples, Mauss, Halbwachs, Radcliffe-Brown, Bernstein.

Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) was deeply devoted to Durkheim's methodological and theoretical canons. The structuralist character of his work may be found in the study of Primitive Classification, which he did in collaboration with Durkheim (1903) and the work done earlier (1899) called: Sacrifice: Its nature and Function. There was another study called: The Gift (1925) which is unquestionably the most important of Mauss's works. Mauss's conception of the gift is similar to the kind of social fact which Durkheim had described in theoretical terms in The Rules of Sociological Method. Mauss described the gift as "the kind that permits objective, empirical and comparative analysis and that also serves as a focus for a broad and complex pattern of social, economic, religious, aesthetic and psychological behaviour" (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 572). Mauss observed the basic function of gift exchange as to contribute to social solidarity. He said: "gift exchanges, while, in theory voluntary, disinterested, and spontaneous are in fact obligatory and interested" (quoted in Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 573)

Most of Mauss's structuralist approaches were to be found in his classical writings. We find not only the emphasis on systems and patterns of social relationships but also the focus on the objective manifestations of regular human interactions. (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 573)

In addition to Mauss, we can introduce Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). He studied under Durkheim and collaborated with him in L'Année Sociologique. He was known as generally following Durkheim's principles throughout his life, but despite this fact, he made a remarkable enlargement of scope and method. Halbwachs, using a combination of comparative and psychological analysis, studied the important subject of social class which had been almost ignored by Durkheim. He studied as well the subject of suicide following the classic work of Durkheim, but with much better sophisticated statistical method than was possible in Durkheim's days.

Halbwachs's structuralism is better seen in his book The Social Bases of Memory published in 1925. It started first of all with a Durkheimian passage on dreams, and moved to develop some analysis of the social

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sources of individual memory. The emphasis of that book was on the function of language, the relation of family tradition to individual images, religion, and social class. All these subjects had been dealt with in order to bring to light the relation between the nature of individual memory and the social order. The structuralism of Halbwachs is much better realized from his final work, The Topography of Legend, published in 1941 in France. This work was the social-psychological study of a famous holy place and put emphasis on the fusion of tradition and legend into a collective memory of those who live there, or who make pilgrimages to it. (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p573)

The influence of Durkheim's structuralism had gone beyond the frontier of France when it had gained the admiration of the British anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955). He is viewed as the first outside France to assert the theoretical-philosophical importance of Durkheim and also its relevance to empirical study of social behaviour. In fact, it was Radcliffe-Brown who had contributed a lot to bringing Durkheim into the position of intellectual authority in the United States since the 1930s. (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p575)

Radcliffe-Brown had emphasised structure and function, and this was the chief reason that enabled him to be among the post-Durkheimians. He believed that anthropologists should be involved in search of scientific laws of structure, function and other cardinal elements of the primitive societies instead of entering into the investigation for "human origins" and the stages of development. Radcliffe-Brown specified very clearly his structuralist tendency in the Natural Science of Society. He wrote: "no amount of investigation can explain the characteristics of society by single reference to the nature of human beings, but by an investigation of human beings arranged in a certain order, yes. The social scientist is studying the structural arrangement of the units and takes the internal structure of the units for granted." (quoted in Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979 p 576)

Radcliffe-Brown made an important distinction relating to the nature of change. Firstly, there is "change within the structure". This kind occurs, for example, when two people unrelated before get married and have children. This fact is, in a way, change in the life patterns of many people but it has not affected the social structure, that is, the institution of

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marriage. The change has taken place within the marriage social structure but it has not affected the system of marriage itself. The other kind of change which Radcliffe-Brown had pointed out is the kind of change that alters or transforms the structure of marriage itself. But this kind of change is rare and it is the result of internal or external disturbances.

The last author I would draw attention to is Bernstein. He is also considered as a Durkheimian structuralist.

According to Atkinson (1981), Bernstein has been influenced by Durkheim's thought and he has always referred to the framework of Durkheim's concepts. The structuralism of Bernstein – inspired from Durkheim – is clearly shown in his papers on the ritual of schooling, and his suggestion of the distinction between the "expressive" and "instrumental" orders of school. (p 88)

Bernstein's structuralism is formulated also on the notion of "code" which has been often misunderstood and misread by a lot of social scientists. Atkinson (1981) argues that Bernstein's notion of code is in some way equivalent to Levi-Strauss's "jig-saw" which is a kind of "regulatory principle or mechanism which underlies the "surface" manifestations of speech, perceptions and order of meaning" (p 88). Bernstein uses again the notion of "code" in a structural way. He refers to it – as Atkinson said – "to a regulatory principle governing the selection and permitted permutations of curricular and linguistic "code" in much more than in common terminology." (p 92) Therefore the "code" as a systematic principle has the function to let the possibility of emerging different "forms" of speech in real life. Atkinson (1981) argues that this latter conception of "code" has been inspired from the structuralist ideas of Mary Douglas. (p 92) Atkinson (1981) draws a conclusion about the aim of Bernstein's structuralism. He said that: "the full significance of his oeuvre lies in a consistent attempt (if unevenly realized) to theorize the reproduction of social forms" (p 92)

Structuralism in linguistics :

The foundations of structuralism are originating in the linguistic model. Barthes himself has been quoted as saying that structuralism as a mode of analysis has its basis in the methods of contemporary linguistics. This view is supported by Levi-Strauss as well. In an article about structural linguistics and anthropology, he said that as far as the

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anthropologists are following the linguist's example; they might become very productive and fruitful and could lead them to the "phonological evolution" in anthropology. (Culler, 1975 p 3-4)

Linguistic discipline has become a key to the techniques of structuralism by the influence of the "Father of Modern Linguistics", Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist whose work is the basis for most contemporary structuralist thinking. Saussure inherited the traditional view of language as in aggregate of separate units, called "words" which were accepted as having separate "meaning" attached to them. All words in a language exist within a historical dimension subject to observable and recordable avowal change. (Hawkes, 1977 p 19)

The contribution of Saussure to the study of linguistics lies in the shift from the traditional view of language to the new conception of it as a "relational" one. The revolutionary ideas of Saussure in linguistics had been recorded in his Cours de Linguistique Generale. It is an account assembled from the notes of his students who attended some of his lecture at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911. Saussure suggested the argument that language should be studied not only diachronically, in terms of its individual parts, but also synchronically, in terms of the relationships between those parts. (Hawkes, 1977 p19-20)

Saussure believed that we should not only take into account the diachronic development of language because it is not the only process to take notice of in the study of language. In fact, the history of a word could lead to inadequate accounts of its meaning. The language should be studied also in its synchronical aspect. There are laws of equilibrium underlying language which operate on its elements and result in a synchronic system at any point in history (Piaget, 1971 p 76).

The next crucial idea in the structuralist enterprise of linguistics is the distinction drawn by Saussure between "language" and "speaking". He has taken linguistics to be concerned with "langue" (language) rather than with "parole" (speaking). The distinction between the two is that language could be concerned with what we have in common which enables us to speak. It is – as Culler (1975) puts it – "a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms" (p 3). "Speaking" is something we have individually. It is a personal freedom of speech. In

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often. The thing which will remain always is the form of the train (the phenomenon) but the matter is in permanent change. There is a similar situation in linguistics, if we take the word “gentleman”, we encounter that it may vary in the way it is pronounced and it may differ in the way it is meant but after all, it remains the same word. What always varies is the phonic and the psychological matter, the form of the word is usually constant. (Pettit, 1975 p7)

Pettit (1975) argues in the end that we can understand from Saussure’s ideas in linguistics that language – as distinct from speaking – “is essentially a system for differentiating words” (p 10). The linguistic model of Saussure – as Pettit (1975) argues – considered language as things of the material world. Saussure put also language as a mechanism or organism. He said: “language is a system of independent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the imultaneous presence of the others”. (quoted in Pettit, 1975 p10)

The system of language is not even qualified as being the product of the conscious mind, it is working under unconscious laws. Saussure argued that: “ the system is a complex mechanism that can be grasped only through reflections, the very ones who use it daily are ignorant of it” (quoted in Pettit, 1975 p10)

Structuralism in Anthropology :

Moving now to structuralism in anthropology, we realize the central figure in the movement is undoubtedly Claude Levi-Strauss. Richard de George (1972) argues that for some people the writings of Levi-Strauss are synonymous with structuralism (p 23) .

Levi-Strauss had accepted the structural conception in linguistics to the extent that he used the methods of structural linguistics in his anthropological analysis. He was first wondering: “... whether the different aspects of social life (including even arts and religion) cannot only be studied by the methods of, and with the help of concepts similar to those employed in linguistics, but also whether they do not constitute phenomena whose innate nature is the same as that of language. (quoted in Hawkes, 1975 p33)

Levi-Strauss treated all kinds of social behaviours and activities such as cooking, music, art, modes of dress, as if they were languages, because each of them is conceived as a social expression. Social

activities have the role of communication and expression. They are like a language, organized in a system of behaviour which is structured by unconscious laws. The structure of each social activity or behaviour could be seen as the grammar of a language. People are unconscious of their structural activities, in the same way as the rules of the English speakers. Levi-Strauss considered that if we do not feel the structuring of our customs and modes of dress and so on, this does not mean that they are unstructured. The structures of the social activities and behaviours are within them and underlying them, and if we want to see them we have to provide a lot of effort to make them explicit over the years just like the English language grammar is now quite known and explicit. Therefore, the primary role of anthropology, in the conception of Levi-Strauss, is to explain cultural phenomena in terms of general laws and unconscious structures. (De George, 1972 p25)

Levi-Strauss perceived cultural activities and behaviours not as intrinsic or discrete entities, but in terms of the dissimilar relationship they have with each other so that they appear strongly similar to phonemic structure of language. He said: "like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems" (quoted in Hawkes, 1977 p 34)

Levi-Strauss's conception of social structure is more elaborated than that of Radcliffe-Brown. Radcliffe-Brown believed that in both the natural and social world, the structure is an organization which consists of concrete parts of the whole. There is a close relation between structure and function and the social structure has the same empirical existence as physiological phenomena. Levi-Strauss on the other hand agreed with Radcliffe-Brown that the structure is part of reality but he saw it at a much higher level of abstraction. He was much concerned with the former way which the parts of the structure are organized. Levi-Strauss emphasised the fact that it is possible to have several ways of organization of the same phenomena or structural elements. (Glucksmann, 1974 p232-233)

Levi-Strauss believed that there is a structure of human nature which should uncover. He thought also that there is a universal, basic structure of man which is hidden below the surface and which is known through its social manifestations such as language, cooking, dress, arts, myths and all

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kinds of social expressions. He agreed with Marx and Feud that everything is determined and comes from deeper realities and deeper order, so there is no room for arbitrary or accidental facts .(De George, 1972 p 28)

Following the Marxist's views, Levi-Strauss argued that both the under-structure (economic base) and the super-structure (social and ideological morals) of a society are formed from a multiplicity of levels (structures) with different types of transformations operative from one level to another. The role of structural anthropology is to uncover the multiplicity of structures at all levels of society and to prove that they are homologous to one another. (De George, 1972 p 26)

Conclusion: In conclusion, we can say that this exposition of the central ideas of Saussure and Levi-Strauss has demonstrated their structuralist concerns. I would like also to draw attention to the conclusion highlighted by Bottomore and Nisbet from the writings of modern linguistics theorists and from Levi-Strauss to Althusser, it says that structuralism embodies a general philosophy of science which is not only antihumanistic and antihistoricist but also anti-empiricist. According to the structuralism tendency, the constitution of any science is mainly a theoretical construction provided by the formation of concepts referring to the "hidden" realities and not relying on the immediately given data of empirical science .

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