

# The Idea of Structure in Anthropology: How It Began

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20 July 2000

The idea of structure in the study of society started with Herbert Spencer. In “The Evolution of Society,” he likened society to a living organism. “The permanent relations among the parts of a society,” he wrote, “are analogous to the permanent relations among the parts of a living body.”

Spencer asserted that a society is an organism, more akin to living than to non-living aggregates due to its “conspicuous augmentation of mass,” which, more simply put, means growth – growth that is visible and relatively fast, that is, in contrast to the slow accretional growth of inorganic things. Moreover, he added, it is a character of social bodies, as of living bodies, “that while they increase in size they [also] increase in structure.”

In living organisms as in societies, Spencer contended, an increase in structure spells a “progressive differentiation” accompanied likewise by a “progressive differentiation of functions.” In society in particular, “a dominant class arising does not simply become unlike the rest, but assumes control over the rest” -- a distinction foreshadowing Marx. “While rudimentary,” Spencer continues, “a society is all warrior, all hunter, all hut-builder, all tool-maker: every part fulfils for itself all needs.” But with each increment in growth, the social aggregate “habitually gains in heterogeneity,” and “to reach great size must acquire great complexity.”

Mutual dependence of parts being an essential characteristic of all structures, whether they be living organisms or societies, “then in proportion as organization is high there must go a dependence of each part upon the rest so great that separation is fatal; and conversely.” In the “lowest social aggregates,” Spencer claims, “little inconvenience results from voluntary or forced separation,” each man knowing all the functions of the tribe; therefore “either before or after a part of the tribe migrates, some man becomes head, and such low social life as if possible recommences.” However, such “highly organized aggregates” as mammals cannot be cut in two without causing immediate death. So too in “high societies.” “Middlesex separated from its surroundings would in a few days have all its social processes stopped by lack of supplies.”

How is coherence among the parts of a social organism maintained, if there is no direct physical mechanism to bind them, as in an individual organism? “Not in contact, they nevertheless affect one another through intervening spaces.” “The internuncial function, not achievable by stimuli physically transferred, is nevertheless achieved by....” Spencer, in his time, could not find the one word that could adequately express this

binding force. The “superorganic,” he called it. It took Tylor to formulate the word “culture,” borrowing it from the Germans, and, together with it, “anthropology.”

Nevertheless, according to Bohannan and Glazer, Spencer’s attempts to define structure, function, organism and evolution as they relate to society appear to have given rise to latter-day structural functionalism, and Spencer remains a formidable founder of the field of anthropology.

Durkheim’s rejection of Spencer led to the growth of varieties of functionalism among the French structuralists, as well as British and American anthropologists. “Spencer was in fundamental error concerning the importance of social as opposed to individual factors in the industrial phase,” according to Marvin Harris. For Spencer as for Marx, the withering away of the state meant the death not only of the apparatus of the state but of the whole “supra-individual, sociocultural nexus of restraint,” and Durkheim objected “to this predicted diminution of the social factor in the strongest possible terms.”

For Durkheim, neither the state nor the power of the social organism over the individual shall fade away; rather, there shall be “an intensification of the mutual dependence of individual and social group”. He subscribed to the superorganic, but not to Spencer’s superorganic model, which “was trammled by bitter opposition to the enlargement of government and was ultimately, despite his denial of free will and his use of an organismic model, perfectly reducible to individual motives... , strengths and weaknesses in the ‘struggle for survival’”. Individual behavior was, for him, rather “a ‘reincarnation’ or reflection of social entities enjoying an existence which is independent not only of the concrete expression in a given individual but also of the observer’s logico-empirical procedures” [Harris, 1968]. And this Harris calls, rightly, Hegelian idealism.

To Durkheim, as enunciated by Harris, social facts are representations of the collective consciousness, “that is, ideas experienced by the group mind and expressed or ‘reincarnated’ in the minds and behavior of the individual members of the social group.” On the question of what causes the division of labor, therefore, he contends that, contrary to Spencer’s view, “the desire for material abundance is a consequence and not a cause of the division of labor,” the function of the division of labor being the preservation of social solidarity.

This leads him to a conclusion in direct opposition to Marx’s, who propounded class struggle. For in Marx’s theory of social/political/economic change, social conflict is bound to intensify rather than diminish, and social cohesion is reserved only for the ranks of the proletariat, which is destined to war with the bourgeoisie. Durkheim rejected this view of the social organism and social structure together with Marx’s economic fundamentals, thereby establishing “a science of culture which could explain sociocultural phenomena without getting involved in techno-economic causation” [Harris].