

How to consider recent capitalism and its consequences for the field of nutrition without resorting to the notion of structure?

Francisco Romão Ferreira¹

¹ Department of Social Nutrition, Institute of Nutrition Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil.

Correspondence

Francisco Romão Ferreira
Email: fromao@terra.com.br

The text entitled as “Estrutural-funcionalismo antropológico e comensalidade: breves considerações sobre a mudança social” (Anthropological structural functionalism and commensality: brief reflections on social change) has a very proper approach when it rescues the structuralist conception in the analysis of the current social relations. It especially points out that research object investigation, in the fields of Food and Nutrition and of Body Practices, does not always explicit their theoretical and methodological paradigms. Or worse, many times such theoretical perspective is ignored in the field of Nutrition, where objective and quantitative studies are preferable and more suited to publications that provide higher points in Capes.

There seems to be certain modesty on the part of some sectors of academia in proposing a structuralist analysis, perhaps because it is no longer edgy, as if the production of thought had to follow the “most recent trend”, as well as the market for consumer goods. But perhaps this is also a trend of current thinking, to seek certain pragmatism and productivism, objectivizing and fragmenting all, turning even the academic thinking into object of consumption. The need for accelerated production, the logic of productivity, measured only by quantitative criteria, may explain this new “market” trend. An old fashioned product such as structuralism would not please consumers nowadays.

This logic of *fastfood* thought does not match the rigor and maturity needed for us to realize the subtlety hidden within the details of social life. Its analysis requires plenty of time to allow us to perceive the hidden or concealed senses in reality. This ethnographic research, based on empirical data, and this thorough and insightful perspective do not agree with the accelerated production of texts, articles, theses and dissertations. Understanding the intricacies of social life requires a *slowfood* reading, ie, we need time to perceive the social structures. One can not perceive or mentally organize such structures in a logic of fragmented thinking that does not value the great narratives. They treat them as if they had disappeared, as if the mere fact that they have stopped noticing them would cause them to disappear. Just as children when they close their eyes and think the object has disappeared. But in our case, the social structures are still there, in the same place, acting and producing meanings. Thus, how to consider recent capitalism without resorting to the notion of structure?

The Structural-Functionalist tradition, as well depicted in the text of Cesar Sabino and Maria Claudia Carvalho, analyzes structures from empirical foundations and emphasizes the subjective structures, leading to social transformation. however, the research base is always the daily experience, because, according to the authors and citing Francis Bacon, “nothing is in the mind that isn’t first in the senses”. In this tradition of thought, social phenomena make up a distinct class of phenomena that are observable in their daily life existence, and social structures are as real as individual organisms. That is, to understand individual actions, one must also understand the set of relationships that make up the system. And to understand the social structure, one must understand individual actions and realize “how those component parts work with each other and with the whole”. According to one of the authors cited in the text, the anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, “social phenomena in any human society are not as well an immediate result of the nature of human beings, considered individually, but instead, it is a consequence of the social structure within which they are united”.

But we know that social structures are totalities organized according to internal principles, which are inserted into them and drive their elements or parts, their operation and their potential temporal or historical transformations.

In the structure, the total is not the sum of the parts, nor a set of causal relationships among elements that can be isolated; instead, it is a guiding, differentiating, and transforming principle. A structure is a totality comprised of sense. The structuralist conception came to show that the human facts take the form of structures, ie, of systems that create their own elements, providing them with sense for the position and function they have in the entirety. Realizing a structure means, therefore, to realize a way of organizing reality from causal relationships, apparently lame, but that make much sense, or rather, that produce the senses that give meaning to reality.

The structuralist conception requires, besides plenty of time, a perception of totality and of the relationships among the component parts of social reality. They are subtle mechanisms hidden in complex systems of signification. Social Anthropology has shown that, contrary to the Positivist Anthropology's idea, the so-called "primitive societies" are not a late stage of mankind social history evolution, but it is actually an objective manner of organizing social relations in a different way than that of ours, constituting cultural structures. Complex urban societies, likewise, produce symbolic structures that regulate social life.

Anthropology exposes systems of rules, values, ideas and myths hidden in everyday life and that give meaning to actions. But this perception implies an immense ability to decode seemingly random data and sort them according to a coherent theoretical framework in which the parts give sense to the total. Other structuralist authors have produced works that serve as references in the Humanities and Social Sciences to this day. Saussure showed the complex mechanisms of language. Sapir showed how our worldview depends on the language. Marx brought to light the weight of the economic structure in the construction of the individual. Psychoanalysis dove into the unconscious structure of personality. Bachelard exposed us to the idea of knowledge as discontinuous development. These are all detailed analyzes of cultural life that intend to account for the totality of reality, and in order to do so, they demand the plenty of time mentioned above. Such amount of time does not match the speed of our liquid world. If Marx, Freud, and Saussure were researchers nowadays, they would have to slice up their work to publish them in *Qualis A* magazines. They would not be able to think of macrostructures, because their works would be considered very extensive, and thus would not get enough points.

For the Philosophical Structuralism, the background category or main focus is not the Being, but relationship; it is not the subject, but structure. It precedes the subject. From this perspective, the French thinker Michel Foucault (also considered structuralist) restructures the ideas of subject, society, institution, knowledge and power. For Foucault, modern societies have a new organization of power, which was once seen as repressive and negative, because they have realized that in capitalism the repressive model is not effective, and if the mechanisms of domination are conducted only through violence, they cannot be effective. For Foucault, the mechanisms of power become more subtle, natural, "pleasant and desirable". According to him, it is necessary to cease the continuous descriptions of the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", "represses", "pressures", "bans", "discriminates", "masks", "hides".

Power generates / simulates reality. It produces means of mastering ideas, objects, meanings, concepts, and wishes. It captures people's wishes and establishes an intimate relationship with knowledge, it becomes a producer of knowledge, it creates power effects. It is, thus, productive, positive. But it is not reproduced from a core center (the Government, the ruling class or group of people). It is reproduced from micro powers that extend over social behavior without centering in

any cores. The mechanisms of domination are more subtle and accepted by the dominated. They are built from several tactics, effective standards, disciplinary control mechanisms, and strategies that ensure domination from the dominated subjects themselves.

The normative order is not intended to suppress, punish, nor ban. It wants to be accepted and spread, it wants to convince, seduce. Its tactic is thus to rationally convince, to present itself as the most clear, rational, and pleasant choice, made by individuals, instead of imposed on them. If before power was repressive, prohibitive, punitive and (as Durkheim would say) coercive, now it is normative, disciplinarian, pleasant, subtle, rational, and “natural”.

By relating this thought to the scientific field of Nutrition, we can see this change in the conception of the discourses that govern the eating order and the production of consumption goods in everyday life, because food is also a symbol, it also has aura and generates social distinction. We can then observe seemingly contradictory directions, because the flexibility of rules and standards coexist with strict nutritional recommendations. Although we have control of the eating order (governed by nutritional scientific institutions) we also have a plentiful supply of food by large global *fastfood* chains; we note a “valorization” of products that reflect the local identity and a standardization of tastes and products on a global scale; and we have an apparently increasing offer of individual choice in parallel to the standardization of products in the same transnational corporations. The apparent ability of individual free choice serves also as a function of the system, since the market is ready to meet (and produce) their needs. To consider the eating order we have, then, to think about the main social actor who is behind everyday actions, ie, we have to think about the role of the market. The market produces elements that organize the symbolic structure that regulates food intake and social relations nowadays.

As mentioned earlier, the global capitalism spreads its power / thinking structure through a subtle, normative, disciplinarian, pleasant, rational, and “natural” market. Their symbolic power and its structure of producing meaning is manifested in the field of Food and Nutrition from different perspectives. Among them: in the medicalization of everyday life (turning food into medication); in the strategies of “Biopower”, disciplinary control and creation of docile bodies “lean and healthy”; on aestheticization of Health transforming beauty parameters into evidence of healthy life; in the eroticism and medicalization of different stages of life; in the commodification of Medicine, in the objectification of affections, desires and relationships; in food production that unify and massify the same products on a global scale; in the acceleration of the social processes of the liquid world that diminishes labor relations; in the commodification of symbolic, cultural, social, and religious dimensions into mere products; or, in the imperative necessity of productivity in the construction of knowledge in the Health Sciences. The pragmatic and utilitarian logic of the market is present in all social relations, even in affection.

A structural functionalist analysis in our society today would need to highlight the role of consumption and the symbolic relationships that it generates. If we conduct an ethnographic study in the surroundings of Uerj to observe the elements of our “local culture”, we will notice that a mosaic, a patchwork of meanings that groups traditional, daily, and global market values. The same elements cited by Bourdieu to capture the games of social distinction in other cultures could be used right here, just around the corner, to notice how much of the symbolic power of global capitalism is present, right next to us. The social ostentation codes in other cultures can be noted right here, in Tijuca, really close by. Just a quick trip to the Tijuca mall will allow us to find “plurality of individual deals” offered by globalization. We can “choose” to have a snack at McDonalds, a fried chicken at KFC, a pizza at Pizza Hut, and sandwiches at Bob’s, Burger King or Subway. We also have other choices such as to eat a *esfiha* at Habib’s, to have some China in Box, or Japanese food at KoniStore. And then we can still have some coffee and eat a *cupcake* at Starbucks (the largest coffee chain in the world).

But if we do not want to go anywhere “so contaminated by the capitalist logic”, we can go to some candy store and find good Italian Lavazza espresso, and we can eat croissants, muffins, madeleines, financiers, cheesecakes, Portuguese pastries or brownie with some Coke Zero, after all, you have to cut some calories down. The hard part is to find cashew fruit sweets, cornmeal cake, *paçoca* (Brazilian ground peanut candy) or *pé de moleque* (traditional candy from the Brazilian cuisine made of peanuts and jaggery or molasses).

But how to consider this reality recent, if in Health Sciences the structural functionalist approach is old-fashioned? How to consider the symbolic structure of the market if the “reflective and subjective” texts are misvalued? How to consider our reality only from epidemiological studies, which are “neutral, pragmatic, and objective”?

Knowing that the social structures are still there, in the same place, acting and producing meanings, only now under the influence of global capitalism, the questions I ask the authors are:

How can we abandon the structuralist thought if it gives us the key to understanding the power games of capitalism?

How to consider recent capitalism and its consequences for the field of Nutrition without resorting to the notion of structure?

