

Why talk about classic anthropological theory in the current field of nutrition?

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We may ask ourselves after reading this dense, coherent and reasonably long argumentation in the article “Estrutural-funcionalismo antropológico e comensalidade: breves considerações sobre a mudança social” (Anthropological structural functionalism and commensality: brief reflections on social change) by César Sabino and Maria Cláudia da Veiga Soares de Carvalho, if it still makes sense to talk about the structural-functionalist approach, in the Social Sciences, as a model, theory, or method of analysis. Especially when read in the works of the founding fathers of anthropology and the varied methodological and theoretical currents that, in the second half of the twentieth century, have been brought forth in anthropology, but also in Sociology, Politics, and finally (after the 1970s), in this extensive disciplinary field known as Social Communication.

The perplexity is justified: in a cultural universe in which scientific thinking, including social behavior, must be in constant change to catch up with the prevailing scientific logic, in continuous evolution, or, preferably using the current trendy term, in continuous innovation, although changing to remain always the same episteme, succeeding in a real parade of fashionable theories in a certain period of time - which is, it should be noted, increasingly shorter - it may sound old-

fashioned to bring out to the analytical scenario certain theoretical and methodological foundations of the social anthropological thought that cannot be affected over time.

In our view, this is the case of structural functionalism. Even retracing its path of propagation under several theories, varying interpretations and multiple controversies generated over time, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, according to the different macro or micro analytical currents of thought in the Social Sciences, this theoretical and methodological approach is still resisting with conceptual density and with the depth of its theoretical source: functional structuralism. Or structuralist functionalism, according to the priorities of the analytical perspective: the morphology or functioning of the structures, ie, their procedural motion or stability in terms of systemic form. Either way, this is a static approach of “social totalities”, either in macro or micro level of methodological approach or theoretical interpretation. We mean that such totalities are always seen in the structural functionalist perspective, through its irreducible (“structure”) morphological constitution, or through its procedural variations in time (“changes”), ie, variations in its entirety as a whole, or in its constituent units. The variations in the constituent units of social structures may or may not lead to changes in the morphological entirety (“*structural changes*”), giving rise to new social forms, either by the combining or development of units, seeking the advancement of new functions, due to the growth, to the maturing, or to the evolving of the constituent units’ complexity of the totality in analysis. Which, from our point of view, identifies the issue of social change, in functional structuralism, to the model of the “procedural variation”, ie, to an ongoing “physiology” of social forms^a. Morphology and physiology of social life are the premier brand of the functionalist method, both in Anthropology and in Sociology, which motivated many of the criticisms to this method.

From another perspective, or from different angles of method analysis, the authors of this text, especially Cesar Sabino for his strong background in anthropology, seek to show how certain roots of the “meaning”, concrete of the symbolic universe that generates culture as a dimension of human existence, that is, *assigning specific meanings to basic human activities* - among which is, undoubtedly, to eat, or have a meal, or to nurture, a central theme of the article - they are **universal** forms, even if the practices derived from them differ in social time and space. Or, if we would rather use another term instead, it is more linked to social history, according to different types of the historical development of societies.

Fundamental social practices, such as those related to the reproduction of human species, which result in what we acknowledge, in the contemporary culture, as “sexual practices”, or those

a See LUZ, M.T. Fondements Idéologiques de la méthode structurelle-fonctionnelle, Master's Thesis in Sociology, Louvain, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1969, 157 + XVI p., chp. 1 and 2. Op.cit. in authors' article.

linked to its preservation, such as food and sleep, or even its recovery, such as those related to healing, which generate the whole field of activities that we currently acknowledge as *health*, are enriched not only of important senses and meanings for the social group, but also of practices, rituals and norms that ratify them and - more than that - ensure the reproduction of those senses and meanings by different human groups and their cultures.

Certainly, such social practices, generated by “collective consciousness”, according to Durkheim, because they become mandatory, generate obligated attitudes and behaviors, are not pure “objectivities”, they are not an external “structure” to the subject, just as in a mechanistic current view, which interprets the notion of collective consciousness as if it were an abstract dimension of society, almost such as a geometric plane, with no real social consistency.

It is essential to understand that social normativity generated by the Durkheimian concept of collective consciousness - later changed by his followers, many cited in the article, adopting other formulations - or in Malinowski, Levi-Strauss and Bourdieu, or even in later authors, it is not an external dimension to the human subject. It constitutes humans themselves, gradually being internalized in the socialization processes typical of each society, and the human individual becomes *a subject*, far more than a mere individual of a particular animal species, acknowledged as superior, largely due to these processes. Socialization means the *normativity* or social submission of individual subjects.

Certainly, one cannot ignore the biological and psychological dimensions throughout this process of normative constitution of the human subject, nor its intricate and complex mediations, but it is impossible to think of a human being outside of their cultural socialization, they are defined by that particular social structure from birth. In many senses, the construction of human body and emotions is conditioned to the actual structure. Although one could also argue that the reverse is true, ie, collective actions and attitudes, in groups or individually, motivated by unsatisfactory social needs of the agents or by feelings of moral outrage, political rejection or, conversely, of support to social order, can cause small alterations or complete changes to social structure. And the theoretical and methodological contribution to the understanding of this process, through the structural functional currents, analyzed in the authors’ article, and to which we have outlined these comments, is **absolutely undeniable**.

Malinovsky and Durkheim’s morphological functionalism, as well as Levi-Strauss’ ethnological structural formulation on the organization and development of society and culture are more than mere theoretical currents. They are true foundational methodological tools in the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, and Politics. Through these approaches, we can understand and analyze what can be termed as “invariant elements” of structure, ie, those that truly *define* a social structure.

Malinovsky's morphology, just as Durkheim's, provides a methodological approach that is certainly influenced by the Biology from those days. However, it allows us to analyze the *basic elements* of each society, ie, the social "constitutive forms" and their variations over their historical time, in morphological perspective, with variation practically anatomical and physiological, consistent with Biomedicine. As for the Straussian approach, in which the structured morphology of society assumes an inconsistent *social structure*, the invariant constituent elements, ie, the *rules of the rules* that regulate each society, can be objectified in standard *norms*, whose basic function is precisely to preserve the hidden rules in the objectified social structure. On these invariant rules of structure reside, if we may affirm so, a symbolic instance, the *hardcore* of human cultural universe, which can be implicitly told through *myths*, such as in indigenous societies, but also through *legendary narratives*, as it occurs with medieval societies or with Greek and modern tragedies (Greek or Shakespearean drama), such as in complex *writing* societies.

Just as eating, and having a meal, as basic functions of human living, the functional structural methodological discourse is also irreducible part of the symbolic human universe. It is a theoretical and methodological tool possibly still essential to anthropological or sociological analyzes, bordering the field of Nutrition. It will be only necessary to specify which categories, which versions of the method are intended to be used, which objects need to be researched for the method to be suitable and productive. We consider this article by SABINO and CARVALHO a first major effort towards this path.

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