Anthropological structural functionalism and commensality: brief reflections on social change

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze, from the key theoretical frameworks of Durkheim, part of the British anthropological classical tradition known as structural functionalism, emphasizing the dichotomy between the empiricism found in Radcliffe-Brown's research and the concern with symbolic systems observed in the works of Mary Douglas. This paper also suggests that there are new uses and developments for these theories today. Another goal of this paper is to highlight, in these approaches, the basic elements of social analysis constructed by the authors, aiming to discuss their methodological relevance and their possible application for research on culture, society and power.

Key words: Anthropology. Sociology. Food. Nutrition.

Introduction

The so-called "structural approach" is still a significant part of contemporary anthropology and sociology. Numerous analyses, directly or indirectly, adopt this methodological approach in the investigation of research subjects in the field of food and bodily practices, although they do not always make theoretical or methodological paradigms explicit. However, instead of forming a "school" in the strict sense, this aspect branches into several trends, with numerous and progressive modulations and even radical oppositions,[1-4] which may be more empiricist or more intellectualist. Roughly speaking, the broader variations of this approach can be referred to as structural-functionalist and structuralist. The former, in the case of Social Anthropology, is directly associated with Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) and is particularly British, originally. The latter is associated with the name of the greatest representative of French structuralism: Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009). Nevertheless, the two aforementioned traditions differ not only from each other, but also internally in each of the approaches. We will try to address some specificities of the so-called structural-functionalist school,[a],[5] better known as British Social Anthropology and, at times, also approach issues associated with the field of food and nutrition in order to motivate the reader of this journal towards interdisciplinarity.

Founding father

The main theoretical and methodological influence associated with structural functionalism (also with French structuralism) comes from the work of Émile Durkheim (1858-1917). For the founder of the French school of sociology, society is characterized as a *sui generis* fact, irreducible to any explanatory instance other than the one rooted in all of those facts - which he had conceptualized as *social facts*. As a whole, *social facts* are synonymous with what Durkheim also called *collective consciousness* or *collective mentality*, i.e. an instance disseminated by social groups and rooted in the unconscious of social agents. Indeed, this representational instance has specific traits that make it a unique reality regardless of personal elements, agents or individuals. In other words, *collective consciousness*[6] could be defined as "the set of beliefs and feelings common to the

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a   We shall use this term to facilitate the tentative analysis. It is known that the very Radcliffe-Brown himself[5] opposed to using such term by saying that "there is no place for 'schools' in the natural sciences and I consider social anthropology as a branch of these sciences. (...) Cooperation among scientists results from the fact that they work on the same emerging issues or problems. Such cooperation does not result from the development of schools (...) There is no place for orthodoxies or heterodoxies in science. Nothing is more pernicious in science than the attempt to establish adherence to doctrines" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 233).

average members of a society [that] forms a given system with a life of its own."[b] This set or system is independent of its elements (individuals or "subjects"), forming the specific and unique object of study of Sociology.[7]

It should be emphasized that the concept of collective consciousness, in Durkheimian studies, comprises the dimension of the moral instance and the perceptual dimension, suggesting that beliefs and feelings belonging to the same *collective consciousness* are both religious and cognitive[8] at once. Thus, human beings classify reality based on its previous classification by the set of norms, values and beliefs that are independent of it and form the set of *social representations (collective consciousness)*, which produce the practices of the group such set belongs to and must adhere to. It should be noted that social facts, therefore, are exterior, extensive, and coercive to social agents.[9,10]

In addition to the study of *social facts* and its fundamental representational dimension, Durkheimian sociology is also expected to consider the empirical dimension of social reality, comparing different groups in search of regularities common to most of them. Following this project, Durkheim seeks to study social morphology and social species in order to classify them, under the aegis of the organicism of his time. Therefore, human societies are assumed to have evolved from simpler organizational systems - hordes and clans - into more complex systems. In the former systems (simple), individuals are juxtaposed and similar, signaling strength, homogeneity and cohesion of the *collective consciousness* in their symbolic dimensions, and weakening the process of disintegration and illness of the social organism - which he called *anomie*. Simple societies have higher homeostasis than contemporary ones.

In order to understand the transformation of simple societies into complex societies, Durkheim developed the categories of *mechanical solidarity* and *organic solidarity*, reiterating that moving from one solidarity status to another represents social change. Mechanical solidarity prevails in primitive (simple) societies, where individuals identified with one another by means of religious and family ties, as well as tradition and customs, while generally remaining independent and autonomous as regards the division of social labor. However, they were socially cohesive, as the function of *collective consciousness* was that of exercising almost full coercive power over individual desires (because such social systems do not have the concept of the free subject, the indivisible atom which should be legally served by institutions), promoting the integration of social totality. In complex societies, on the other hand, the same cohesion should be produced by the division of social labor, thus making individuals increasingly interdependent. In these societies, this interdependence would ensure greater cohesion, unlike the force exerted by the customs, traditions and narrow social relations

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b   Durkheim, 1973, p. 342.

associated with simple societies. Indeed, *collective consciousness* in complex societies, with increasing division of social labor, ended up unraveling, because as they became dependent on each other, as a result of the specialization of activities, there was self-isolation, and personal autonomy, and, therefore, individualism with all its Cartesian, philosophical support.

The study of complex societies led Durkheim to formulate the concepts of *normality* and *social pathology*. By studying the forms of social pathology, as aforementioned, the author uses the concept of anomie, which means the absence or disintegration of order and social norms. More frequently, anomie is the pathology of complex societies, and because the latter are based on individual differences (in the social representation of the subject), for effective cohesion to take place, the tasks to be performed by individuals would have to match their desires and aspirations. As this process may not occur, the values that promote social cohesion would eventually be weakened and the social system would be threatened by the disintegration of *collective consciousness*, and society would run the risk of collapse.[6] Claude Fischler,[11] imbued with some Durkheimian pessimism, created the hypothesis that the emergence of fast-food restaurants and self-service are symptoms of contemporary social anomie and represent the regression of taste and the disintegration of commensal relationships of solidarity. According to Fischler,[12] there is a "bastardization of culinary folklore in the agri-food era"[c]. According to his perspective, in ill societies like the modern one, the act of eating fast and alone, without enjoying the taste and so on, shows the social disease rooted in the American food model[d]. Hence, Fischler refers to these contemporary practices of food and nutrition (or lack thereof) as *gastro-anomie*.

Durkheim's works show a concern with two realities that constitute society: subjective structures (social or collective representations, collective consciousness or collective mentality) and objective structures (social morphology and integrated functioning of the social body, institutions and organizations); it is an aspect in his work associated with the social division of labor. These two subsystems - one more abstract or subtle, and one more concrete or dense - would be interconnected, consolidating the entirety of the social body. This duality also suggests a chronic problem inherent in the Social Sciences: the opposition individual/society and action/structure.

As noted, Durkheim's works directly influenced the development of British Social Anthropology which, like other approaches in Social Sciences, oscillated between two poles. On one hand,

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c   Fischler, 1998, p. 860.

d   Fischler, a paradigmatic and innovative researcher in the area of food culture, does not seem to recognize French ethnocentrism in his own speech, when he indirectly accuses of barbarism the whole food model arising from the United States of America and praises European culinary tradition, as if it had never been invented and reinvented constantly, hence a product of socio-cultural loans over time. In Fischler's work, there seems to be a kind of romantic nostalgia that ignores the capacity of societies and cultures for reflection and reaction as regards their cuisine.

according to Da Matta,[13] there is a tendency towards broad generalizations represented, for example, by the abstract dimension, distant from the field, of Sir James Frazer (1854 to 1941). There is also the specific concern for detail - in addition to individualism - represented by the works of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). On the other hand, there is the tension between the traditional English empiricism, represented, for example, by the works of Radcliffe-Brown, and the attempt to understand symbolic classification systems - and its possible transcendent bases - represented by the works of Mary Douglas (1921-2007), among others. Empiricism/rationality, in line with the other two pairs of oppositions above-mentioned, is a common feature of the works of structural-functionalists. Thus, the empiricist position is associated with the study of kinship as well as social and political organization, while the rationalist position is more closely associated with studies based on symbolic analysis. Also, according to Da Matta: "this dichotomy appears as a ghost in the work of every important English anthropologist"[e]. But while every renowned English or British anthropologist has this characteristic, some (during their professional life) swing from one side to another: that is the case of the papers of Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) on the Azande[14] (a markedly symbolic study) and on the Nuer[15] (more focused on socio-political structures), or even the case of the vast set of works of Sir Edmund Ronald Leach (1910-1989), with special mention, by contrast, of his studies on the political systems of Upper Burma and those associated with biblical myths.[16,17] Other authors remain steadfast in their positions and may lean, more or less, towards empiricism, as is the case of Radicliffe-Brown and Mary Douglas. However, whatever the tendency, everyone should consider certain aspects of the works of Durkheim - "The Division of Labor in Society" or "The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life" or even "Suicide" - where he explores his primary issues further, directly associating them with the problems of commensality and nutrition as fundamental aspects of social existence.[18,19]

Balance and change

Social Anthropology has Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown as one of its greatest representatives. The only legitimate Briton of his geration[f],[13,20] and follower of Malinowski, he led forth the assumptions and findings of the latter, expanding and consolidating a new trend in anthropological approach which renewed the functionalist assumptions existing heretofore because Radcliffe-Brown's theory differed significantly from that of his master. While Malinowski thought that the ultimate goal of the social system and its functions was the satisfaction of individual needs,

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e   Da Matta, 1983, p. 23.

f   Sir Raymond Willian Firth (1901-2002) was a New Zealander; Meyer Fortes (1906-1983), Isaac Shapera (1905-2003), Max Gluckman (1911-1975) were South African Jews. Nadel (1903-1956) was Austrian and Malinowski (1884-1942), as widely known, was Polish ([13, 20]).

particularly people's biological needs (which depicts a kind of methodological individualism in Malinowski), for Radcliffe-Brown the individual is no more than a product of society and a means for the existence of such society. Likewise, while Malinowski urged his students to go to the field and seek human motives concerning the logic of action (its sense and meanings), Radcliffe-Brown asked his mentees to discover abstract principles and general mechanisms of social integration.[5,21-23] Therefore, it is possible to distinguish them terminologically by classifying Malinowski's works as representative of functionalism and Radcliffe-Brown's as representative of structural functionalism.

In order to understand the role of Radcliffe-Brown in British and global social context, it is necessary to define some central assumptions of his work. Radcliffe-Brown, who had significant knowledge of natural sciences (he studied medicine at the University of Oxford), believed that Social Anthropology or "Comparative Sociology" was a branch of Biological Sciences focused on understanding human society:[5]

"I see social anthropology as the theoretical-natural

science of human society, that is, the investigation of social

phenomena by methods essentially similar to those used in

physical and biological sciences. I would gladly name the subject

as comparative sociology if someone wanted me to."[g]

Radcliffe-Brown saw social systems as being analogous to organ systems, creating the need for them to share the same methods.[24,25] and forming the basis for his concepts of social structure and function. Such concepts had been previously used by Spencer and Durkheim, precursors of anatomical analogies in sociology. Radcliffe-Brown redefined them, consolidating the uniqueness of his anthropological theory that opposed, *mutatis mutandis*, to the insurgent cultural studies of that period. In his understanding, the concept of culture was no more than "mere abstraction"[h], and did not contribute to the advancement of science. Moreover, the concept of social structure defines something concrete and empirical; therefore, it is the key focus of anthropological analysis:

"We did not observe a 'culture', since that word denotes not a concrete reality (...) I use the term social structure to refer to a network of relationships that actually exists ... My opinion on natural science is that it is the systematic investigation of the structure of the universe as it is revealed to us through the senses"[i] (emphasis added).

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g   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 233.

h   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 234.

i   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 234.

Empiricism is, *par excellence*, the hallmark of British philosophical thought, and Radcliffe-Brown never let go of that tradition. He seems to have never forgotten the saying "there is nothing in the mind that has not been in the senses before".[j],[26] In line with Durkheim's proposition, Radcliffe-Brown always reiterated that social phenomena are a distinct class of phenomena - yet natural - and social structures are as real as individual organisms. Radcliffe-Brown reinforces the Durkheimian imperative that treats social facts as things, making them more concrete than the French master did. Thus, he makes up a British Durkheim.

This unique interpretation is observed in the change he made as regards the individualism present in the British empiricist thought. If all knowledge passes through the senses, according to the English thinkers, the primary basis of this process would be the individual, a rational and conscious subject. This originates the whole Anglo-American liberal political theory that considers the individual monad, in its relation to the world, the only thing actually existing. Radcliffe-Brown,[5] instead (and because of his organicist interpretation of society), takes away from the individual any independence of the processes of interaction:

> *"The complex organism is a set of interstitial fluid living cells arranged in a certain structure: and one living cell is, similarly, a structural arrangement of complex molecules. The physiological and psychological phenomena that we observe in the lives of organisms are not only a result of the nature of the constituent molecules or atoms that make up the body, but the result of the structure in which they are united. Also, social phenomena in any human society are not the immediate result of the nature of human beings taken individually, but a consequence of the social structure in which they are united."[k].*

Radcliffe-Brown seems to establish a kind of transcendental empiricism - to use the term by Gilles Deleuze[27] – suggesting that "relations are external to their terms.""[l]. This empiricism can be even better understood when the author makes the concepts of structure and function inseparable. This is accomplished, according to him, by the fact that the interdependence of the parts that

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j   Roughly speaking, the empiricist tradition is rooted in the philosophy of Sir Francis Bacon, an advocate of the experimental method that became the basic assumption of modern science, where emphasis is given to systematic observation and experimentation in the production of knowledge. In the eighteenth century, the same tradition was consolidated in England with John Locke and David Hume as the main representatives. According to the former: "All ideas come from sensation ... therefore, the mind is a blank sheet of paper, void of all characters, without any ideas ... How do you get all the stuff of reason and knowledge? I answer this in one word: by means of experience".[26] An eminently English thought, at first, empiricism is connected with the political rise of the bourgeoisie that, from the 17th century onwards, holds not only economic but also political power, through the establishment of parliamentary monarchy. The emergence of this new social order is simultaneous to the birth of political and economic liberalism.

k   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 235.

l   Deleuze, 2008a, p. 213.

make up the system - its structure - requires understanding the function of that system. That is, understanding how these components pieces work to each other and in the whole. Reassessing the Durkheimian concept of function - which defines it as the correspondence between an institution and the needs of social organization - Radcliffe-Brown[5] reinforces the organismic analogy saying that just as "a body [of any living being] *is not itself* the structure [but] an accumulation of units (cells and molecules) arranged in a structure, i.e. a set of relations [indicating that it] has a structure"[emphasis added][m]. Although the units (cells) of an organism do not remain the same, "the structural arrangement of the composing units remains the same"[n] and it is this process that maintains the structural continuity which is called life. Just like this whole process works in living organisms, it also works in society. Just as the life process consists of the activities and interactions of the units within certain structures, society exists through relations (activities and interactions) between individuals (social actors) playing roles in a given structure. This process is directly associated with the concept of function: life both of an organism, such as a society, "is conceived as the operation of its structure. [So] it is through continued operation that the continuity of the structure remains."[o]. In this respect, different from what Malinowski wrote, and corroborating the ideas of the philosopher Deleuze,[28] we can say that Radcliffe-Brown, in line with the latter, agrees that "every institution imposes on our body ... a series of templates ... [and so] man has no instincts, he makes institutions"[p].

According to the rules established in the studies by Durkheim,[6,9,29] which made society independent of individuals, Radcliffe-Brown maintains that individual human beings, key units in this case (like the cells of an organism), bind by a series of links forming an integrated, structured whole. Indeed, individuals are born and grow and die and this structure remains, just like structure of an organism is not destroyed by changes in the constituent units. Like all great anthropologists, Radicliffe-Brown aims to observe regularity in the complex body of evidence about the numerous individuals and social groups studied, seeking to distinguish the permanent traces in the transience of human events. He seeks to separate order and permanence from what is contingent and, therefore, uses the term social structure.[30] If structure[q] is defined as being formed of a series of links between units, and its continuity is maintained by a vital process consisting of the activities of the constituent units, function, as a corollary, is the part that a particular activity plays in social life as a whole, contributing to the maintenance of structural continuity.

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m   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 221.

n   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 221.

o   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 221.

p   Deleuze, 2008b, p. 31.

q   Structure is also understood by the author as "distinguishing social positions of men and women, community leaders, employers and employees [...]" (Dyson-Hudson, 1976, p. 236).

The structural-functional approach has received a great deal of criticism (mainly Marxist and Marxian theorists) which holds the view that such approach does not address or does not give due importance to social change in its assumptions and research. This view excludes various theoretical approaches associated with the theory, especially the latest ones. To clarify this misunderstanding, it is necessary to refer to the functionalist theory of Malinowski and his influence on British and general anthropology. For Malinowski, institutions played the same role in society as the role played by the organs of a body. For any social orders, there must exist certain social institutions that govern fundamental human relations and, although institutions can take many different forms, they fulfill the same functions in any society at any time and space. It should be noted that Malinowski emphasized the systematic interconnection of institutions, i.e., any change introduced into a social dimension would be reflected across the whole.[21] Given this argument, the author thought that social change had in mind the external pressure exerted by Europeans in their colonial domains and, thus, elaborated his critique of the dissolution of primitive cultures perpetrated by imperialism of the dominant countries in the world scenario[r]. Thus, the corollary of the principle of interdependence of institutions was the notion that all attempts to "improve" the conditions in small-scale societies would be subject to more harm than benefit from such societies.[31] Under the profound influence of the works of Durkheim, Malinowski's functionalism noticed that customs were indispensable to the societies where they were found, thus the "revolutionary" change in institutions - performed by the action of the people whose social system it belonged to or by external forces - would probably be worse. This approach was adopted by the structural-functionalist tradition, and because of this tradition, many authors claimed that such theory and method could not be used to understand social transformations. But neither Malinowski, nor Radcliffe-Brown, ignored change and institutional changes in their theories about society. What they did was to define distinct types of change. They never denied that all social systems are in continuous process of renewal and adaptation to their environment, although their members often conceive social reality as being eternal.

An example of separation between different types of change is given in the work of Radcliffe-Brown, as regards the issue of durkheiminan *anomie*. While an organism suffering the attack of a disease adapts or dies (dissolution of its structure), society does not experience the same, because

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r   There is a classic sentence in the preface of the book Argonauts of the West Pacific, where Malinowski expressed his ethnographic disappointment: "Ethnology is in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that at the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity" (Malinowski, 1978, p.11). Goody's[20] book is an enlightening document about the ethical position of British anthropologists, with their paradoxes associated with the financing of their research and the role of anthropology in the colonial administration during the British imperialism in Africa and Asia.

when there are serious problems that may affect it, a process of structural change takes place in order for society to adapt and consequently, survive:

"*societies do not die the same way as animals and, therefore, we cannot define dysnomia [anomie] as what leads to, if not controlled, the death of a society. Furthermore, a society differs from an organism in that it alters its structural type (...) therefore, we cannot define Dysnomia [anomie] and disruption of the normal activities of a social type - as Durkheim tried to do*" [emphasis added][s].

In this sense, we begin to understand, as outlined previously, why the concept elaborated by Claude Fischler of gastro-anomie is somehow wrong. In fact, at first the new lonely and fast food practices may suggest anomie. However, studies in the area of food and society have demonstrated that new sense and meanings are produced by social agents, leading to a resurgence of commensality as a fundamental element of social cohesion, even in places thought to be *gastro-anomic*[t]. The composition of other food orders is constantly perpetuated, always referring to new meanings attached to new food practices.[32] Even fast food restaurants can have numerous meanings that contradict the traditional view that sees them as the icon of destruction of commensal solidarity.[33,34]

The emphasis of this theoretical aspect refers to the perception that contradiction is inherent in every social system as "organized and regulated antagonism", i.e., if a society is subjected to the condition of functional disunity or inconsistency, it does not necessarily die, but its structural type is modified - undergoes structural changes - to continue existing or adapting to the surroundings.[4] Given this inherent antagonism to the system (something similar to entropy in cybernetics[u],35) Radcliffe-Brown very briefly indicates that the death of a society is only possible if perpetrated by another, through extermination (ethnocide), as was the case of some Australian tribes subjugated by the destructive force of the white man or the Amerindians. Therefore, there is no way to oppose the change as it is constitutive of society and of what is understood as the reality of life in general.

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s   Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 225.

t   In one of his writings,[12] the author, without realizing the theoretical implications of his research, describes the invention of an American cuisine tradition made from elements of diverse cultures: *cincinnati chili*, a traditional food from Ohio created in the 1920s in the last century by a Macedonian of Bulgarian origin (Tom Kiradjieff). With elements of Balkan, Mexican and Italian cuisines, he created a dish (with variants) based on cooked minced beef, and 12-18 herbs and spices, including cinnamon. This blend is cooked in the fire for three or four hours and served with spaghetti, grated cheese, onion slices and also beans, occasionally.

u   This term is clarified in the work of Norbert Wiener: Cybernetics and Society.[35] Quite simply, it can be said that for Wiener, and his interpretation of the theories of thermodynamics, every system - whatever it is - is carried out while constantly fighting steady against its dissolution. The contradiction is that this fight for survival there is loss of energy (entropy) that ends up contributing to the dissolution of the same forces that fight against dissolution. Thus, the entire system generates devices to control the inevitable tendency to disorganization, "in other words, [it tends] to produce a local and temporary reversal of the normal direction of entropy.

Opposition takes place against extermination, genocide or ethnocide - what might be termed "disorganized and unregulated antagonism" – from a society to another. It is a deleterious event that not would not even be a change, as it not possible to effect the process of absorption of a society by a larger one (as is the case of many African and Amerindian groups) and, even less so, it would be the product of structural dynamics aiming at vital adaptation.

The "normal" change - stressing the term in the Durkheimian sense - would be regularly diagnosed by circumstantial adaptation of institutions[v] whose function would be disadvantageous in certain situations. This means that by gradually changing the function of certain institutions, society would eventually change its structure. Some institutions would present disadvantages in certain situations; the process, in turn, implies functional readaptations: "throughout the life of an organism, its structure is constantly renewed, and social life renews its structures likewise".[w] When laws and customs, for example, no longer suit to the more practical context of a particular group, they tend to undergo changes or even be eliminated. A clear example is the case of the imposition of sanitary-hygienic rules on dietary practices that tend to undergo changes and readaptations over time, as clearly shown by historical studies on the issue. The case of dietary rules - driven by the concepts of risk and probability, which seeks to prevent disease (prevention), has, in some cases, been replaced by others, which are adapted to the fast-paced life of the big cities in order to balance a vital necessity and, thus, give new meaning to dietary life. Supposedly, this fact could produce more health-promoting rather than disease-preventing food practices.

Therefore, imbalances remain until a new ordinance of forces materializes temporarily. Thus, far from despising social change, structural functionalism elaborates a theoretical framework about it.[x],[36] However, a specific aspect should be clarified. If structural-functionalism has a theory of social change, it is directly associated with the concepts of (im)balance and homeostasis.

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v   It is noteworthy that Radcliffe-Brown institution defines as: "standard ways of conduct [which] constitute the mechanism by which the social structure, which is a network of social relations, maintains the existence and continuities of its own" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1973, p. 246). He also states: "one of the objectives of Social Anthropology is that of understading the nature of human institutions and, if I can say so, the way they work" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1990a, p. 179).

w   Radcliffe-Brown, 1990a, p. 237.

x   It should be emphasized that the structural-functionalist approach was not bounded to the fields of Social Anthropology. Its influence is observed in Sociology, Political Science and Philosophy. In this line of social thought, there are theoretical works of indisputable importance, such as those of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), Robert King Merton (1910-2003), Jürgen Habermas (1929 -), Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) Jeffrey Alexander (1947 -), among others. Thus, studies that began in Anthropology migrated to other disciplines, giving considerable contribution to its consolidation, although the authors and their followers hardly recognize that. In this regard, it is worth noting the neo-evolutionist dimension presented by that some of these works (more specifically Habermas and Luhmann), somehow also subservient to functionalist and structural-functionalist analyses.[36] Radcliffe-Brown[5] himself introduced presented an evolutionary theory distinguishing the natural progress of evolution and linking the latter to the structural changes of societies. Also Luhmann,[4] a more contemporary thinker, does the same in Sociology.

As previously mentioned, if change happens, it is materialized with an aim at readaptations of the system, which goes back into temporary balance (homeostasis). What Meyer Fortes[17,37] wrote about the Tallensi can be enlightening in this respect:

> "At any level of social organization of the Tale (...) there is a clear tendency to balance. (...) This does not mean that the Tale society was stagnant.Tension lies implicit in balance. (...) But conflict could never develop to the point of producing a complete disintegration. The homogeneity of the Tale culture, the undifferentiated economic system, the stable population, the network of kinship ties, the ramifications of clan systems and especially the mystical doctrines and ritual practices that determine the native concept of the common good - all are factors that limit conflicts and promote the restoration of balance."[y].

This approach seems to be one of the main features of structural functionalism and systemic theories at large. Edmund Leach, in his work on the Kachins of Upper Burma was one of the first to challenge it - without much success at the time - opening, however, the important possibility for contrasting the ideal structural pattern and what the natives said and thought about reality and reality itself with its dichotomies concerning effective practices of such natives with their strategies and tactics of action within the structural scheme. In this respect, Leach was also a key reference (with little recognition, by the way) in the formulation of a theoretical synthesis of structure and action. The process of "mismatch" between symbolic structure, social structure and practice was addressed a little later by Mary Douglas, in her book Purity and Danger (1976), as we will see later on.

Symbolic Structure

While Radcliffe-Brown emphasizes empirical structures in a unique way, subsequent authors focused on subjective structures and institutional transformation as habits added to the understanding of society. This means that these authors did not disregard the empiricist tradition, but they added new approaches which had been observed since the 1930s, in the 20th century, in British anthropology and also when French structuralism emerged.

The works of Mary Douglas (1921-2007) are an example of this epistemological maneuver that occurs without disregard for tradition, sharply geared towards symbolism and understanding of change and restructuring through social conflict, a constant theme in functional-structuralist studies.[37] Her work among the Lele of Kasai in Congo raises - according to the Durkheimian strand

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y   Fortes, 1940, in Leach, 1996, p. 52.

inaugurated in The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life - issues concerning classification problems inherent in the human mind which suggest proximity to Lévi-Straussian approaches as regards wild or magic thought,[38] i.e., approaching the French structuralism. During his field studies, Douglas[39] noticed how certain forms of classification established a bidirectional relationship between thought and reality. She wrote:

> *"among the Lele, I found rules of hygiene and etiquette, rules about sex and power held by or derived from implicit assumptions about how the universe works. It was evident that a relationship between the structure of thought and the structure of nature as they think about it was given so that what they think is rooted in community life"[z].*

Trying to understand the two structural dimensions - subjective and objective - Douglas revisits some aspects of Durkheim's work related to the universal dichotomy sacred (+)/profane (-) and the logical-classificatory assumptions inherent with it. From this point, she traces her analysis prioritizing the direct relationship between the pairs purity/impurity (and the social danger that the latter represents) and the organization of the empirical structure of societies.[39,40] Thus, Mary Douglas seems to suggest a return to the concept of culture previously despised by Radcliffe-Brown as meaningless abstraction[aa]. She also adds to her approach the results of research on rituals performed by Van Gennep and Victor Turner, highlighting the importance of the concept of liminality and its relationship with the ambiguities in the social structures and their importance to the hierarchy and organization of groups:

> *"the articulated and conscious points in social structure are provided with articulated and conscious powers to protect the system; unconscious powers emanate from inarticulate, unstructured areas, making others ask for ambiguity to be reduced"[ab].*

The correlation between the logic of thought and the logic of social organization is clear, and it is suggested by the assertion that the existence of ambiguity, the inexplicable and disorganization represents something that should be fought as impure and dangerous to the organization of thought itself and, simultaneously, of social life. Indeed, the rituals of purity and impurity created unity in experience, as symbolic patterns were performed and publicly expressed across such rituals, and

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z   Douglas, 1999, p. x.

aa "I will make (...) two attempts to use primitive cultures to support interpretations" (Douglas, 1976, p. 143).

ab Douglas, 1976, p. 127.

the paradox became at least partially and circumstantially domesticated, giving life a sense of social order[ac]. Therefore, according to the author, the social representations of disorder, impurity and dirt, prior to being a threat to people's physical health, were a threat to mental and social health:

> *"dirt is essentially disorder. There is no absolute dirt: it exists in the eyes of the beholder. If we avoid dirt, it is not for cowardice, fear, horror or fear of the divine. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends the order. Cleaning it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment"* [emphasis added] [ad].

Although the meaning of dirt and, thus, hygiene is relative, varying in time and space, its function as a systemic element is universal. This approach emphasizing the symbolic sphere can also be perceived when the author discusses the traditional anthropological question of jesting relationships (the so-called act of "tricking", "nagging", ironically irritate someone in Brazil, for example), accurately treated by scholars such as Radicliffe-Brown. He perceives these relationships as social ties that reinforce hierarchical structure and refer to the contrast between feelings and/or affection, respect/disrespect, suggesting not only the dichotomy empiricism/rationalism, but also the individual/society one, because, on the one hand, we would have the problems posed by personal and individual choices generating feelings and emotions, and, on the other hand, the explicit rules that underpin the whole society. This dichotomy between the individual and the collective space would be solved, in Radcliffe-Brown's theory, subsuming the former to empirical social structures which had the ability to assigning specific roles to individuals, constructing them as different people.[24] Thus, jesting and/or kinship relationships for fun, with their load of disrespect and mockery, exemplify a function bounding the social conduct in charge of reinforcing and reiterating the order in the social system:

> *"The theory outlined here is that both kinship as a joke, which is an alliance between clans or tribes, and kinship established between relatives by marriage, are modalities of organizing a defined and stable system of social conduct in which the components of conjunction and those of disjunction, as defined, are maintained and combined."*[ae].

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ac Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his famous article "The Sorcerer and his Magic", similarly claims that "what cannot be formulated is the disease of thought" (Lévi-Strauss, 1975, p. 211).

ad Douglas, 1976, p. 12.

ae Radcliffe-Brown, 1990b, p. 121.

classifying playfulness as a symbol of social, physical and mental experience. By elaborating the approach rooted in Freudian theory about playfulness and some elements of the philosophy of Bergson, Douglas says that playfulness "has a subversive effect on the dominant structures of ideas"[af], because

"The pleasure of playfulness lies in a kind of [libidinal] economy. The whole time we spend energy monitoring our subconscious to ensure that our conscious perceptions pass through a control system. By breaking control playfulness allows the monitoring system a break."[ag].

Playfulness is a ritual, though momentarily, to reverse the order (paradoxical kind of anti-ritual ritual) and, in a way, the opposite of what Radcliffe-Brown emphasized that would allow loosening of ordering structures. He temporarily changed the "balance of power" by suspending, circumstantially, structure as a rite of reversal. According to the author, while affirming rituals (*standard rituals*) of structure organize ideas, playfulness does the opposite; rites impose order and harmony, while playfulness disorganizes as we as emphasizes, in its irony, the possible reflexivity of the social agent.

"From physical to personal to social, to cosmic, great rituals create unity in experience. They reiterate hierarchy and order. Thus, they reaffirm the value of symbolic standardization of the universe. Each level of standardization is validated and enriched by association with the rest. But playfulness [jokes, mockery] has the opposite effect. It connects different fields widely, but this connection destroys hierarchy and order. It does not state dominant values, but denigrates and devalues such values. Essentially, playfulness [a joke] is an anti-rite".[ah] [emphasis added].

Although it is an anti-ritual, the function of this social fact is to demarcate, separate and above all to exaggerate the differences inherent in society. By exaggerating differences - in / out, up / down, female / male, for / against etc - through its partial suspension, playfulness contributes ultimately to the maintenance of structures,[ai],[41-45] but also to the critical perception of its features from the agents, at least occasionally. While Douglas differs from Radcliffe-Brown with respect to the interpretation of the ritual associated with jesting relationships, when highlighting the same ritual

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af   Douglas, 1999, p. 95.

ag   Douglas, 1999, p. 94.

ah   Douglas, 1999, p. 102.

ai   We should highlight the relevance of studies on rituals by Van Gennep (1873-1957) for thought-building and the works of Roberto Da Matta[41-45] about Brazil and the influence of the works of Victor Turner (1920-1983) and others.

as reversal of the order, and suggesting its symbolic weight, its structural functionalism ultimately remains loyal to that of Malinowski's successor, because although it was reversed, the process constituted by playfulness appears in his work as contributing to the health (or homeostasis) of the system: "we have seen that the cognitive quest to achieve consistency and regularity in experience requires the destruction of some information so that we can save the regular process of the rest"[aj].

By associating this discussion with the institutional power that the scientific field of Nutrition and all its cohorts have as keepers of food ordering and health promotion, and, therefore, of the traditional structures of power and truth about food, the occasional subversion of dietary rules would relativize the requirement to follow the nutritional recommendations as rigid laws. In this case, reversing the food ordering (dictated by scientific nutritional institutions) runs up against the popular customs and traditions as well as the willingness and eventual choice of the individual to transgress. However, they also work as an exhaust valve (function) of the system, since these actions would loosen the rigid character of the nutritional scientific "truth" (structure), but they paradoxically reinforce its recommendations.

However, Douglas modulates her functional-structural interpretations when she addresses the understanding of social change. In the penultimate chapter of her book Purity and Danger ("The System at War with Itself"), the destructuring aspect of the system is configured as a problem concerning the contradictions between the symbolic dimension, social representations and individual practices. Working with pairs of binary oppositions (sacred/profane, pure/impure, female/male), Douglas compares some social systems in which inherent paradoxes contribute to the ongoing tension that threatens the dissolution of the system itself. In Africa, the Mae Engas, for example, have a social organization in which the clans are encouraged to fight each other endemically, yet kinship between these people is achieved through the exchange of women between those clans. Thus, "the Engas want to fight with enemy clans but also marry women of such clans"[ak], i.e., their enemies are also their relatives. Among the Lele, also in Africa, women are viewed by men as mere objects of exchange. Their system is constituted as a type of bullionist capitalism where women are commodities. The more women (daughters and wives) a man has, the greater his power. Among the Lele, there is immense competition for the acquisition of women, which gives a significant reputation to men who have them. At the same time, it is a perennial concern, because men are constantly and peremptorily making a pass at other men's wives and daughters. But if men compete with each other for women all the time, women, in turn, are not only a passive object, unaware of social structure: they scheme, intrigue and seduce, use strategies and tactics, articulate a counter-power rooted in fact that, at least until old age, there are plenty of suitors

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aj   Douglas, 1999, p. 7.

ak   Douglas, 1976, p. 191.

willing to marry them. This fact compels men to make the greatest efforts to satisfy the whims of their women. The paradox is that, among the Lele, women are loved and hated at the same time:

> *"Even though, in some contexts, they thought of women as desirable treasures, they also spoke of them as useless, worse than dogs, rude, ignorant, unstable, irresponsible. Socially, women were those things, actually. They were not at all interested in the world of men in which they and their daughters were exchanged as pawns in the games of prestige of men. They were cunning to take advantage of the opportunities they were offered. If they were accomplices, mother and daughter together could destroy any [male] plan that bothered them"*[al].

One of the peculiarities of the Lele society is that "men had to assert their lauded dominance by fascination, coaxing and cajoling treats. There was a special, flattering tone they used with women."[am] Seen as currency, women had the same concept which is sometimes introduced by money in our current business culture: women - like money - can be considered good and bad at once or, on the other hand, the source of all evil in imagination and mythology. However, awareness of their counter-power made women reflect upon specific issues. Thus, the intrigues made by Lele women, according to Mary Douglas, led men to intense disputes among themselves in favor of women. Women manipulated men, pitted them against one another; "the Lele want to use women as men's pawns, while also defending them against other men"[an]. In these approaches, Douglas not only points out that conflicts are a key social dynamic element, but also reiterates the importance of the symbolic dimension and its internal paradoxes, as well as its direct relationship with the practices of the societies studied, producing a synthesis between that dimension and the empirical dimension and reflexivity of the social agent in maintaining or changing the order.

Structural change among the Lele of the Kasai

Mary Douglas revisited the Lele society 50 years after her first fieldwork among them.[46] During her stay, she observed the change in social structure caused by the adoption of Christianity by the Lele. Prior to becoming Christians, they had a single god, or, to use a philosophical term, univocal. A god to whom all things were subsumed, as the God of Spinoza. With the arrival of Christianity - particularly Catholicism - the priests turned the Lele's God into devil, creating religious dualism. The Lele began to believe in two gods: Jesus Christ and the devil. In general, and unfortunately for Christian theology, the Lele believed the devil to be much more powerful

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al Douglas, 1976, p. 184.

am Douglas, 1976, p. 191.

an Douglas, 1976, p. 191.

and present, which can be explained by the fact that the practice of witchcraft in Central African societies is an ancient tradition. Young converts to Catholicism began not only to despise the religion of their ancestors, as their ancestors and the elderly: "the situation [conversion to Christianity] generated contempt for the old, liberation for the youth, mutual hatred and widespread distrust among the young and the old"[ao]. These controversies were heated with the work of missionaries who started to fight against the tradition of witchcraft and incited disrespect for the old religion, while wanting to teach respect for family values along the Christian lines. Thus, the missionaries associated the whole Lele religion with witchcraft, which was a mistake because the former sought precisely to prevent acts of witchcraft and undo its effects. Just like the Azande, there was no room in the Lele thinking for the inexplicable.[14] Their religion did not understand misfortune at all but through witchcraft. The fact remais that the young Lele, in a kind of diffusionism, mixed their Christianity with their old religious beliefs, which they supposedly fought against. Accordingly, the young Christians came to readily believe that their misfortunes were caused by their older relatives - especially their uncles – who were sorcerers. The gap between the generations of the Lele began to gradually deepen, causing imbalance in traditional social system because "the belief in witchcraft supported the unstable gerontocratic structure, maintained the system of matrimonial exchanges, accounted for deaths and illnesses and justified compensation to bereaved relatives [allegedly victims of witchcraft]"[ap]. Christian traditions, especially Christian marriage, adopted by the Lele put an end to the old power structures associated with the domain of the elder and kinship organization due to the collapse of marriage alliances by the donation of women as payment for witchcraft. Pagan cults against sorcery were aimed at reconciling factions and smoothening intergenerational tensions, but they were diluted now.

This interpretation of the rupture of the symbolic system of the Lele suggests the influence of Durkheim's theory of social change in structural-functionalism of Mary Douglas. Without the symbolic incentive (social representations: values, norms, rules, customs, etc.) for the traditional cooperation within the clans, the social structure of the Lele collapsed. The ties of solidarity that allowed group cohesion were disrupted, causing great individual frustration. That was only possible due to the new direction that witchcraft took in the Lele-Christian symbolic system. Witchcraft, in her analysis, is the recurring item, with meaning being reinvested with a new signifier – or, to be more faithful to the Derridean terminology,[47] the signifier of the signifier - crying out for the need for a new native social order.

It would be plausible to claim that the anthropology practiced by Mary Douglas introduces an approach concerned with the symbolic dimensions of social reality (subjective system) and the ambiguities put forward through its direct approach to social practices in its relations with the

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ao Douglas, 1999a, p. 146.

ap Douglas, 1999a, p. 148.

institutional changes and the strategies of individuals and groups. Different from the Radcliffe-Brownian analyses, more focused on understanding the systems of structural relations (objective system) of native societies, the issues raised by studies on the Lele ended up highlighting the traditional dichotomy between empiricism and intellectualism, cultural system and social system, structure and action found not only in British anthropology, but in general anthropological thought and in Human Sciences as a whole. A dichotomy that must be overcome in favor of the improvement of research instruments in view of the multidimensionality of the *socius*.

Inventing tradition

It is by paraphrasing Descartes ("I eat, therefore I am") that the contemporary African thinker Célestin Monga started a chapter of his book Nihilism and Blackness[48] on commensality in African society and culture, especially the Republic of Cameroon. Although not an anthropologist, Monga makes a brilliant analysis of the Cameroonian structure and culture similarly to the analysis by Douglas. And it is in the category of food and commensality that structural change is best reflected in his work. "If what you eat does not define what you are (the place you take in the social scale), at least it defines what you want to be";[aq] the author begins by highlighting the key role of food in the analysis of societies. Monga shows that food items such as rice (introduced less than a century ago in Sahelian Africa) is now a fundamental item in the culinary practice of people who live there. Also bread, which the Bantu currently have as part of their timeless imagery, dates from the recent colonial period, as well as champagne and whiskey, which have become necessary and unfailing elements in any festivity of the African elite. What is unusual that Monga (as Pierre Bourdieu) brilliantly describes and exemplifies the relations of symbolic power invested in actions – such as eating, for example - and other aspects of African societies. The author stresses that commensality encodes the symbolic violence of a society, because the act of eating requires and establishes power relations that are constitutive of the current social system. This is a more marked feature in societies where hunger and poverty are extreme conditions. African culture has absorbed, according to the author, *status* elements of European and American capitalist cultures, giving the same elements new meanings, reusing and adapting foreign cultural items in structural relationships. The latter are new and maintain traditional rituals and cosmologies in another dynamic, i.e., in structural dynamics, the tradition is invented and reinvented by social agents who, through the food status, seek to demarcate their social standing in a country where nutritional deficiency prevails. Cameroonians speak of a "politics of the belly" suggesting that the greater the misery, the greater the ostentation: "the propensity for exaggeration is the social reflection of

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aq Monga, 2010, p. 67.

those who have little.”[ar]. The author also suggests that social actors in Cameroonian society seek, through food and commensality, strategies to build self-esteem and dignity in an environment with prevailing authoritarianism, patrimonialism, clientelism and poverty. Thus, "all Cameroonian festivals start with a banquet”[as]. And the banquets are prepared Western-style, reinterpreted and resignified according to the African way, with an eloquent text about the structure of that society. What the author describes about the wedding banquet that took place in Douala and Yaoundé supports our hypothesis that the diffusion of cultural elements is one of the ways for societies to restructure, absorbing elements of other societies and adapting them to their traditions and needs:

"boys and girls, dressed up, receive guests and take them to the table that was reserved (...) porcelain from Limoges and silverware from Christofle (...) there is also a selection of great appetizers . The banquet hall is usually decorated with (...) the colors of the family in a better financial situation, leaving aside the customs connected with tradition or lineage (...) when guests are seated, the appetizer is served: whiskey, champagne and wine. Often one of the families makes a special orders French champagne or wine whose labels have their name printed on. They drink Bordeaux wine in bottles reading from the Castle 'Family X' and the millésime with the wedding date. The meal (...) begins with starters that do not match local habits (...) but they are much appreciated by the prestige associated with them: smoked salmon, caviar and foie gras, French salad with more exquisite spices. Then, varied and plentiful hot dishes are served. French, Dutch or Swiss chese and desserts come next (...) . While in the West 'sweets' evoke moral judgments (...) in the south of the Sahara it tends to evoke a sense of candor and immaturity, and even weakness and naivete (...) therefore, they are reserved for women and children – it is more appropriate to have sweet drinks in public even if alcoholic (...) soft wine or imported liquors (...) 'strong' spirits (...) traditional or imported beer, exotic drinks like whiskey reveals adherence to positive values of strength, courage and endurance. Consumption of 'strong' taste is accompanied by very spicy meals (spiced up), also symbols of strength and virility. This combination of 'strong' and 'spicy', incidentally, is a rite of passage to adulthood, affirming indisputable masculinity, admission on the ground of the great . And when a woman has a penchant for consuming liquor and spicy dishes, she is admired and feared at the same time, and people begin to doubt the virility of her partner ... In Cameroon , there will be no hesitation in asking the latter : ' Who wears the pants in your home?”[at].

The ethnography of the author emphasizes the acquisition by the Cameroonian society of elements of European culture, especially French, as a sign of *status* - which seems to be common in every part of the globalized world. However, the same elements have specific directions and, if on the one hand they fall into line hierarchical local customs, on the other they are subverted, for

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ar   Monga, 2010, p. 76.

as   Monga, 2010, p. 86.

at   Monga, 2010, p. 74-75 e 78.

example, when the purchasing power supersedes tradition and lineage (similar case of spreading the Christian religion among the Lele, as studied by Douglas), key elements of order of traditional African societies. The dual symbolic structure (also highlighted in the work of Douglas, under inspiration by Durkheim) allocates specific items of western cuisine to local gender and power relations, now based on the contemporary capitalist model. While describing the operation of the local culture and its relationship with the social structure, the author also suggests the existence of a reflexivity of agents and groups when he writes:

> *"eating [in Sahelian Africa] is an aesthetics in itself (...) every citizen feels obliged to access the system of social rules and values (...) black African ethics trying to make life into a work of art (...) is not blind submission to a moral code; it is a personal aesthetic and philosophical choice (...). However, this inventive production itself is not intended to reaffirm the primacy of the [Western] sovereign and individualist subject"*[au] *[emphasis added].*

Indeed, in the context described, the struggle for luxury and *status* implies the articulation of individual and collective strategies that reinforce the structure of the social system Cameroonian as a function. The latter adapts to its surroundings through the new meanings conferred by the agents to the new conditions that are presented. The system fits (and this has nothing to do with progress) to survive by absorbing elements which are alien at first. Therefore, for the structural-functional approach, the change does not take place through class struggle, as Marxists think, but by diffusion and invention (creation and recreation). The perspective developed by Canguilhem in The Normal and the Pathological[49] can help us understand how the systems, for the functional approach we are advocating, opposes the Parsonian tradicional approach.[50] For the author, the norm is procedural and occurs in the difference of the interaction between the system and the environment. In other words, pathology (in our case, anomie) is fundamental to the creation of new forms of normality - which is not a state *a priori*, as in Durkheim or Parsons, but a relative and contextual process. Canguilhem argues, while theorizing about life sciences, that health is not the absence of disease, but the ability of an open system to restore a previous state of homeostasis (always elusive) through a vital effort amending its structure, allowing new interactions and new condition of existence in another setting or level. Indeed, for this process to take place, the system cannot be designed as closed in the Parsonian way but open. Niklas Luhmann,[4] inspired by studies of contemporary biologists Maturana and Varela, describes these open systems as *autopoietic*[av].

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au   Monga, 2010, p. 77-78.

av   From the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century, the concept of system, which had already been studied by Wiener from the concept of *entropy*, absorbed new contributions from the discoveries in biology (Maturana and Varela) and mathematics (Spencer -Brown), and the concept of n*egentropy* was coined, meaning the opposite of entropy, since [social and biological] systems started to be understood as autopoietic, self-referred (...) where (...) the difference was crucial concerning the relationship between such system and its surroundings. (Luhmann, 2009, pp. 8-10 and 68).

Thus, the current structural functionalism tries not only to cope with social changes, but also to realize their positivity.

Final remarks

We have seen that changes in the theoretical framework discussed equate with transformation of a social model from one point in time to another, and this transformation takes effect in most institutional fields - both in symbolic and practical scope If, at a given moment, a social scheme is based on a certain tradition, through the contact (diffusion) to other symbolic systems (and learning processes, joint interests and even utilitarian guidelines), it can be pressured by transformation and adaptation, which is likely to make it modify its dynamics and even its structure. This is due to practical problems in the societal context in which agents and groups produce resignifications of reality, creating new forms of interaction (invention) and therefore new representations and practices. But this creation does not come from nowhere. It is prepared by a process of DIY, the product of articulation of pre-existing heterogeneous elements in the system itself or coming from other systems to produce new ways and possibilities of life.[38,51-54] This demand for transformation can take place *non-intentionally* - when agents do not have centered reflexivity, i.e., objectively discoursive - and, otherwise, when it is carried out based on discoursive arguments that aim to develop strategies and tactics of conscious transformation of social models. Such transformation can be characterized, in that aspect, as centered reflexivity or, quoting Bourdieu:[36] "[as] dissatisfaction with the present that implies the negation of the present and the propensity to work towards overcoming it."[aw].

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