Against structural skepticism: Max Gluckman's response to Elizabeth Colson

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Abstract. A quite recent book casts the anthropologist Elizabeth Colson as a systems skeptic, with Max Gluckman attempting to counter her skepticism. In this paper, I offer clarifications of the skepticism and of the counter.

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Between A and B each time—

That is the structure of my crime

A history of anthropology book from early on in this decade includes sentences that might pique the interest of researchers in philosophy:

> One paradoxical suggestion, by Gluckman, was that 'in its very formlessness Tonga society has a structure which exerts some control over its individualistic members'. Gluckman made a valiant effort in his foreword to Colson's Tonga social and religious essays to push the argument beyond her systems skepticism and further in the direction of structuralist analysis. (Werbner 2020: 86)

"Paradoxical" and "skepticism": what is going on here? Is it all hype or is there anything of interest? British anthropologists from the 1930s to the 1960s were studying tribes and how tribal institutions fit together in a structure, and also structures of complementary roles within a given institution. The structures attributed can be described as systems. I wish to detach from the texts of those times, to

formulate various kinds of structural skepticism and flesh out a response along Gluckman's line.

A normal way of understanding skepticism in philosophy is to mean doubt over whether some kind of proposition or approach is sound, but I shall take it to mean something stronger than doubt, something stronger than "I am not sure about this": to mean opposition. Even granting this focus, structural skepticism can come in various degrees of strength. This is a particularly strong form:

> *(Total structural skepticism)* Any attribution of a structure to a tribe, or to an institution within a tribe, does not attribute something that is actually there, nor is it useful as a model.

Here is a weaker form.

> *(Trivial structural skepticism)* Any attribution of a structure to a tribe, or to an institution within a tribe, is at best trivial. It is uninformative for readers.

We can commit to this kind of skepticism without claiming that the structure attributed is both fictional and useless. Perhaps the structural claims are true, hence not fictional. But if so, we can infer them from common knowledge. It is like saying, "The whole tribe of 300 humans does not live in a 10m by 10m room because there is not enough space."

I take Gluckman to be targetting total structural skepticism. When one describes a social structure, one also describes rules which people abide by in order to maintain the structure. Here is an elaboration of Gluckman's objection, which may not be totally faithful to the original texts. Some structures are natural and the only way in which they can be avoided is by means of a rule not to realize that structure, but that rule is itself a structure (or structuring entity). If you have got a high talent for doing

A and I have for doing B and both talents are very useful for survival and we are stuck on an island and there is no grave mistrust between us, it is natural for us to specialize: you do A and I shall do B and we shall pool the results. To prevent such a structure from forming, a tribe might have a rule: no doing that! The apparent absence of structures in various cases is by means of a rule, or set of rules, but Gluckman's thought is that such a rule is itself a kind of structure. The rule is a way of organizing tribal life.

A somewhat similar example is if the school of social sciences of a university decides to randomize teaching. The postgraduates and other people who get teaching work do not know in advance what course in the school they are teaching. Their qualifications or their PhD topic are no guide to this. Someone might be of the opinion that there is no proper organizing of teaching here – the anthropologist teaches political philosophy; the political philosopher teaches economics; the economist teaches anthropology; etc. – but probably there is a computer program which randomizes the teaching and relying on that program is a way of organizing.

Gluckman's objection, as elaborated, depends on a commitment to a natural direction being avoided in the seemingly structureless case. Some may reject that belief in the natural.

Reference

Werbner, R. 2020. *Anthropology After Gluckman: The Manchester School, colonial and postcolonial transformations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.