

A third solution to a Victorian anthropology paradox: structural-functionalism

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Abstract. This paper presents a structural-functionalist solution to a paradox that historian of anthropology George Stocking dug up: from the point of view of parts of the Victorian middle class, Victorian society was highly evolved yet also contained savage components.

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George W. Stocking Junior tells us of a paradox concerning how in Victorian society, not everyone was such a good Victorian, with some groups flouting official social norms:

The survival of such “savagery” in a world of unprecedented progress was one of the more disturbing of the cultural paradoxes experienced by thoughtful members of the Victorian middle classes. (1987: 214)

Why did such savagery persist given the opportunity of becoming civilized members of Victorian society? The twentieth century theory of structural-functionalism provides a solution. The different institutions of a social group form a coherent structure and are oriented towards maintaining that structure. This makes change difficult. If you make a statement to the effect “Why don’t you give up savage practice S1 for civilized practice C1?” they cannot just give that up, because practices S3 and S2 of theirs depend on S1.

Structural-functionalism, according to the usual history, was formulated by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, taking inspiration from French social theory. There is an alternative history we can at least conceive in which it arose independently from

engagement with the paradox.

Reference

Stocking Jr., G.W. 1987. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.