

British anthropological models: preserving structure while coping with change

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Abstract. This paper presents a proposal for how British structural-functionalist anthropology can cope with some change. It may not seem a very sensible proposal, but I think it needs to be registered. I use a structure of universities in a country to illustrate the proposal.

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“When the good old days we miss

We wonder: what country is this?”

British structural-functionalist anthropology is famously criticized for depicting societies as neat unchanging systems (e.g. Evans-Prichard 1961: 2; Jarvie 1967: 155; Haslanger 2020: 10). They are composed of institutions that form a complementary structure and each functions to maintain that structure. In this paper, I wish to introduce a proposal about how some phenomena of change can be coped with. It will probably seem an insensible proposal to some readers, but it is a proposal nonetheless – there is a shortage of clear proposals in this area, I think.

Rather than stating the general proposal and then illustrating it, I think it will be easier to start with a fictional example. Let us imagine that the universities of a certain country form the following structure: there are two elite universities and then there is a support cast of provincial universities. The elite universities do beautiful groundbreaking research and the provincial universities take care of some earlier beautiful groundbreaking research by the

elite universities. For example, literary theories fashionable a few decades ago are taught at provincial universities, as if they still held their dominant position; philosophy courses too seem as if from a few decades back. Travelling to these places is somewhat like travelling back in time.

Then two of these provincial universities decide to merge and embark on a project of becoming an elite university. They get stuck in an in-between zone: not properly playing the role allocated to the provincial support cast but not exactly being one of the elite universities. Has there not been a change in the structure of universities in that country? Before it was the structure of elite and provincial university, with roles complementing each other, but now an aberration has occurred. Nevertheless, the anthropologist tries to keep the structure attributed by denying that the merged university is part of the society. Just as there are some little countries within larger countries, the supposed exception is treated as if it were not within the territory of the country. In the anthropology book, the structure of elite and provincial university, with their designated complementary roles, remains the structure of universities in this country.

“But the aberration is not outside the country,” one might object. Well, the structure the anthropologist attributes is a model and is evaluated as models are: in terms of usefulness for various ends, rather than corresponding exactly to reality (see Leach 1954: 5). This model just serves the anthropologist’s ends better, let us suppose. For example, by modelling the merged university as part of some other system, the anthropologist can predict course content better and successful applications and who disowns the university and who does not. (One does not need a passport to travel from the city centre to the university and the model fails to predict that; but that might be a minor weakness compared to the gains. One can always add a

reminder for readers regarding that point.) The general proposal is to treat some changes that do not fit with a structure in this way.

References

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