Max Gluckman versus the structureless again: what did he actually say?

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Abstract. What did Max Gluckman actually say about apparently structureless societies? I introduce a fictional example to make sense of what he says regarding the Tonga.

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In her uniform she feels a fool

But September is going to school!

Max Gluckman and Elizabeth Colson disagreed with each other over analyzing societies as systems, more specifically, as structures of roles and institutions. Colson was the skeptic while Gluckman was in favour (see Werbner 2020: 86). I have elaborated an objection by Gluckman in their debate before but without turning to his original texts: the basic idea is his; the elaboration mine (see Edward 2022). Here I wish to rely more on Gluckman's own words, but first I shall start with a fictional example.

Let us imagine a certain character, T, who works in the school of social sciences of a certain university. T attends a club for promoting the interests of ethnic minorities, such as himself; T attends a club for promoting the interests of philosophers, such as himself; and T attends a club for writing better computer code. These clubs have rules, such as:

(Ethnic minority club protest rule) If you are called upon by the club to protest

against deteriorating respect for minority rights, you must.

(Philosophical club rivalry rule) If you are called upon by the club to engage in activities against rival philosophers, you must.

(Computer code promotion rule) If you are called upon by the club to protest against the lack of teaching of computer coding skills, you must.

The activations of these rules means that he disputes with everyone within the school of social sciences over the course of a year, but algorithms are used so that he never experiences conflicting demands from his rules at a given point in time. And the same situation obtains for everyone else. If an anthropologist goes to the school, taking it as their object of study, they might think there is no structure – over the course of a year, they find that everyone disputes with everyone. It is not, say, a simple hierarchical society, with class or caste always determining whom one disputes with. But actually there are rules which provide a structure and algorithms to prevent conflicting demands. What the anthropologist must do is identify those rules.

> Now this is what Gluckman says about the Tonga, studied by Colson:
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> The Tonga thus present an intricate network of social ties, established on quite different principles, so that men who are opposed to each other under one rule, are allied with each other under another rule. Nor have I given all the rules. (1965: 107)

It seems to me that Gluckman's proposal is that a situation there obtains like the situation described in the school of social sciences. There is a structure which can be given by specifying rules and the clubs one is part of, or something analogous to clubs, but the effects of the structure are complicated in a way that might give an appearance of no structure. It is not a simple case of one group in a hierarchy against

another. I don't know whether Gluckman is right about the Tonga, but I think the analysis is of wider interest.

References

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