

ON THE NOTION OF STRUCTURE

N. J. ALLEN

LET us consider the notion of structure from an abstract and logical point of view.

a. A structure is a totality made up of several elements, at least two. The simplest possible structure is therefore ternary, the totality itself being 'on a higher level' than its elements.

b. A structure is not merely a collection envisaged as a unity (the higher level) and a plurality (the lower one). It is a totality which is systematic and coherent in the sense that the component elements stand in definite relationships to each other, such that neither the totality nor the elements can be properly described independently of these relationships.

c. In describing a structure the anthropologist is not describing the empirical world as such; he is abstracting from the object of his attention that which enters into the relationships.

d. Although, in principle, phenomena of all kinds can have structures, the term is scarcely useful except in the context of *constant relationships* between elements of *varying content*. Thus, either the content of a phenomenon changes over time (e.g., a structured human group with a changing membership); or the analyst shifts from one domain to another within a single culture (e.g., showing that the structure

This short article is a translation by the author of a text originally written in French for a French encyclopedia of anthropology. It was written under a strict limit on the numbers of words and references. I am grateful to the editors of *JASO* for accepting it for publication in this form.

of relationships among men is isomorphic with that among gods); or the analyst shifts cultures but not domains (e.g., identifying a particular kinship structure among different peoples).

In practice the term 'structure' is often used imprecisely as the equivalent of 'system' or 'organization'; and many writers have thought in terms of structures without using the word (Montesquieu and Saussure among others). However, it is not a piece of unnecessary jargon. One can describe a phenomenon systematically but at the same time fail to appreciate its holistic aspect and its internal relationships: and the desire to identify structures does not in itself give one the conceptual tools to delimit or articulate an appropriate field (Boudon 1971: 102). In any case, since 1930 both word and concept have become integral parts of the history of social anthropology (Bastide 1962).

Their primary application has been to society itself. Like the Marxist terms 'base' and 'superstructure', 'structure' originally applied to human artefacts (Latin *struere*, 'build'), but at least since Spencer the dominant analogy has been that of an organism. Thus Durkheim, as an evolutionist, contrasted mechanical and organic solidarity—two modes of relating the elements of society; and as a precursor of the functionalists, he contrasted social morphology and physiology. For Mauss in 1927 (1969, II: 190ff.), morphology, the study of the physical structure of societies, brings together demography and human geography, and is distinct from social organization (the classification of people into phratries, clans etc.), which he and Durkheim had related to primitive cosmological classifications (1969, III: 13ff.). According to how one envisages society, either as inhabited space or as generations succeeding each other, one observes two different sorts of structure.

In Britain, polemics against the atomizing tendencies of historico-cultural studies gave so much emphasis to the concept of structure that in connection with Radcliffe-Brown the expression 'structural functionalism' gained currency, and Fortes even spoke of a 'structural school'. Conceiving of society as process or action, Radcliffe-Brown in 1940 defined social structure very broadly: a complex network of actually existing social relations between persons, i.e. between human beings seen as occupants of social positions (1952: 9-10, 190). Nadel (1957) tried to be more precise: a certain Sudanese tribe had an inventory of about 50 different positions or roles, but they did not form a single coherent whole—a society would have several structures. Such conceptions, which remain fairly close to the observed behaviour of actors, do not tell us how to evaluate the differential importance of relations between roles within the social system.

Evans-Pritchard (1940), on the other hand, understood by social structure the relation between groups which possess a high degree of coherence and stability. Having described the 'structural time' of the Nuer, he analysed two types of structure, viz. politico-territorial and lineage, and established a relation of structural coherence between them. In each system, the segmentary elements possess a different 'value' according to context. In one context two groups are in a relation of opposition, while in a larger one they unite to oppose a third. This

fusion, or (reversing the perspective) this fission, can be repeated either upwards or downwards. Thus the identity of a group resides in its relationship with others, and in the relationship of these relationships with others in the structure. For Evans-Pritchard 'opposition' may imply hostility, or the relationship may be purely conceptual; Durkheim and Mauss would have talked here of the nesting (*emboîtement*) of classifications giving rise to a hierarchical order. Evans-Pritchard did not use terminology such as 'level' or 'encompassment', but one can acknowledge, following Dumont, his independent and little-recognized discovery of a form of structuralism.

The structuralism of the Leiden school (de Josselin de Jong 1977) remained without theoretical elaboration. This really came into its own with the work of Lévi-Strauss from 1945 onwards. Influenced by thinking in fields such as phonology and Gestalt theory, as well as by anthropological tradition, Lévi-Strauss gave to the notion of structure a much more abstract and general character than it had previously possessed. Thus his three elementary structures of kinship are not made up of social relationships of filiation, marriage etc. as observed in the real world, but are constructed on the basis of empirical reality by conceiving or drawing models, i.e. the three genealogical diagrams illustrating marriage with cross-cousins. These belong to a group of transformations (1958: 305-6), and at a more general level express the necessary and pan-human relationship of the exchange of women between men, which itself is only a modality of social communication.

If Lévi-Strauss enlarged the applicability of the notion of structure (to mentalities, mythologies etc.) in the course of his rapid passage from one tribe to another, Dumont (1979) demonstrated its utility in the thorough analysis of the social ideology of a single great civilization. In his conception of social structure he de-emphasized both the territorial dimension and the political one (cf. Leach 1954: 4), and refined the notion of structure by distinguishing between relations of equistatutory opposition (as between two segments of a lineage) and hierarchical opposition (as between right and left hand, where the right represents the body as a whole). However, as Mauss observed (1969, II: 143ff.) when referring to Hertz's essay on the right hand, an a priori binarism can be dangerous. Although he came in later life to distrust the word 'structure', one of the contributions of Dumézil was to recognize structures that are in essence triadic.

In different contexts and usages structures can be attributed to observed reality, to the conscious or unconscious mind of those under study, or to the ingenuity of the analyst. As for the much-debated relationship between structure and diachrony, there is no reason to think that structural research and historical research are incompatible (Dumézil, Sahlins). But the polyvalence of the notion of structure is not without its limits, and it has proved to be more applicable to some societies, especially ones of archaic character, than to others.

REFERENCES

- BASTIDE, R. (ed.) 1962. *Sens et usages du terme structure dans les sciences humaines et sociales* [Janua linguarum XVI], The Hague: Mouton.
- BOUDON, R. 1971 [1968]. *The Uses of Structuralism* (transl. Michalina Vaughan), London: Heinemann.
- DE JOSSELYN DE JONG, P. E. 1977. *Structural Anthropology in the Netherlands: A Reader* [Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde Translation Series 17], The Hague: Nijhoff.
- DUMONT, L. 1979. *Homo Hierarchicus* [Collection Tel], Paris: Gallimard.
- EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. 1940. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LEACH, E. R. 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma* [London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology 44], London: Athlone.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, C. 1958. *Anthropologie Structurale*, Paris: Plon.
- MAUSS, M. 1969. *Oeuvres* (ed. V. Karady) (3 vols.), Paris: Minuit.
- NADEL, S. F. 1957. *The Theory of Social Structure*, London: Cohen & West.
- RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London: Cohen & West.