

# CONFLICT AND CONGRUENCE IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

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Whatever their particular science, scientists have a way of getting themselves classified according to some theoretical position. Thus, we call ourselves (or others call us) evolutionists, or neo-evolutionists, or structural-functionalists, or ideal-typologists, or some other theoretical name. And for the most part we accept these epithets—even with pride—for each of us is proud of his theoretical position; and we can always see the error in the other fellow's ways. The members of any theoretical "school," then, are quick to criticize the theoretical efforts of the "opposition." But this report will attempt to show that critics are often ready to reject whole theories in toto, merely because they cannot accept the assumptions implicit in their presentation. Various seemingly conflicting theories are, in certain fundamental aspects, congruent, or at least complementary, but certainly not in basic conflict.

Perhaps the best place to begin is by asking, "What is a scientific theory?" For the relatively undeveloped theories of the social sciences, we can answer that a theory is the expression of a set of hunches about which things go together in the world of our experience. Clearly, this is an over-simplified and highly informal definition of theory, but it will give us a point from which we can start our discussion. The important thing to note about this definition is that it includes not only hunches or hypotheses about the world, but their expression as well. And this is where the problems arise, for it is in the linguistic expression of a theoretical system that its assumptions can be found, and it is these assumptions which lead to the conflict.

Whitehead (1948, p. 25) has said that, "It often happens . . . that in criticizing a learned book of applied mathematics, or a memoir, one's whole trouble is with the first chapter, or even with the first page. For it is there, at the very outset, that the author will probably be found to slip in his assumptions." Very often it is these assumptions, and not the substance of an author's work, with which his critics are at odds. But since a theory is designed primarily to organize knowledge, its hypotheses—not its assumptions—are its most significant elements.

The assumptions which color the expression of a theory are of two sorts. In the first place, the statement of a theory reflects the methodological assumptions of its author. It may be stated, for example, in the language of functionalism, or the jargon of causality, or the symbolic notation of mathematics. Thus, one biologist might say that the operation of the heart is functional for the maintenance of human life. Or another, that stoppage of the heart causes death. And a third might state the same proposition:

$$(\Delta P)[L(P) \equiv H(P)],$$

which can be read, "For any person, he is a living person if, and only if, he is a person with an operating heart." Each of our biologists is making the same assertion about an empirical covariation, but their methodological assumptions and hence their languages differ; and we may get the impression that they are saying quite different things.

Secondly, the theories of a given time and place are stated in such a fashion that they reflect the *Weltanschauung*—the basic philosophy—of the culture in which they emerge. Thus, Rousseau and Morgan may introduce similar hypotheses about the interrelationships among variables in the empirical world, but these will be placed in very different evaluative settings. Rousseau will tell the tale of the vast degeneration of mankind while Morgan will suggest man's colossal progress. So again, the illusion is created that entirely different schemes are being presented.

Typically, members of one theoretical "school" are ready to reject the theories of another on the basis of their assumptions alone, without ever a glance at their hypotheses. Today, for example, we find ourselves in a cultural setting in which science is, in and of itself, a Good Thing. We are enamoured of the rational-empirical model, and we are quick to reject theoretical schemes

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which smack of any other basic philosophy. Any theory which includes a suggestion of evaluative criteria is immediately suspect. So we build our theories around an attempt to avoid evaluation and condemn our more value-ridden forebears.

Less consensus, however, exists with reference to methodological assumptions. For today we can still find evolutionists like White (1949) and Child (1951), who view scientific anthropology as a search for diachronic relationships, structural-functionalists like Bennett (1949) and Levy (1952), who view scientific anthropology as a search for synchronic relationships, and culture historians like Mead (1953), who try to avoid viewing scientific anthropology at all. It is among proponents of these three schools of thought that conflicts in theory exist. Such conflicts, however, are centered around methodological assumptions; let us glance briefly at some of their hypotheses and see to what extent real differences in theory do obtain.

To illustrate evolutionism we shall look to the theory of E. B. Tylor. In Tylor's work we find evolutionism in its purest form; it includes not only the search for diachronic relationships, but the use of evaluative criteria as well. Tylor lived and wrote in a period and place where the dominant theme of the culture was progress. People looked about them—at the technological advancement, the political enlightenment, the economic expansion—and they were convinced that they lived in the Best of All Possible Worlds and that it was getting better day by day. A general spirit of social and spiritual improvement was in the air. And Tylor was swept up in the current. So his interest in and thoughts concerning man's social life were built around the concept of evolution.

Tylor (1921) used the concept of "evolutionary stages of human life" to organize his thinking about society. He defined three such stages: savage, barbaric, and civilized. The savage stage is characterized by small settlements, a hunting and gathering economy, and simple wood, stone, or bone tools. When the members of a society "rise" into the barbaric stage they develop agriculture or herding. In this stage there are settled villages, governmental organizations, and the beginnings of metal craft. Civilized life begins with writing. It includes extensive trade with other societies, bilateral reckoning of descent, formalization of government and jurisprudence, specialization, and the development of social classes.

Thus, in proposing these three stages in the development of civilization, Tylor outlined several criteria characteristic of each stage. Some characteristics which appear at earlier stages (say small settlements) disappear and are replaced by others (settled villages) at later stages, while others are cumulative—that is, they emerge at a given level of development and continue to appear at each successive level (metal craft appears at the barbaric stage and continues on into civilization). Thus, to rid this scheme of its evaluative connotations, we find that Tylor was talking of variables when he described his characteristics. For example, the variable occupational specialization has two values; (1) no specialization, and (2) specialization. Just so, settlement pattern as a variable has three values: (1) small bands or hamlets, (2) settled villages, and (3) urban centers or cities. And furthermore, if we reinterpret Tylor's stress upon evolutionary stages, we find that he has suggested a characteristic relationship among his variables. He has proposed, for example, that a change in settlement pattern will be accompanied by a change in occupational specialization—that, in fact, settlement pattern and occupational specialization vary together, and that they are correlated with all the other variables: tool types, social organization, subsistence economy, and the like. In short, Tylor has proposed a specific interrelationship among a set of societal variables.

The general viewpoint of the functionalists was summarized by Malinowski (1944) when he defined culture as ". . . an integral in which the various elements are interdependent." The basic hypothesis here is that, given the presence of a particular element in a society or culture, certain other elements will also be present. Bennett and Tumin (1949) specify this hypothesis by suggesting that a certain form of economic structure (e.g., industrial economy) will be associated with a certain form of social organization (e.g., lack of strong familism). They assert that a certain population size will be associated with a certain form of economic structure, and a certain amount of trade with a certain social structure. And Levy (1952) suggests further that the amount of occupational stratification will be associated with the complexity of the society, and

the amount of specialization with the presence of classes.

The approach of the structural-functionalists, then, is synchronic. Instead of looking for stages in the "progress" of a society, they seek to find associations among cultural elements at a given time. Thus, they hypothesize that a society with a large population will have an industrial economy, and conversely, one with a small population will probably lack industry. So again, they are describing variables, and again they are suggesting association among these variables.

We have seen that both the evolutionists and the structural-functionalists propose that a set of societal variables are interrelated. Furthermore, these are, for the most part, the selfsame variables. Both, for example, propose that size, specialization, social organization, economic structure, amount of trade, and the like are associated. Their difference, then, rests in the diachronic approach of the evolutionists versus the synchronic view of the structural-functionalists. But how different are these approaches? If, as the evolutionists propose, one "stage" of society follows another, the elements at any given level must change together into those typical of the next level. Hence, these elements are interdependent, and the functionalists are correct. And if, on the other hand, certain elements in a culture or society imply others, as the structural functionalists would have us believe, then any change must involve the transformation from one functionally interrelated set to another. This implies an ordered series of types of society and, therefore, the evolutionists are right. Each of these schemes, then, implies the other; the structural-functionalists stress patterns, and the evolutionists stress change, but they are both talking about the same thing: a set of socio-cultural variables which vary together—an interrelated set of cultural characteristics. So, fundamentally, when it comes to their hypotheses, there is no conflict between these two theories, there is only congruence.

The work of the culture historians has, for the most part, stressed differences rather than similarities among cultures. Clearly, this approach is not congruent with the two just described. But even the works of such noted proponents of the historical approach as Kroeber and Lowie are not entirely free from hypotheses about regularities among cultures. Thus, Kroeber (1942) has suggested "... that among primitive peoples society is structured primarily on the basis of kinship," while "... successful technological and political developments ... characterize the more complex civilizations." And Lowie's book (1940) abounds with distinctions drawn between "primitive" and "civilized" societies. He has summarized these distinctions by saying that:

"... certain cultural traits appear to be organically linked, so that one of them renders the presence of another more probable or, on the contrary, may tend to exclude it. In some instances the nature of the correlation is clear to us; in others we merely recognize its reality and suspect that some intermediate link eludes us. Thus we readily see why pigs do not go with pastoral nomadism and why pottery accompanies a sedentary life." (Lowie, 1940; p. 384.)

Thus, the culture historians are describing the same association among the same variables as did the evolutionists and the structural-functionalists. In this case, the emphasis is upon the unique in a given culture, but comparisons are made and hypotheses concerning regularities are always just beneath the surface. All of these schools, the evolutionists, the structural-functionalists, and the culture historians are expressing the same hypotheses in different linguistic guises. Their methodological assumptions differ, but when we look to their hypotheses their conflict disappears—they become congruent—a single theory of socio-cultural form and process.

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