# Manchester school of anthropology - structural-functionalism

**What were the distinctive features of the Manchester school of anthropology?**

Structural-functionalism, which dominated British social anthropology for much of the twentieth century, interpreted society in terms of its institutions. Institutions provided society with its structure and worked together to keep society, a bounded unit, in a state of equilibrium.

A person's role or position in the structure determined their behaviour. In the early 1950s, criticisms of the structural-functionalist approach began to emerge from the Manchester school of anthropology, a group of anthropologists involved with the anthropology department at Manchester University. The Manchester school reacted against the obsession with formal institutions and the structure they supposedly produced.

Many felt it was time to move away from the search for ideal types and focus on the much-neglected individual and how he/she coped in a system full of contradictions and inconsistencies. The Manchester school developed a distinctive approach which focused on the role of conflict in society, acknowledged the importance of the wider context (particularly the impact of colonialism), shed light on the issue of multiple identities through their studies of urban and rural communities, and advanced a new analytical model; namely social network analysis. Although the school is distinct in certain ways, its continued reliance on the structural-functionalist paradigm must be realised.

In contrast to structural-functionalists, the Manchester school did not see social equilibrium as " a simple affair, resulting from the neat integration of groups or norms. On the contrary it emerges through the balancing of

oppositions in a dialectical process” [Kuper 1973, 139]. In other words, conflict is an inherent part of society but certain mechanisms exist to ease the tensions and maintain an equilibrium. Ritual, according to Max Gluckman, was one such mechanism.

He analysed “ rituals of rebellion” in southern African societies and argued that “ whatever the ostensible purpose of the ceremonies, a most striking feature of their organization is the way in which they openly express social tensions” [Gluckman 1963, 112]. One such ceremony occurred in Swaziland. The dominant cleavage in the society was between the king and his subjects.

During the ceremony various groups formed cross-cutting ties which undermined and reduced the severity of the dominant cleavage and the king’s subjects were given the opportunity to voice their hatred towards him. “ This ceremony is…a stressing of conflict, a statement of rebellion and rivalry against the king, with periodical affirmations of unity with the king” [Gluckman 1963, 125]. One could infer that such a ritual could totally disrupt a society based on the domination of the ruled by the ruler.

Crucially however, the people are rebelling specifically against the king, and not against the institution of kingship; “ the rebellious ritual occurs within an established and unchallenged social order” [Gluckman 1963, 126-27]. In sum Gluckman explains,

The acceptance of the established order as right and good, and even sacred, seems to allow unbridled excess, very rituals of rebellion, for the order itself keeps this rebellion within bounds. Hence to act the conflicts, whether

directly or by inversion or in other symbolic form, emphasizes the social cohesion within which the conflict exists [Gluckman 1963, 127]

**The ritual reaffirms and perpetuates the social order.**

Gluckman's fieldwork in Zululand and Swaziland established conflict as an unavoidable aspect for analysis in the study of society. However, he has been criticized by many for continuing to use a structural-functionalist paradigm. His studies address the issue of conflict but always in terms of how it is contained by mediating mechanisms (such as ritual) which reaffirm the social order. Kuper explains that this

emphasis on the maintenance of equilibrium grew out of his study of white-ruled Zululand, ' which despite its many unresolved and irresoluble conflicts, " worked"', obliging him to consider ' how social systems could contain the deep conflicts which are present in all of them' [Kuper 1973, 141].

In other words, Gluckman concentrated on repetitive (as opposed to changing) social systems in which " changes occur not by alterations in the order of offices, but by changes in the persons occupying those offices" [Gluckman 1963, 128]. This, Kuper argues, is " the most vulnerable feature of Gluckman's theory" [Kuper 1973, 140]. Although it may shed light on small-scale, non-centralized communities, it ignores conflicts " in which the contending parties no longer share the basic values upon which the legitimacy of the social system rests" [Swartz 1966, 34].

From the viewpoint of the sociology of knowledge, it is no accident that this alteration of analytical focus from structure to process has developed during a period in which the formerly colonial territories of Asia, Africa, and the

Pacific have been undergoing far-reaching political changes that have culminated in independence [Swartz 1966, 3]

In other words, with many countries engaged in the struggle for their independence, anthropologists working in the 1950s and 1960s finally accepted that “ the total political situation should be taken into account” [Kuper 1973, 142]. As the Manchester school anthropologists carried out most of their work in British Central Africa they focussed particularly on the impact of colonialism and capitalism in the societies they studied. Gluckman argued for the recognition of “ a Central African Society of heterogeneous culture-groups of Europeans and Africans” [Kuper 1973, 141].

The point of articulation between imperial and indigenous cultures was epitomized in the position of the headman or elected elder, an office institutionalised by the British. He was seen as an “ inter-calary figure”, caught between the demands of the state and the demands of his people [Kuper 1973, 143]. As Epstein’s classic study of *Politics in an Urban African Community* shows, when Africans rioted against the British in response to an increase in taxes in 1935, the elected elders were also attacked and forced to take shelter with the colonial masters [Kuper 1973, 146]. Such studies shed light on the flaws of the colonial system and the social problems it had caused, topics almost entirely avoided by previous anthropologists.

The Manchester school also focused their attention towards urban and not just rural localities. Through recognition of the urban as a valid and necessary unit of study, the school brought the issues of multiple identities and situational selection to the fore. The process of urbanization in colonial

Africa markedly increased the number of identities people associated with themselves. “ Sometimes a man might side with Bemba against non-Bemba; at other times with clerks against underground workers; and then again line up with fellow Africans against the white mine authority or the government” [Kuper 1973, 146-47].

In other words, people responded to this identity dilemma by choosing to use or ally with different identities, depending on the social situation; this technique is known as situational selection. In the *Kalela Dance* Mitchell argues that the same group of people can have very different relationships depending on whether they are in a tribal or urban setting. Thus, “ ethnic identity is both situational and negotiated by actors amongst each other, and any continuity is possible in principle but not guaranteed” [Rogers 1995, 23].

In 1954 Barnes published his study of a Norwegian Parish and introduced the concept of the social network as an analytical tool [Mitchell 1969, 5]. “ Basically, network analysis is very simple: it asks questions about who is linked to whom, the nature of that linkage, and how the nature of the linkage affects behaviour” [Boissevain 1979, 393]. Social network analysis studied the relationships of interacting people in actual situations.

The individual, instead of structures or institutions, was the starting point. This allowed anthropologists to “ concern (themselves) with individuals using social roles rather than with roles using individuals, and with the crossing and manipulation rather than the acceptance of institutional boundaries” [Rogers 1995, 20]. In contrast to the structural-functionalist approach which viewed a person’s role in the structure as determining their behaviour, social

network analysis considered how individuals adopt and modify the rules to further their own interests and “ use network linkages in order to achieve desired ends” [Mitchell 1969, 38].

Network analysis was found to be particularly useful for studies of larger scale communities. As Mitchell argues, this is because of the “ large number of single-stranded relationships in them, therefore institutional integration is relatively weak” [Mitchell 1969, 48]. In other words, in bigger, more complex communities people have fewer overlapping relations; using an institutional approach is simply not sufficient for such societies. Also, “ social network analysis facilitates the tracing of the connections between locality and wider contexts”, an important factor in an approach so concerned with the “ total” situation [Rogers 1995, 18].

An interesting aspect of social network analysis is its application of mathematical methods to anthropological study. Mitchell argues that the “ use of graph theory and probability mathematics provides an intriguing method of erecting model networks with which empirical networks can be compared” [Mitchell 1969, 34]. This “ openness to methodological innovation” was a key feature of the Manchester school but the school also widely accepted that statistical methods should be used as an aid, and not form the basis of anthropological analysis [Kuper 1973, 142].

There are numerous problems with social network analysis. “ The study of personal networks requires meticulous and systematic detailed recording of data on social interaction for a fairly large group of people, a feat which few fieldworkers accomplish successfully” [Mitchell 1969, 11]. Social network

analysis is simply too time-consuming and detailed for it to be a viable analytical model in many situations.

Also, although the level of abstraction is not as great as it is in the structural-functionalist approach, the anthropologist must still identify the limits or extent of a network, and select the individual or group at the centre of it. The isolation of one part of the network is “ based on the fieldworker’s judgement of what links are significant in explaining the behaviour of the people with whom he is concerned” [Mitchell 1969, 13-14]. Just as structural-functionalists “ found” structures in society, the Manchester school “ found” networks.

However, the important factor to keep in mind with regard to social network analysis is that it was always intended as a complement to structural-functional analysis. As Mitchell outlines, the “ notion of social networks is complementary to and not a substitute for conventional frameworks of analysis” [Mitchell 1969, 8].

In conclusion, it is clear that the Manchester school was distinctive for several reasons. Firstly, it was an action-oriented approach which described the social system as it actually was, full of conflicts and contradictions. Cleavages and tensions were dealt with through various redressive mechanisms. Secondly, it rejected the view of society as a bounded unit and acknowledged the influence of a wider context in all situations; the role of colonialism in causing social problems in Africa was highlighted.

In addition, the Manchester school addressed both urban and rural localities and in doing so furthered anthropology’s understanding of multiple identities

and the necessary application of situational selection. Finally, the school advanced the use of social network analysis, applying mathematical methods to the study of culture and bringing the individual and his/her interactions with other actors in actual settings to the centre of study.

Despite these advances, the Manchester school continued to function within a structural-functionalist paradigm. This is shown, for example, by the fact that conflict was studied only in relation to equilibrium; the school did not account for social change or transformation. Also, although they emphasised the impact and inequalities of the colonial system, the Manchester anthropologists did not provide a general theoretical approach for the colonial situation.

Finally, its analytical model was designed as a complement to structural-functionalist modes of analysis. The Manchester school is characterised by several distinct features however, overall it “ represents more of a shift of emphasis than a complete departure from pre-war structuralism” [Kuper 1973, 148].

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