Essay on comparative essay on the theories of claude levi strauss and clifford ge...

Introduction

At some point in history there emerge people who contribute immensely in the advancement of a particular field. Claude Levi Strauss and Clifford Geertz are two such men whose contributions in to the field of anthropology cannot be understated. Claude Levi Strauss (1908-2009) was a French ethnologist and anthropologist. He is commonly referred to as the " father of anthropology". He famously argued that both the " civilized" and the " savage" human minds have the same structures and that human characteristics are the same through and through. He is a structural theorist who has contributed several theories in the fields of sociology, philosophy and humanities. Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) was an American anthropologist famed for his compilation of essays titled " The interpretation of cultures". . He was a strong advocate for symbolic anthropology. For a long time he was revered as the most dominant cultural anthropologist in the US. Geertz's theories are anchored on the belief that the analysis of culture ought not to be an experiment science searching for a law but rather an interpretive one in search of a meaning. Both Geertz and Strauss are anthropologists of immense repute whose contributions are vital in the understanding of concepts in humanities, philosophy and sociology. This essay compares and contrasts the basic theories of Levi Strauss and Clifford Geertz. While Clifford Geertz's theories centre on symbolism, Levi Strauss's theories focus on kinship and how families acquire their patterns of thought.

Comparisons of the theories by Levi Strauss and Clifford Geertz

The theories by Levi Strauss are anchored on his argument that linguistics is a social science which he asserts is the " only one which can claim to be a science" (31). He says so because linguistics has achieved not only the formulation of an empirical method but also an understanding of the nature of the data that is submitted to its analysis. Strauss asserts that other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology learn from linguistics which is the " road that leads to the empirical knowledge of all social phenomena" (31). Geertz also affirms of the crucial role anthropology has played in enhancing cultures. According to Geertz, symbols pay a significant role in human life through his culture patterns. He asserts that absent an organized system of significant symbols the behavior of man would be ungovernable. Human life would be characterized by exploding emotions and useless acts all conjuring to shapeless experience.

Strauss however, is most interested in the assistance which linguistics can offer to anthropologists to study kinships and family relations. Strauss asserts that the study of human relations as family units is very vital. He argues that kinship is the most elementary structure sin social relationships that human beings share. It is also the structure that differentiates human beings from animals. According to Strauss, an understanding of the kinship system ought to provide decisive insights into the nature of the society in general and basically explain human nature.

In the past, linguistics leaned heavily on historical analysis. Linguistics was predominated by a diachronic or historical approach which sought to ascertain the meaning of a word by exploring its historical roots. Strauss claims that structural linguists revolutionized meaning in its production of meaning on four basic operations. First, the structural linguistics deviates from conscious linguistic phenomena to the study of the unconscious infrastructure. Secondly, the new structural method analyses terms not as independent entities but as rather the basis of analysis is the relationship between terms. Thirdly and very importantly, the new method introduces the concept of a system. Finally, the new method of structural linguistics targets at ascertaining general laws by either induction or by logical deduction which gives the laws absolute character. As such, structural linguistics as a social science is able to formulate necessary relationships.

Contrary to Strauss who emphasizes on the need to consciously cultivate harmonious family relationships in a deliberate and pro-active way, Geertz appreciates the idea of unconscious motivation. He argues that the " organization of the means of production does not explain everything" (4), not even everything human, though it explains something. Geertz views culture not just as an ornament of human existence but rather the principal basis of its specificity. He insists that the not all existing symbols give the same motivations to the different people. Using an example of people in Morocco he picks aspects of anthropological symbols in their society and asserts that the symbols could have a very different meaning were they to be placed in a Western context.

While Strauss's theories affirm that structural kinship systems are an integral part of science, Geertz's theories refute that science plays a vital role in symbolic anthropology. According to Geertz, human attention is focused on disentangling meaning from pseudoscience. He asserts that the entire discipline of anthropology arose from the concept of culture. He ironically notes that anthropology attempts to dominate culture by specifying, limiting, focusing and containing.

Geertz's often cited essay " deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight" presents a classic example of the thick description. The thick description is a method of explaining possible reason behind human actions. For instance if a man winked it was impossible to tell why the man winked; was he removing something from his eye, was he flirting among other reasons. Initially, Geertz considered anthropology as a form of science but he later sought to give anthropology an interpretive approach. Geertz spoke about the difficulties that ethnographic research has in achieving a convincing description about the objective reality.

Geertz takes a look at the progression of man through the latter stages of evolution. He appreciates the role culture played in the process. As man adopted organized hunting and gathering skills, began to establish familial systems, discovered fire among other he established a culture which has continually evolved to date. As man evolved his reliance on a system of symbols increased. Some of the most significant symbols were language, myths, rituals and art. Man used these symbols for self-control, orientation and communication.

Historically, linguistics prevailed within anthropology while seeking to focus on kinship problems. According to Strauss, details and terminologies about kinship as well as special marriages were associated with certain specific custom as either its survival or its consequence. This presented some discontinuity chaos. It was impossible to explain how kinship systems, which are commonly regarded as whole synchronically, could be the subjective product of numerous heterogeneous institutions, yet they function with some sort of effectiveness and regularity. Philology (the study of language and literature) furnishes anthropology with terms which permit the establishment of certain kinship terms of relationships which were not always apparent in the past. Philologists have helped to show how the roles of different actors in the kinship system have adjusted over time. According to Strauss, this phenomenon has been useful in the role of the uncle and the role played by " avuncular relationship" in enhancing kinship systems. Strauss historically explored the roots of the word " uncle" in various cultures. He asserts that kinship problems are like phonemes which are elements of meaning. As such kinship terms get meaning only when they are incorporated into systems.

Kinship terms and familial names such as uncle, aunt, mother, father etc are all developed by the mind on the point of unconscious thought. Strauss insists that the recurrence of familial patterns, marriage rules, shared prescribed attitudes between some types of relatives are distributed in all part of the world. This phenomenon prompts people to believe that in the case of familial and linguistics, the observable occurrences emanate from a set of laws which are general but also implicit.

Strauss theory on structural linguists forming the basis of kinship systems further insists on the need to study the systems as synchronic systems. This shifts the study from the familial aspect itself (say the role of the mother) and its origin to the relationship between the kinship aspects (say to what extent is the role of the mother a function of her relationship with other members of her family). This way the focus is changes from the familial terms making up a given kinship system (nuclear family or extended family) to some other unconscious infrastructure pertaining to the rules adhered to when assigning roles top different family members. This way the terms making up the system are not treated as independent entities but rather as symbols that aid in analyzing relationships between autonomous terms. Ultimately this helps uncover the general " laws" that rule human culture across the world.

Though Levi Strauss and Clifford Geertz theories compare relatively well on several aspects relating to anthropology, the same theories also contrast sharply in some aspects. Levi Strauss does not favor empiricism. He in fact does not see culture as symbiotic and was a Hegelian reductionist. He doesn't see the difference between the social and the symbiotic, thinking that the empirical is an illusion. The basis of Strauss's theories is his belief that no mind is superior to the other and theat both the " savage" and the " civilized" minds have the same structure. This shows that Strauss pays homage to Marxist theories that stress on equality for all. On the other hand, the theories by Geertz do not take what can be considered as a moral standing regarding equality. His theories were based on the role of symbols

in the anthropology. In no instances dies Geertz invoke sentiments that border on issues regarding people I society such as the need for equality.

Geertz theories about symbolic anthropology invoke the roles of religion in a cultural system. Geertz highlights two characteristics of anthropology on religion since the world war two when anthropological work is carried out before and after the first. He notes that there are no major theoretical advances. Adding that the said anthropological adds very little apart from some empirical attachment. Secondly, the anthropological works draws concepts that it does not use from a narrowly defined intellectual tradition. In religion, terms such as symbol, meaning and conception carry deeper meanings than in any other sphere of human life. The concept of meaning in its varieties is a dominant philosophical concept that breathes life to symbols. Geertz urges that it is prudent for people to become aware that social anthropology and particularly that which is concerned with religion will forever shape the life man.

While Strauss eschews from discussions on religion regarding the role of religion in kiship systems Geertz theories stem deeply in religious views and anthropological symbols. Geertz asserts that religion shapes human actions and urges people to conform to certain social orders. One of the basic social orders is the family structure which according to Strauss is the basic unit of all societies. Religion instructs the members of the kinship system on the roles they should adhere to in order to coexist harmoniously with all the other members. For instance many religions appreciate and recommend the man as the head of the family unit. Religious instructions urge the man to be

responsible over the security of his family, to provide food among other responsibilities. They also urge the children to show respect to their parents while urging young family members to offer the utmost respect to their elders. The theories of Strauss and Geertz therefore play complementary roles to each other.

The theories by Strauss and Geertz appreciate the role of symbols in communication. Geertz appreciates the non verbal modes of communication as well as the artwork that existed during the early days of man before man developed speech. Strauss also views the advent of non-verbal means of communication as contributing to the development of the kinship systems. This is especially so in the development of young children children and the communication that exists between then and the older members of their families. Communication is an integral part of anthropology and its enhancement by whichever means becomes vital to future anthropology studies.

Geertz showed that the symbolic dimension of social events is like the psychological though in itself it is theoretically abstract from the events happening as empirical totalities. He considers Kenneth Burke's remark on the differences between building a house and drafting a plan to build a house. By this Gertz insinuated that no matter how deeply interfused the social, the cultural and the psychological maybe in everyday life it is useful t distinguish things in analysis. By doing so people are able to isolate the generic traits of each activity or thing against a normalized background of two confusing entities.

Kinship systems according to Strauss consist of two very different orders of reality. One of these is a " system of terminology" (37) which includes the terms used when expressing various family relationships and a " system of attitudes" (37). The attitudes are both social and psychological in nature and are analogous to the status of the one signified in the language. Individuals who employ some familial terms do or do not feel bound by the prescribed behavior in their relationship with each other. Some grounds on which they may feel obliged to change the language used to relate include familiarity and respect, obligations and rights as well as affection or hostility (37). When people understand how the system of nomenclature works but do not understand how it functions to the end, the group relating as a family loses cohesion and equilibrium. As in the case of language people in a family unit understand the function but do not understand the system and how they can interconnect the two entities.

In many cultures, different signified may be attached to the same phoneme in different languages. Likewise, different attitudes can also be attached in varying cultures towards terms that perform roughly the same function but in different systems. Culture patterns be they complex symbols or systems bear generic traits in that they are sources of information. This notion is affirmed by Strauss's theories on kinship systems that insist on the need to treat anthropology as a source of information to enrich and grow societies.

Clifford Geertz's theories centre on giving prime attention to the role symbols play in public meaning. These theories are contained in his influential work: the interpretation of Cultures published in 1973. In these

essays, Geertz outlined culture defining it as, " a system of inherited formations that are expressed in symbols as people perpetuate, communicate and develop their attitudes and knowledge toward life."(89). Geertz was convinced that the role of anthropologists was to interpret and guide symbols affiliated to each culture.

Culture is made up of psychological structures which help guide the behavior of individuals or groups. Geertz borrowed from Goodenough who says that a society's culture " consists of whatever it is that someone has to believe or know in order to believe in a manner that is acceptable to its members" (11). This statement affirms the opinion by Strauss who argues that the roles placed on family members define what is acceptable and what is not in kinship systems.

Geertz viewed the aim of anthropology as the enlargement of the universe of human discourse. Moreover, anthropology serves to instruct, amuse, advance morality and discover human order in human behavior. He insisted that culture is not an authority to which behaviors, social events, processes and institutions can be causally accredited, it is a context. Cultural analysis according to Geertz is based on assessing the guesses, guessing at meanings, drawing explanatory conclusions from better guesses. Cultural analysis is not based on discovering the expansive meanings of aspects of culture as delineating the different aspect that make up culture.

Conclusion

The anthropological theories by Levi Strauss and Clifford Geertz have contributed immensely to the expansion of the understanding of philosophy,

sociology and humanities. Geertz's theories emphasize on symbolic anthropology while the theories by Strauss explored the kinship system in the context of anthropology and in respect to linguistics. The two theorists appreciated the role of symbols in anthropology. Strauss is however les empirical of the two and his theories are Marxist as they touch on the need for human equality.

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