

# Historical Functionalism

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I will argue that historical particularism and structural functionalism are related in that they both concentrate on detail and pre-existing conditions.

Historical particularism was a school of thought which concentrated on a holistic historical approach to the study of cultures and civilisations, from the development of their language to their physical appearance. Historical particularists believed in concentrated study of a people and their languages to gain a full understanding on their culture. Contiguously following was structural functionalism as a school of thought. Structural functionalism concentrated all of its resources into describing the material, psychological, physical, and social structures of a civilisation.

These methods were demonstrated in the various essays by Franz Boas, and A. L. Koeber for historical particularism, and Bronislaw Malinowski, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown for structural functionalism. Specifically, Boas, in *The Methods of Ethnology*, argued against the various traditional evolutionary theories proposed by Morgan, Marx, Tylor and Spencer. Stating simply that these theories had a particular resilience, but lacked any sort of empirical evidence, Boas argued that the evolutionary theory was based on the counterfactual assumption that our culture was the most advanced and all others were merely following us (Boas, 134). After attacking the diffusionists by noting that their data was not competent enough, methodological difficulties, he responded to the view that historical particularism was atheoretical. How things are and how they come to exist can give only broad

outlines of chronological events. Hence cultures are dynamic and in constant flux; every phenomenon is not only an effect, but also a cause. (Boas, 137) A point, taken to the extreme by Kroeber, but also put forth by Boas was that certain problems may be solved in only particular ways. Because humans are similar in their “infrastructure”, they would tend to solve these problems in similar ways, leading towards the creation of similar traits. Hence, it is not about cultural achievement, but rather about particular conditions that exist at the moment when the new effect is obtained. Kroeber took this to mean that individuals are nothing in a society without a set of pre-existing circumstances. Einstein born in 200 B.C. would have not been influential at all in the field of physics. There were certain pre-existing conditions (historical paths, if you will, Newton’s laws, etc.) that were necessary before Einstein could reveal his full potential.

While intensive detail of temporal changes and pre-existing conditions were at the forefront of historical particularism, structural functionalism stressed the detail of static conditions. According to structural functionalism, it was sufficient to understand culture by looking at the parts of a culture and how they all worked together. Malinowski, for example, tended towards the psychological aspect of structural functionalism: each organ of a culture worked to satisfy a particular psychological need. Whereas Radcliff-Brown concentrated on the actual organs, in this case kinship structure of society, to meet a cultural need: the individual was not an important aspect of a culture; it was rather his *role* in a culture which dictated what kind of person he was to be. (Radcliff-Brown, 178) An interesting point to note is that structural functionalism returned to the views that there were primitive versus advanced cultures; Radcliff-Brown, citing as an example kinship structures, argued that there were certain ideal-types for kinship systems, and that their

presence in primitive societies were either too advanced or underdeveloped.

Narrowing these two unjustifiably brief views down, we see that they both tend on specific and intensive detail. The difference is that one would like to detail the actual conditions in existence now, structural functionalism, and the historical particularism would like to detail the actual conditions which have come to pass. By Boas, and Kroeber admitting to a cause and effect and cause relationship, they are implicitly noting that the person within a society is a product of his society (Boas continues to state that the person is a product *and a factor* within society.) This means, that a person who is produced by society plays out his role, as defined by society, yet the role is dictated by what has come to pass (the historical path of that society.) Similarly, structural functionalism relegates the person into a role based on how the culture is structurally composed. The difference, however, is about how the society is *currently* composed, rather than how the society has come to be. Hence the logic of structural functionalism is: behaviour towards *x* demonstrated by a person, will lead towards the same behaviour regarding *x*. In this case, the individuals' behaviours are effaced, and merged into the group with a similar behaviour. Then this group is compared with a similar group of another society.

The intensive study on the culture is not satisfied, according to either camp. Indeed, Radcliff-Brown notes that his essay does not bring to light anything substantial because more studies must be done on the structures of matriarchal societies, in order to show that these particular tribes (in South Africa, of which he writes about in his article) were not changed from patriarchal to matriarchal, but have *always been patriarchal*. (Radcliff-Brown, 182) Implicit in that and any structural functionalist's argument is the denouncement, and ignorance of change. This is the major schism between the two schools: historical particularism

embraces, and even necessitates change in a society.

In sum, these two theories are similar in that they emphasise detailed study of a particular culture; they also share the view that one's role in society largely determines his actions within a society. The inherent difference between the two schools involves area of concentration: where one concentrates on psychological or physical structures of a society at the present moment, the other concentrates on the processes of cause and effect that leads the culture to its present state. Implicit in this differentiation is structural functionalism's rejection of change within a society. Taking into consideration these differences, (albeit superficially, any indepth study would require more than a handful of essays and three pages of synthesis,) one may clearly see that these two schools are not mutually exclusive. They can co-exist, and are indeed necessary to understand, in depth and breadth the existence of various cultures; hence the term "historical functionalism."

## References

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