

Structured structures and the dualism of discourse

Danny de Vries, 1999

Anthropology

Carole Crumley (1994) has argued (and still does) that the notion that "culture has triumphed over nature" is mistaken and characterizing western nature-culture dualism. To support this claim, she points at Anthropology introduction textbooks, in which the first part of the story is couched in evolutionary and environmental terms, while the second part denies the environment a meaningful role in human history. According to her, this dualism is also reflected in the separation of Archeological/ Physical anthropologists versus Socio-cultural anthropologists: neither acknowledges their mutual reliance. Reading Ortner's theoretical overview (1980), this perception seems certainly not far fetched. The struggle between materialism and idealism, between the hard and soft approaches, between nature and culture, has lasted well into the seventies. The mentioned debates between cultural ecologists, accused of "mindless and sterile scientism" and symbolic anthropologists, accused for being "fuzzy headed mentalists" are evidence to this fact.

Was Anthropology able to free itself from this paradigm through the seventies? At the social cultural side, Structural Marxism presented a watered down version of ecological awareness. Despite its dialectic legacy, in which culture and nature are seen as constantly interacting, ecological considerations were seen as subdued to the social. Political Economy emphasized the impact and adaptation to external forces which were symbolic, and not ecological. Structuralism emphasised *binary* structures which presumably are neurally hardwired and guide culture to mediate or reconcile opposites. At the ecological side, the Cultural Ecology approach of Steward--ridiculed by the Symbolic anthropologist as "vulgair materialism"--was accused of "giving undue weight to culture as the primary unit of analysis" (Moran, 1993). Instead, a more explicit biological ecosystemic paradigm was proposed. Even though the notion of the environment as the static background against which human dynamic occur was dismissed, no serious integration of social cultural

processes into ecosystem functioning was developed. Instead, energy flows became the starting point in understanding the complexity of human systems.

Not much reason to conclude progress was made on either side of the line. The binary opposites were remolded, but not removed. The cultural remained separated from the natural, the social from the ecological, the subjective from the objective, the humanities from the hard sciences. It is not surprising then that an entire new movement of thought had to be developed, and discovered, to finally create the theoretical consciousness capable of overcoming this conundrum. Much influenced by Foucault, Bourdieu and the Gramsci, a new question was investigated: "*how* is this dualist structure sustained?" It appeared that to answer this question, both "structure" and "power" had to be reassessed. Interestingly though, and not much later in time, a similar investigation of the role of structure and power was dealt with by Archeologists and Human Ecologists, as can be exemplified by the work on Historical Ecology by Crumley and others (Crumley, 1994). Is this then the beginning of the end? Has the investigation of power and structure led a fruitful synthesis of social-cultural and ecological & evolutionary theories? What barriers are still to be resolved? Before being able to attempt to answer these questions, the commonalities between these different theorists, Bourdieu, Foucault, Gramsci and the Historical Ecology of Crumley need to be investigated.

A first important similarity between these different theorists is the common **acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of the dominating structure**. In "*A Dialectical Critique of Hierarchy*," (1987) Crumley, from an Archeological and Evolutionary Anthropological perspective, questions the assumptions underlying theories of state organization According to her, "*we create a conceptual field in which structure serves as a metaphor for stability and familiar patterns are reproduced and exchanged... To investigate this, our underlying assumptions about one structure or another needs to be brought to consciousness in order to inform practical choice,*" (p155). Crumley also emphasises the arbitrariness of this established structure. According to her, "*thought and act conflate structure with order; as long as some pattern may be recognized we assume that things are running smoothly and that change, if it comes at all, will be gradual. Even morally and politically unacceptable structures are tolerated because their existence guards against the even more fearful unknown.*" (p.155). This very same point lies at the heart of the theories of all three of the social cultural thinkers,

although posed in different language. According to Bordieaux, the formation of the "*habitus*," or "*durably installed generative principles of regulated improvisations*," (1977, p.72), forms, and constrains, any arbitrary form of social structure, resulting in the natural acceptance of its power as an essential element of the established order. Bordieaux calls such an uncritically accepted, ideal type situation a *Doxa*. Foucault, instead of trying to explain this in cognitivist terms (as Bourdieu seems to be doing), emphasises the importance of *discourses* in the arbitrariness of the existing structure. According to him, a system of control mechanisms assures the dominant power to impose its discourse on alternative subjugated knowledges (1980). Further, he stresses its arbitrariness in emphasising the importance of historical contingency and accidents as determinative for the dominant order. Gramsci also recognizes the arbitrariness of social reality, stating that the "*whole substance of lived identities and relationships manifest [itself] to such a depth that the pressure and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense.*" (Williams, 1977, p.110), Taken for granted thus the arbitrariness of this reality by the people exposed to it.

A second important commonality is **the infusion of process in the investigation of structure**. Crumley suggests that the problem with an investigation of structure arrives at incorporating "*that untrappable beast process which stalks the periphery of our empirical investigations [in structure].*" (1987, p. 156). According to her, it is the relation between structure and process which is the proper focus of study. Thus, an historical, processual, analysis of this structure is needed. Bordieaux, in his own way, emphasizes this processual approach as well. In his *theory of practice*, Bourdieu's goal would be to put "objectivist knowledge back on its feet by posing the question of the (theoretical and also social) conditions which make such knowledge possible." (1977, p.4). According to him, objectivist knowledge coincides with seeing the world as a "structure." It is to be in a certain position, which puts the observer outside of primary, phenomenological, experience. As a result, action which by the agents are seen as irreversible, such as the exchange of a gift, are seen as reversible from the observer's objectified point of view. Placed outside of immediate experience, the details of what happens "between the structure" are lost to the observer: style, the occurrence of necessary improvisation, strategies to behavior and, most importantly, time (tempo). Thus, in contradiction to

Geertz webs of significance that have been spun, it is the analysis of the spinning that counts: putting time, or process, back into the analysis through the theory of praxis. Foucault, rejecting anything but the "how" question, is more explicit in emphasis on process. To him, it is exactly the historical investigation of the how-question which is of central importance. Through a *Genealogy*, the aim is to rediscover the painstaking struggles that went into the formation of a certain dominant structure. To "*discover the point at which practices became coherent reflective techniques with definite goals, at which a particular discourse emerged from these techniques and came to be seen as true, and at which they are linked with the obligation of searching for the truth and telling the truth.*" (Rabinow, 1984). Process is also emphasized in Gramsci's work. As Williams puts it: "*The lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits*" (1977, p.112). However, Gramsci's approach is not historical perse. Although a brief sketch is given on the formation of intellectuals, this certainly does not comprise the core methodology of his work, as it is certainly the case with Foucault.

A further similarity can be found in the mutual **recognition of the diffuse, local, nature of power in structure**. Essential to Crumley's critique is the insistence of some researchers to seeing all structures as hierarchically organized, in which "*on the basis of certain factors some elements of structure are subordinate to others and may be ranked.*" (1987, p156). Against this stereotypical idea, and based on the model of the brain as a horizontally organized structure, the idea of an *heterarchical* structure is suggested: "*complex systems in which the elements are either unranked (relative to other elements) or ranked in a number of ways, depending on systematic requirements,*" (1987, p.158). According to her, a common error is made by many researcher who uncritically nest levels of analysis, confusing scalar hierarchies (global-regional-local system) with control hierarchies (such as the court system) and leading to the misinterpretation of chains of causation. It is quite possible that effects that occur at the "subordinate level" have major systemic effects: they can change parameters (boundaries) or control levels (center-periphery shifts, scale changes) or the ranking of various elements. This is not to say hierarchies do not exist, it is the mere suggestion of its relativity in relationship to the goals and aims. This idea can be recognized in the concepts of power as put forward by all three social cultural theorists, even though all of emphasize it differently.

When Bourdieu's *Doxa* enters the field of discourse, or when its assumptions get contested, the *heterodox* claim, posing the existence of several competing possibilities of opinion, becomes recognized. These possibilities of opinion can exist in the form of a *homology*, a form of sharing in spite of diversity. Within such homology, a hierarchy can be respected. A diffuse, decentralized analysis of power is central to Foucault as well. Power does not flow from a center to its peripheries, but is present at the local, individual level--through the controlling constraints of discourse and normalization techniques--and the reproducing embodiment in local practices. Power is the immanent relation of force that organizes action. It is constant, and it is everything. Similarly, Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, as interpreted by Williams (1977, p110), represents a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living. "*The pressures and limits of a given form are experienced and internalized in practice.*" This nature is negotiated, it can never be singular, and there are many different sites of power. Everyone is a philosopher, and as such can be an intellectual: those who create the dominant ideology.

Finally, and the list is surely not exhausted, all authors **recognize the importance of discourse in the sustenance of this relation.** Crumley argues that the dominant ideas of hierarchy are constructed and disseminated for the benefit of identifiable vested interests (1987, p156). The embeddedness of our language and imagery in hierarchical structures is effective in preventing us from conceptualizing other forms of social organization. To her, "*such unconscious adoption of hierarchy-as-order is endemic to what is termed complex society.*" It is of course without much doubt that Foucault would argue likewise. His entire genealogy is an attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from the subjection to the hierarchical, unitary, formal, scientific, discourse, and revolves around the insurrection of subjugated knowledges. Gramsci's notion of Ideology illustrates the importance placed on discourse here as well. The dominant class, controlling the production of ideas, extracts a system of ideas from its living process, which it disseminates to the actual consciousness of both the dominant and the subordinate classes (Williams, 1977, p109). Finally, Bourdieu seems to be the exception relative to the explicit attention to discourse given by the former ones. The notion the habitus, "*the endless capacity to engender products,*" is seen as constrained by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production. However, no explicit link to discourse, in the sense of Foucault, is made. Instead, systems of classification reproduce in

their own specific logic the objective classes in the relations of production, and make their specific contribution to the reproduction of the power relationships.

The above mentioned commonalities do not preclude the existence of major theoretical differences. However, the main goal of this paper is not to deconstruct these theorists, but to investigate the consequences of their approach in terms of the divide between social-cultural theory and ecological & evolutionary theory. Despite the somewhat underrepresented number of ecological theorists, it seems that the analysis of structure in the form of power provides a bridge crossing the muddled waters of the disciplinary divide. Of course it would be naive to believe that ecology & evolutionary scholars would not be influenced by major revolutions in social-cultural theories. This actually is precisely the point made: that the distinction between the two "fields" is an historically created, and not essential to the structure of human reality. However, despite the obvious commonalities, the most striking finding is the lack of cross-disciplinary reference within the theoretical branches. For example, while acknowledging the fact that Crumley's treaty arrived at a somewhat later time than the social-cultural theorists dealt with, it seems somewhat absurd that no mention is made at all--in none of her examined papers and books (1986; 1994; 1998)--of the theoretical sophistication developed within social-cultural anthropology on the issue of power. When explaining the development of her claim, Crumley bases her argument on a somewhat far stretched link with neuropsychological theorists (making one wonder about structuralist influence in her perspective), while ignoring any reference to Foucault, Gramsci or Bourdieu. It is as if Crumley had to re-invent the "wheel of power" from within the ecological & evolutionary framework. This remarkable development seems only open for explanation by referencing to the very concepts posed by all four thinkers. The subjugating influence of the dominating structure, the hierarchy built into perception, the pervading influence of dualist discourse, and the lack of general acknowledgement of hegemonic, heterarchic and homologic structures.

No closer to our Academic home can one find this--despite acknowledgement of its necessity at both the socio-cultural and ecology and evolution sides--than in the lack of integration, the very separatedness of the social-cultural and ecological & evolutionary Graduate core courses. The influence of the dominant paradigm through its "structured structures"--as Brodieux would say it--seems ironical in an Academic Department which

strives to place itself in the middle of this very dualistic discourse. As Foucault argues, it indeed seems to be that the relative conservativeness of academic discourse is part of the glue which holds the structure together. As such, analysis of the actual hegemony of power, including its reflection in the habitus and the appearance of subjugated knowledges, seems of tremendous importance in bridging the dualistic divide. As such, it would be a tremendous achievement to make further structural adjustments to the Graduate core courses to counter the dominant discourse.

References:

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Crumley, C (1987) *A Dialectical Critique of Hierarchy*. In: Power relations and State formation, Thomas C. Patterson and C.W Gailey, eds. p155-168. Washington D.C., American Anthropological Association.
- Crumley, C. (1994) *Historical Ecology: A Multidimensional Ecological Orientation*. In: Historical Ecology, Cultural Knowledge and Changing Landscapes, Carole C. Crumley, Ed. School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
- Crumley, C. (1998) *Foreword*. In: Advances in historical Ecology, Ed. William Balie, Columbia Univerasity Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980) *Two Lectures and Truth and Power*. In: Power/Knowlegde: Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977. Pantheon.
- Moran, E.F. (1993). *Ecosystem Ecology in Biology and Anthropology: A Critical Assessment*. In: The Ecosystem Approach in Anthropology. Moran, Ed. The Universtiy of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
- Ortner, S. (1980) *Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties*. In: Culture/Power/History, A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory, Eds: Dirks, Eley, Ortner. Princeton University press, Princeton, new Jersey.
- Rabinow, P. (1984). *Introduction*. In: The Foucault Reader. Pantheon.
- Williams, R. (1977) "*Hegemony*" from Marxism and Literature, Oxford University Press, pp108-115.