

Structuralism

Levi-Strauss analysed cultural phenomena such as languages, myths and kinship systems to discover what ordered patterns, or structures, they seemed to display. These, he suggested, could reveal the structure of the human mind. He reasoned that behind the surface of individual cultures there must exist natural properties (universals) common to us all. Levi-Strauss focused his attention on the patterns or structures existing beneath the customs and beliefs of all cultures.

One such pattern is called opposition. The entire world could be conceptualised in this dualistic way. The reason people of all cultures tend to think in terms of opposites is that to think, we must classify, which means we must be able to distinguish between things.

In the industrialised world, the red light of a traffic signal means 'stop', and green means 'go'. To Levi-Strauss, this is a mere external of culture, devoid of any deeper significance. Much more meaningful is how these facts convey information to drivers and pedestrians; through the contrast or opposition between red and green, and the switching from one colour to another. Red has a meaning only in relation to green. It is the structure or pattern of opposites that provides the messages, not the colours considered independently of each other.

Levi-Strauss likened people's language to the 'rules' that govern society, in that the governed are largely unconscious of what they know. He likened speech-the use of sounds and rules, mainly in the form of sentences-to the ideas and behaviour that result from the application of largely unconscious social rules. Members of a society are much more likely to be conscious of their actual ideas and behaviours than they are of the deeply structured rules that make these ideas and behaviours possible, but the ideas and behaviours of a given group of people can be understood if the unconscious of the unconscious structures in their minds can be discovered. - Levi-Strauss puts forward that culture is to be understood as a surface phenomenon which reveals the universal human tendency to order and classify experiences and dynamics. - Seeks to understand the 'deep structures' in society. - While the surface phenomenon may vary, the underlying ordering principles are the same. - Levi-Strauss has analysed kinship and marriage, myth and ritual - He argues that the human brain universally forms 'Binary Oppositions'. Here, people and society forms oppositions and contrasts. For example, the Yanomamo make a distinction between the things of the 'jungle' and the 'village'. Man is of the village and animals are of the jungle. Man is of the village and animals are of the jungle. Moreover, in our society we form a distinction between man and woman, right and left, and raw and cooked. - No term, therefore, is to be understood in isolation, but instead, as part of a contrasting system built up from the brain's elementary function of contrast and opposition. - He argues that myth and ritual serve to bridge these contradictions (i.e. bridge social dichotomies). Problems with structuralism- - Structuralism tends to be static and 'ahistorical' (not examining past events), thus not accounting for the way history effects the present. - Poses a biological explanation for cultural, which sometimes ignores 'social constructions'.]

Authority and the Exercise of Power Systems of social stratification Sociologist Max Weber established possible connections among power, prestige, and unequal access to resources. He suggested that social inequality tends to develop in a society when: - People have unequal access to whatever is considered valuable: natural resources, labour, money, or (especially in non-western societies), intangibles such as ritual knowledge. - People are entitled to different degrees of prestige, depending on criteria such as descent, wealth or race, or (more recently), education or Westernisation. - Some people enjoy more power, either physical or ideological (based on ideas and charisma) than others. -

Such differences are both causes and characteristics of stratified societies. Society ensures the appropriate behaviour of its members by rules about social stratification, especially through status, role and prestige. Social class- a group of people in a stratified society, such as elites and commoners, who share a similar level of access to resources, power and prestige. Rank- a position in hierarchical system of social classification. Ascribed status- the social status that one is born into, includes gender, birth order, lineage, clan affiliation, and connection with elite ancestors. Social stratification- a ranking of social statuses such that the individuals of a society belong to different groups having differential access to resources, power and prestige. Status- the place that an individual occupies in the social structure Role- a combination of the attitudes with a given status and the behaviour that expressed them. Prestige- social reputation based on a subjective evaluation of social statuses relative to one another. Class- a group defined by the amount of control it exerts over- factors of production. (Those with more control are the higher classes- and vice versa).

Class Marx's definition of class as an economic phenomenon assumes that in creating their own wealth, the high-ranking classes will exploit the labour of the low-ranking classes. Marx also suggested that conflict between different classes, which has been going on through out human history, is inevitable.

Classes are like strata of a social structure. They are interlocking 'pieces' within a social system defined according to their own economic relationships. It is not that they are necessarily richer or poorer; but that their function within a system of production is specialised. It is specialised not in terms of what people actually do, rather, a class is defined in terms of the relationship of people's labour to their sources of subsistence and to the means of production. Caste Caste- an endogamous, ranked, occupationally defined group- known as 'Jati' in India. Caste is a special phenomenon fully developed only in India and Sri-Lanka. Castes are not simply ranked social categories through in Hindu ideology they are related

to the idea fourfold division of society into 'varna'- a priestly class; rulers and warriors; landholders and merchants; cultivators and menial. Local castes or 'jatis' are usually endogamous corporate groups. Hindu cosmology and rules of purity and pollution prohibit eating and sexual contact between higher and lower castes. These castes are hierarchically ordered in a fixed rank order, associated with traditional occupations. A person's caste is fixed by birth (i.e. ascribed status) and it is unchanging. But in practice a local caste hierarchy may correspond only very loosely with the ideal. In some societies, certain occupations are regarded as being so lowly or degrading that only those of inferior social rank undertake them. Likewise, prestigious jobs may be performed only by members of a superior rank.

For example, traditional Hindu society in India is divided into 4 'varnas':

Class ranks- 1) Priestly (Brahman)

 2) Warriors (Ksatriya)

 3) Merchants and cultivators (Vaisya)

 4) Craftsman, labourers, servants (Sudra) Then come the Untouchables- so inferior, they're considered outside this ranking system altogether). Well-defined sets of rights, duties and rules of conduct set the individual varnas apart from each other and the untouchables.

Within each varna were numerous castes, hereditary social groups identified with special rights duties, and prohibitions, each occupying a permanent place in hierarchy of similar groups and each associated with a distinctive occupation. Caste members inherited their membership patrilineally, and were members for life. Castes were endogamous, required to marry someone from the same caste, although from a different patrilineage. Each caste occupied a permanent position in an overall hierarchy of castes, with each (except for those at the top and bottom) ranked as superior as well as inferior to at least one other.

Untouchables belonged to no caste. As a member of caste, only you and other members of your caste would have had the right to perform the traditional services 'owned' by your caste. Your occupation would have been the one to which membership in your particular caste entitled you; e.g. if you were a member of the Washerman caste, you would be a washerman.

You could not have accepted food from, or had sex with, a person of any caste ranked below yours. You would probably have been prohibited from eating certain foods forbidden to members of your caste.

The caste system had the important function of forcing people into dependence on one another's specialised services, thus promoting their interaction and co-operation among the groups to which they belong, thereby increasing the integration of the entire society. Specialists in Indian culture disagree about whether the caste system should be considered predominantly an economic or religious institution. From an economic perspective, castes were occupational in nature, but the hierarchical ordering of castes was reinforced by a religious concept. At the core of Hinduism lies the notion of personal purity and pollution. One way these were determined was by one's varna; Brahmans were purer than Sudras, and this kind of purity or pollution was unchangeable. But a person could also be polluted by normal biological functions- eating, excretion, sex, childbirth or death, and such pollution was thought to be contagious. The ranking of castes was based on the degree of purity or pollution associated with the job traditionally performed by members of a given caste.

Over the last half-century, the system has been considerably weakened, first by Western influences and then by Indian law. The Indian government has tried to raise the status of members of low-ranking castes by encouraging them to change the occupations allocated to them by tradition, and this has allowed many Indians to break out of the system. In his account of life in the southern Indian village of Gopalpur, Beals describes how missionaries converted many members of the village's lower castes to Christianity, a religion in which everyone is believed to be equal in the sight of God. Among those converted were some members of the lowly Leather Workers caste, whose job it was to dispose of the carcasses of the animals that died in the village. One day, a water buffalo died in Gopalpur, but the leatherworkers refused to remove it on the grounds that they had rejected traditional ways and were no longer members of the Leather workers caste. So the buffalo's corpse lay rotting in its stall. Eventually, no longer able to bear the stench, an angry committee of villagers belonging to other castes tied the animal's legs together, thrust a pole through them, and carted the carcass to the edge of the village. Only a generation before, this could not have happened, for non-Leather Workers would never have polluted themselves by performing such a defiling job. William and Charlotte Wiser, who studied social relations in the Indian village of Karimpur between 1930 and 1960, found that much had changed when they returned in 1970. 'There are fewer caste restrictions than there used to be', claimed villagers, although they added that castes were still endogamous and that most of Karimpur's Hindus were still uncomfortable with the idea of accepting food from a member of a lower-ranking caste. But the villagers added 'these rules' have not interfered with our personal relationships with each other. We have friends in other castes and we think nothing of it. Friendship is more important than caste, anyhow?.

 Jati in Gopalpur - Members of a Jati can accept any food prepared by members of a higher-ranking Jati, but they can accept only certain types of food from members of a lower-ranking Jati. - Christian and Muslim criteria of pollution are different from those of other Jatis. Both Jatis consume beef, but not carrion beef. Among other things, Muslims do not eat pork, and Christians do not drink alcoholic beverages. A further complication is that both Muslims and Christians have always possessed great political power. The region in which Gopalpur is located has been ruled for centuries by Muslims. - It is a mistake to assume that there is a direct correlation between the rank of Jati in terms of purity-pollution and the social and economic position of a Jati or of individuals in a particular Jati. Birth into a particular Jati is a reward for virtue accumulated in a previous life, but, in theory, at least, one does not continue to receive the rewards after one has ceased to be virtuous. Anyone in any Jati can be poor. If one is born a Brahmin, one derives certain advantages. Brahmins may always earn a little money by serving as priests; such occupations as Village Accountant are reserved for a particular class of Brahmins. A Brahmin who begs from door to door will always receive a little more than other beggars

because a Brahmin is always a religious mendicant rather than an ordinary beggar. There are a relatively large number of ways in which a poor Brahmin may become wealthy. - To fill the gaps between reality and the ideal pattern of economically co-operating Jatis, there are social and religious obligations. To arrange a marriage, to set up the doorway of a new house, to stage a drama, or to hold an entertainment, the householder must call upon a wide range of Jatis. The entertainment of even a modest number of guests requires the presence of the Singer. The Potter must provide new pots in which to cook the food; the Boin from the Farmer Jati must carry the pot; the Shepherd must sacrifice the goat; the Crier, a Saltmaker, must invite the guests. To survive, one requires the co-operation of only a few Jatis; to enjoy life and do things in the proper manner requires the co-operation of many. - Even in the economic field, co-operation extends far beyond any kind of formal arrangement. Fences, constructed of dried thorny branches, soon deteriorate. When the farmer is away, there is nothing to stop the herdsman from turning his cattle into the farmer's field. When the herdsman is away, there is nothing to stop the farmer from casting stones at the sheep that strays into his field. The belief that Jatis are related to each other, like brothers, and that all Jatis provide essential services for each other creates a sense of unity within the diversity of Jatis. - The members of any one Jati are relatives. They owe each other the respect, affection, and obligations specified by the nature of their kinship ties. Men of the same age in any one Jati are usually 'brothers'. 'Brothers' do not compete with each other. They do not wrestle with each other, They do not compete with each other. If the situation is even vaguely competitive, the younger 'brother' always loses. If a younger 'brother', no matter how distantly related, forgets himself, violence is often a result.

About the Author

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