Functionalism: A Protest

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on one side, all evil on the other. Moreover, they assume to assign the label of unqualified good or evil to every cultural activity. These evaluations are not matters of inquiry; they just are so: the list is a credo to act on. The trouble with the poor functionalists and economists has been that they have not known about this simple good-bad list or dichotomy, so sometimes they have straddled both sides of the fence, to their and others' discomfort. All they need to do now is to take over the list, put a straight-ticket check mark against every item on the good side, and all will be well with their sciences.

The world is full of aberrations, and it may seem that this one need not be taken too seriously. But the article contains several postulates which, if more widely accepted, would quickly undermine and destroy science. I assert, contrariwise, the following simple propositions, which the Gregg-Williams article violates or denies:

1. The method of science is to begin with questions, not with answers, least of all with value judgments.

2. Science is dispassionate inquiry and therefore cannot take over outright any ideologies “already formulated in everyday life,” since these are themselves inevitably traditional and normally tinged with emotional prejudice.

3. Sweeping all-or-none, black-or-white judgments are characteristic of totalitarian attitudes and have no place in science, whose very nature is inferential and judicial.

The matter of cultural relativism and its implications is too complex to be gone into systematically here. Obviously, relativism poses certain problems when from trying merely to understand the world we pass on to taking action in the world: and right decisions are not always easy to find. However, it is also obvious that authoritarians who know the complete answers beforehand will necessarily be intolerant of relativism: they should be, if there is only one truth and that is theirs.

I admit that hatred of the intolerant for relativism does not suffice to make relativism true. But most of us are human enough for our belief in relativism to be somewhat reinforced just by that fact. At any rate, it would seem that the world has come far enough so that it is only by starting from relativism and its tolerations that we may hope to work out a new set of absolute values and standards, if such are attainable at all or prove to be desirable.

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FUNCTIONALISM: A PROTEST

The paper by Dorothy Gregg and Elgin Williams in the American Anthropologist for October–December 1948 calls for protest. The authors arbitrarily apply the label “functionalist” to certain writers on anthropology and sociology. By selecting from these writers detached quotations, to which they sometimes attach meanings that they did not have in the minds of the writers, they build up an imaginary picture of something they call “functionalism,” which they then present as a body of views held by all the persons they have decided to call functionalists. All the canons of scholarly integrity are ignored.

Malinowski has explained that he is the inventor of functionalism, to which he gave its name. His definition of it is clear; it is the theory or doctrine that every feature of
culture of any people past or present is to be explained by reference to seven biological needs of individual human beings. I cannot speak for the other writers to whom the label functionalist is applied by the authors, though I very much doubt if Redfield or Linton accept this doctrine. As for myself I reject it entirely, regarding it as useless and worse. As a consistent opponent of Malinowski's functionalism I may be called an anti-functionalist.

Malinowski's view of society is rooted in utilitarianism, and his theory is one of a series of theories of one general kind. There was the theory of Lester Ward that "desires of associated men" act as "social forces" and produce the institutions which constitute the social order. He was followed by Albion Small (1905) who proposed to explain the features of social life as the product of six basic interests—health, wealth, sociability, knowledge, beauty, rightness. Sumner (Folkways, 1907) sought to explain social evolution as the result of four basic motives—hunger, sex passion, vanity and fear. Malinowski produced a variant, in which culture is substituted for society, and seven "basic biological needs" are substituted for the desires, interests and motives of the earlier writers.

One thesis of the paper referred to, and apparently the major thesis, is that "both economists and functionalists derive behavior from biological sources and as a result view all customs as reasonable and necessary." After pointing out that every one knows that the "wants" of human beings in any society are socially determined, the authors continue, "Nevertheless functionalists, like economists, do take wants and needs as individual, inborn physical mechanisms. They do derive cultural necessities and imperatives from physiological sources. The outcome of this procedure is apparently that all social institutions appear right and good by definition. Behavior stems from needs; it follows that the institutional manifestations of these needs are reasonable, necessary and just.

So far as I am concerned, and I can only speak for myself, the statement that I take wants and needs as individual, inborn physical mechanisms is a falsehood invented by the authors for some reason of their own. I generally avoid any use of the word "need" since it is tainted with ambiguity. As to wants, could any one in the world believe that my wants, for certain kinds of books, for certain kinds of music, or for a typewriter, are inborn physical mechanisms? This is what the readers of this journal are told that I believe.

In the passage quoted above there is an omitted step in the argument, namely, the proposition that all modes of behavior that are derived from biological sources, or "stem from needs," are right and good; reasonable, necessary and just. What is not clear is whether the authors themselves think this, or whether they are asserting that all functionalists hold this view. For the latter, they do not produce a single scrap of evidence. I find it impossible to believe that Malinowski or any other person has ever entertained it. In any case the anthropologist is not concerned, as an anthropologist, with whether such things as slavery or cannibalism, or the institutions of the United States or Russia, are or are not right, good, reasonable or just. Among the Malays there is an institution known as amok; in certain circumstances a man runs amok and kills as many persons as he can before he himself is killed; the authors say that all so-called functionalists think that this institution is right, good, reasonable and
just. Is this absurdity the sort of thing that deserves to be put before the readers of the *American Anthropologist*?

I have no wish to follow further the irresponsible extravagances of the authors. They certainly do not deserve to be taken seriously. I only ask to be permitted to register a personal protest against a procedure, for which they can find no possible justification or excuse, by which, having applied to me the label "functionalist," they attribute to me, first, acceptance of the Malinowskian theory of culture, which I reject, and second, the quite impossible view that all customs and institutions of any society are right and good, and I suppose they might add that all socially accepted beliefs are true.

It is true that I make use of the concept of function, and I did so in my lectures at Cambridge and the London School of Economics before the time when Malinowski began to study anthropology. All physiologists make use of the same concept, but they are not called functionalists. The concept, as I use it, is one that enables us to study the interrelations of a structure and an associated process. An organism has a structure of organs and tissues and fluids. What we call the life of an organism is a process. The structure determines the process; life consists of the actions and interactions of organs. The process determines the structure, by renewing it and keeping it alive. This mutual relation between structure and process in an organism is what is referred to when we speak of function in physiology.

For me, as for many others, there is such a thing as social structure. The theory of social evolution depends on this concept, since that theory is that in human life there has been a development of different types of structural systems by divergence or variation, and a development of more complex systems from simpler ones. A social structure is an arrangement of persons in relationships defined and regulated by institutions; and an institution is an established pattern of conduct, or a set of patterns, relating to some feature of social life. The process that is connected with social structure is social life, the interactions and joint actions of persons who are brought into relation by the structure. The concept of function, as I employ it, is used to describe the discoverable interconnections of the social structure and the processes of social life. The social life is determined by the structure; the structure is maintained in existence by the social life, or undergoes modification through the events of the social life (such as a war, for example). The function of an institution, custom or belief, or of some regular social activity, such as a funeral ceremony, or the trial and punishment of a criminal, lies in the effects it has in the complex whole of social structure and the process of social life.

This theory of society in terms of structure and process, interconnected by function, has nothing in common with the theory of culture as derived from individual biological needs. Why should the authors of the paper referred to pretend that they are the same thing? What do they think they can get out of this attempt to introduce utter confusion?

It is worth while to point out that names ending in *-ism* do not apply to scientific theories, but do apply to philosophical doctrines. There are such things as socialism and utilitarianism, and also Platonism, Hegelianism and Marxism. Chemists work on the basis of the atomic theory, but no one calls their theory "atomism" though this may be an appropriate name for the philosophy of Democritus. By calling his doctrine
“functionalism” Malinowski seems to have wished to emphasize that it was the product of one mind, like any philosophical doctrine, not, like a scientific theory, the product of the co-operative thinking of a succession of scientists. Might it not prevent confusion if it were renamed Malinowskianism?

A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN

THE CONTEXT OF THEMES

In the July–September, 1948, issue of the AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST, Albert K. Cohen gave his views “on the place of ‘themes’ and kindred concepts in social theory.” As he himself points out, his remarks tend to be highly condensed and offer some difficulty to the average reader. However, I gather he is for themes and kindred concepts as far as they go, only deploring that their sponsors have “divorced (them) from a broader theory and conceptual scheme.” The conceptual scheme that he feels has been forgotten apparently relates to “the kinds of things that have got to get done somehow, regardless of themes or value systems.” Themes cannot be anything, says Mr. Cohen. They cannot defy the limitations of the environment; they cannot make impossible demands upon human beings; they cannot prevent some kind of working relationship between one human group and another; they cannot halt reproduction and the food quest; they may not jeopardize the allocation of duties and responsibilities in matters of work and authority. The divorcement of themes and kindred concepts from such a list of basic needs and institutions of man, he declares, constitutes an “idealistic theory of action” and “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

I shall not attempt to speak for those responsible for “kindred concepts” but as the author of the papers on “themes” to which Cohen pays his respects I must observe that the “divorce” which he deplores exists solely in his own mind.

A glance at the very first paragraph of the first paper I contributed on the subject of themes should have shown that the existence of basic human needs and social structure was taken into account and that themes were conceived of as postulates which arose from them and in relation to them. I wrote:

“A study of any society, nonliterate or modern, ordinarily divides into familiar categories, such as political organization, economy, social life, religion, art, etc. Yet, in spite of the universality of human needs which this suggests and the historical connections between peoples of which we are aware, each culture, in specific respects and in its totality, is different from every other, both in content and organization (emphasis supplied).”

It should be abundantly clear from this that the concept of themes is not intended to set up a rival, idealistic approach to the study of culture which ignores fundamental human needs and primary, universal institutions, but is intended better to describe and explain the patterning and change which occur within this framework. We have suspected for some time, even before Cohen’s closely reasoned discussion of the matter, that Eskimos, Hottentots, Navahos and Fijians reproduce, have some kind of social

1 Cohen, 1948. 2 Opler, 1945, p. 198.