Comparison of Marilyn Strathern's "synthesis" of social anthropology and cultural studies versus my own

Author: Doctor Terence Rajivan Edward (or 0161__Rajivan, if that helps)
Abstract. One of the big issues which dominated British social anthropology in the 1990s was its relationship to cultural studies. Here are some standard stories of origins: cultural studies developed from applying predominantly French 1960s theoretical frameworks, developed for the study of prestigious arts, to less esteemed culture, on the grounds that they can be used there too or that there is no defensible distinction between the two. Social anthropology, older, had started out in the 19th century as the study of human societies, with a special emphasis on primitive societies, and developed a special method of lengthy intensive fieldwork and later applied this method "at home" too. Its traditional reference points are different and unsurprisingly there is rivalry, sometimes bitter. I interpret Marilyn Strathern as trying to offer an anthropology to win over students for whom cultural studies has appeal, in her 1992 book *After Nature: English kinship in the late 20th century*. She engages in a kind of worldview analysis of a number of things of interest to students of English culture - she grasps the intellectual tastes of the student and aims at an anthropology which works for that taste, it seems to me. My own synthesis is at a philosophical level. Building on John Searle''s responses to Jacques Derrida, I observe positivist premises shared by this influential figure in cultural studies and the functionalist tradition which dominated British anthropology from the 1920s to the 1960s at least. These allow us to conceive a more Derridean functionalist anthropology. Also I propose that it is possible to do a number of functionalist analyses for "1990s cultural studies tastes," as Strathern does worldview analyses.
Draft version: version 1 (18th November 2025)
Word processor: Google Docs.

"I too let out a frustrated sigh
Although I don't quite know why,
So great is our distance from the great:
How long can Sally-Ann wait?"

1. Introduction

Perhaps this paper is of most interest to historians of the academic world looking back at how history could have been. Perhaps it is of interest to people interested in fairness: can you fairly deal with a bitter dispute within the academic world during the 1990s, and probably some years before and some years beyond, on the boundary between the social sciences and the arts? The dispute is between social anthropology and cultural studies. I can. I fear though that I don't have enough rules when dealing with disputes, but I do have the character for it, I think (or hope). My fear is that someone will simply say, "Figure out a system of rules for being fair in such cases, available to loyal members of either side, or this text gets locked in the closet." But what happens if I do? "We will do our best to improve it slightly and then lock your one in the closet"? In the next part and third part of this paper, I present the histories of both disciplines, or fields of research, according to standard accounts of our time. In the fourth part, I present Strathern's attempt at "synthesis." It aims at meeting the taste of the student contemplating cultural studies instead of anthropology. In the fifth part, I argue that she could have appealed to this taste without abandoning traditional structural-functionalist analysis. In the sixth part, I present my synthesis of structural-functionalism and part of cultural studies. The seventh part is a side note on the sexes of the participants.

2. Origins of British social anthropology

Social anthropology was once defined as the study of primitive societies. Legend says that British social anthropology was founded by the Pole Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, once known as Anarchy Brown, who had climbed up from the lower classes. Malinowski provided the method which has come to define social anthropology in the eyes of many: lengthy fieldwork involving participating in the way of life of the society studied. Malinowski was counted as a member of the enemy by the British during World War One, because he was from the Austro-Hungarian empire, but was allowed to do fieldwork amongst the Trobriand Islanders, an exotic people by British standards. His 1921 book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is referred to as the founding text. Malinowski also devised a new theoretical framework, influenced by French thinker Émile Durkheim: functionalism. Malinowski's functionalism was simple: individuals in every society have certain needs, but different societies have different ways of meeting those needs. For

example, the need for bodily comfort is partly met by agencies which rent rooms in our society, but is met in other ways in other societies. Radcliffe-Brown was also inspired by Durkheim, but developed a different kind of functionalism, which was probably more popular in British anthropology: structural functionalism. Structural functionalism does not focus on the functions of institutions within a society to meet individual needs, rather on how the different institutions form a coherent structure and function to maintain that structure. For example, if you departed from certain norms in your professional work, this may be of value for moving up a social class, but if you also have an episode of mental illness, the psychiatrist will say, “Why are you doing these unprofessional things? Your mind seems to be not in its right state.” Psychiatry functions to maintain hierarchy, preventing people from one social class from moving up a rank. (This example is from personal experience, by the way.)

How accurate is legend? In truth, there was a demand for fieldwork to be done by social anthropologists from the mid-19th century at least, but for some reason it proved difficult to meet the demand. Anthropology in the 19th century was defined as the study of man, of human beings, but there was a special emphasis on primitive societies. However, the armchair academics involved mostly did not actually study primitive societies. Prior to Malinowski, there were earlier efforts, such as the Torres Strait expedition of the 1890s and W. H. Rivers’ study of the Todas. Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown are not considered to be gentlemen, an important concept in British society, and are even considered to be enemies of the gentleman academic, harbouring murderous desires, but a series of more refined researchers had earlier failed to do what they did, bring about the desired revolution, though they probably contributed much.

Academic social anthropology continues to focus on societies regarded as primitive, although anthropologists today do not think of them as such and emphasize their histories and the consequences of colonialism. One of the repeated criticisms of earlier social anthropology was that it was the handmaiden of colonialism: and functionalist Since the 1980s, there has been a considerable expansion of anthropology at home, in developed complex liberal societies, such as Britain.

3. Origins of Cultural Studies

The origins of Cultural Studies are quite different. Cultural Studies, according to a standard origins story, developed from applying theoretical frameworks for the interpretation of prestigious arts to less esteemed creative works: “trashy” novels, advertisements, and more. These were applied either simply because they could be or because of doubts about the division between high arts (literature in a prestigious sense, painting, classical music, and more) and popular arts of less esteem. In his much used textbook on literary theory, Terry Eagleton writes.

> Some literary theory has indeed been excessively in-group and obscurantist, and this book represents one attempt to undo that damage and make it more widely accessible. But there is another sense in which such theory is the very reverse of elitist. What is truly elitist in literary studies is the idea that works of literature can only be appreciated by those with a particular sort of cultural breeding… Theory was a way of emancipating literary works from the stranglehold of a ‘civilized sensibility’, and throwing them open to a kind of analysis in which, in principle at least, anyone could participate. There are those who have 'literary values' in their bones, and those who languish in the outer darkness. One important reason for the growth of literary theory since the 1960s was the gradual breakdown of this assumption, under the impact of new kinds of students entering higher education from supposedly 'uncultivated' backgrounds. (1996: viii)

The new theoretical frameworks for analysing prestigious literary texts and more came mostly from 1960s France, more specifically 1960s Paris, such as most infamously Derridean deconstruction. Derridean deconstruction said that a text always has some other interpretation which is equally legitimate, when compared with the orthodox interpretation. Such an interpretation is often achieved by paying attention to aspects of a text regarded as marginal or much lesser importance by the orthodox interpretation, such as a piece of dialogue in play which could be cut while preserving the main characterization and plot.

How true is this origins story? Some of the theoretical frameworks which came out of Paris were, officially at least, not foremostly developed for the purpose of interpreting prestigious or less prestigious cultural objects. Lacanian psychoanalysis was presented as an interpretation of Freud and its official end was

to provide therapy for patients. The historically-minded Foucault was probably tasked with letting more people know what psychiatry is really like by means of flashier texts: it functions to produce docile subjects, to borrow his apt word “docile.” A different kind of story emphasizes Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary formation, allocating interpretation of the arts a lesser role. Decades before these French theorists, there were scientific and systematic projects of literary interpretation, but they are mostly obscure now and not mentioned even in lengthier histories. I recall opening a book which had been brought up from the store section of the University of Manchester library which simply counted kinds of metaphor or similar in Elizabethan writers, such as metallic imagery and earthy imagery. It was by a University of London scholar, a woman, I cannot remember her name or the book. It had graphs you could pull out. Her first name was Catherine perhaps.

4. Rivalry and Strathern’s “synthesis”

Social anthropology and Cultural Studies unsurprisingly developed rivalrous relations, which were especially visible in the 1990s but probably existed long before and still continues: professional philosophers seem to die much younger than anthropologists. The two disciplines, if they can be called that, have different origins and they have different concepts and they are prominent in different institutions. British social anthropology is mainly based in elite and some other old universities of the United Kingdom. The London School of Economics, where Malinowski was based, is particularly important in its history; the University of Cambridge was extremely influential before the functionalist period and with its demise; other universities involved include Oxford, the University of Manchester (the home of a late stage functionalism), St Andrews and more: the elite and the solidly respectable, in short. Cultural Studies is popular in a variety of newer universities in Britain, which gained university status in the 1960s and afterwards.

I think of Marilyn Strathern in her book *After Nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century* as writing a book for a student choosing between a career in social anthropology and cultural studies. It seems to me to have heavily taken into account the tastes, or perceived tastes, of such a student and is the fruit of years of experience and debate. In 1988, Strathern wrote an article which addressed revisionary historians of social anthropology who emphasized the overlaps between Malinowski and earlier anthropologists, including overlaps with an armchair

anthropologist who never did fieldwork but was enormously popular with Victorian audiences, namely Sir James Frazer. She said that Malinowski pioneered a new way of writing an anthropology text, contrasting this way with Frazer's pages of decontextualized pieces of information. The philosopher of anthropology I.C. Jarvie was invited to respond and charged Strathern with being a relativist, instead of regarding Malinowski's fieldwork revolution as scientific progress. It was mere a change of literary fashion, or that is the depiction Jarvie attributes to Stathern (Note: if you try to write anthropology, you are usually heavily dependent on how predecessors did: the framework for putting all this data into a coherent shape. The development of such a framework is a major achievement, so I would not say that Strathern is flagging mere changes of literary fashion.) Despite their intense disagreement, Jarvie and Strathern share the common ground of wanting to bring back Frazer, much to the opposition of most anthropologists. Jarvie more or less gives Strathern some advice:

> Assuming that ethnographic monographs are fictions, we may wish them more readable and hence persuasive; for that they would better be modelled on the astringent Trollope, Surtees, or Waugh than, as they often seem to be, on Melville, Dreiser, and Dos Passos (1988: 273)

I think it is difficult to underestimate the extent to which the debate influenced Strathern's book *After Nature,* although he is not acknowledged*.* Early on, the book presents itself as a positivist text focused on publicly observable behaviour. Her text:

> …should not be mistaken for a study of what people think or feel.

In response to the charge of relativism: she more or less says that she is scientific, a positivist. To overcome the experience of boredom which various readers complain of with the older anthropology (and maybe almost anything from the London School of Economics, and which Jarvie publicly flags), Strathern has lots of brief analyses. And to cover interest in literature, there is analysis of Jane Austen's assumptions about society.

The old functionalist anthropologists were mostly opposed to the concept of culture, which they found vague. They thought of society as a set of individuals bound by relations of rights and duties specified within the society. They also sought to avoid describing people's beliefs, even their public statements. Rituals start up and different individuals give different justifications for why it is there. Focus on what the function of this ritual is, for maintaining the society. Strathern abandons

functionalist anthropology for analysing changing assumptions, a focus which has significant resemblance to Frazer's interest in how societies move from magic to religion to scientific thinking. She more or less treats English middle class kinship as a folk theory which has endured for long but which is challenged by new reproductive technologies. (Another aim of Strathern's, I think, is to say something about these which is better than the Warnock Report.)

Strathern's so-called synthesis then involves bringing back a pre-functionalist emphasis on changing assumptions, on worldview in short, and focusing more on home contexts, rather than so-called primitive societies, and having lots of brief analyses. It seems to me that the book is aimed at the tastes of the student who would otherwise prefer Cultural Studies. It is anthropology adapted for that taste. That is as far as it goes with synthesis. (Behold the charming Victorian book cover and compare it to the cover on her older work of anthropology at home, on Elmdon) Is it successful? The brief sparkly analyses which bubble and disappear have prevented it from being included in kinship readers, I think, despite its large influence. This is a major problem. The older anthropology has more mainstream status, e.g. Radcliffe-Brown on the mother's brother and joking relationships! From the oral culture, it has received criticisms for being insufficiently historically-minded, a criticism which dogs Strathern wherever she contributes, and for being essentialist about the English middle class, conveyed by David Mills, for being overly focused on the middle class of England, which John Gledhill conveys (there is Marxist strand of Cultural Studies), and for being obscure or simply too condensed, from almost everyone involved. David Mills is on the boundary between cultural studies and social anthropology and he is not buying, which is a big mark against Sfrathern's effort, I think. But it is a foundational text for anthropology in Britain and has influenced numerous fieldworkers here, such as Nigel Rapport, Jeanette Edwards, Sarah Green, Katharine Tyler, and Gillian Evans. Not Raminder Kaur?

5. Structural functionalist in cultural studies style

Strathern writes that structural functionalist anthropology has not been of significant value when applied in home contexts, in Britain for example, in contrast to how rewarding it has been when applied in the societies traditionally studied by social anthropologists:

> The social anthropological models of kinship so well nurtured in Britain in the mid-century, and so illuminating in relation to non-Western societies, seemed after all to obscure rather than clarify things when it came to elucidating the English. (1992: 4)

It seems to me that structural-functionalism can be profitably applied to British society. As already suggested, it can be applied to psychiatry and doing so leads one to anticipate Foucault: the same basic lesson that this institution functions to produce docile subjects and thereby maintain the social structure can be learnt: one emerges from treatment behaving in line with the norms of one's social class and fears to do anything else. (If I may draw on personal experience, I had some troubles with mental health in 2023 and the psychiatrist, apart from recommending injections, which were carried out, said that my house was cluttered, evidence of a disordered mind, and my fingernails long. After the two months in hospital, I was careful to behave in line with middle class social conventions for more than a year.) Drawing on my earlier work, I shall present two other structural-functionalist analyses.

Structural-functionalism can be used to analyse literary fashion. In prestigious literature, there are the best, a few, and the many rest. A foreigner appears and is in-between: a Milan Kundera say, a Joseph Conrad from an earlier period. The rest move up a level and produce similar work, posing the question: is this person any better than us? Unless the foreigner clearly moves up a level, literary fashion probably functions to maintain social structure

Structural-functionalism can also be used to understand haircuts and social justice. When we think of social justice and haircuts, we think firstly that people with inconveniently long hair should be entitled to a haircut. But haircuts can also serve as subtle signalling systems, for example for oppressed groups in a society. The removal of those signalling systems can result in excessive oppression and lead to instability. A structural functionalist analysis of the barber is available. It seems to me that structural-functionalism could have been used to offer lots of brief insightful analyses, of the kind attractive to the reader Strathern is seeking to win over.

6. My synthesis

My synthesis is not about achieving an anthropology adapted for the aesthetic tastes of someone attracted to cultural studies: the pacing of material, etc. My synthesis is philosophical! It is the old functionalists and their close intellectual

descendants who are most opposed to cultural studies. At a 1999 conference to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the University of Manchester's anthropology department, I recall an old anthropologist standing up and saying, "If we do this, we will finally become CULTURAL STUDIES." Was it Jean La Fontaine? Also, Maia Green used to unhappily inquire about the work of another anthropologist: is it cultural studies? My synthesis combines Derrida and the old functionalism.

John Searle in his long debate with the infamous French philosopher Derrida pointed out that Derrida relies on positivist assumptions: either something falls under a concept or not (e.g. either the concept of fiction applies to a literary work or it does not apply: either it is fiction or not); and there must be a method of verifying whether it does or does not, for any proper concept. Derrida's positivism leads him to doubt the value of the concept of a social context when analysing a literary text, to minimize reliance on the attribution of intentions, and to propose that regarding the interpretation of a text which (supposedly) most closely fits with the evidence, there is an alternative interpretation which fits just as well or better. The old structural-functionalism was also based on positivism. It did not get involved in attributing beliefs because what the anthropologist has is behavioural evidence, which may not correspond to inner states. My synthesis is this:

- We can think of the structural-functionalist who tries to specify the social structure of a society and how it is maintained as like an interpreter of a text.
- For any structure attributed with justification by the anthropologist's evidence, there is an alternative structure which is also justifiable.

But the synthesis is, I think, a dangerous one for anthropologists in very different societies to ours, in practice. Just imagine oneself doing fieldwork amongst an exotic tribe. They tell you that a certain person is the chief. Given the second component, you wonder whether some other person is the chief (or at least whether you can make such a hypothesis practically workable - you can orient yourself in the society with some other attribution of chiefhood), much as a footballer may sometimes wonder whether the actual captain of a rival team is the one who wears the captain's armband. But if you are busy looking into alternative hypotheses, which may not prove practically workable, you may be confused for too long. You should be doing things on the basis of the official structure and instead you are looking into whether an alternative model works. It is probably too much for the working anthropologist elsewhere, although the synthesis surely cannot be ignored.

7. A sidenote

I fear someone will simply say, “Professor Marilyn Strathern’s is a typically female approach to the problem of bridging anthropology and cultural studies: it pays considerable attention to people’s tastes; it is a pragmatic local fix. Doctor Terence Rajivan Edward, building on Professor John Searle’s observations about Derrida, is a typically male approach: a systematic synthesis. Men have come in and laid solid long-term foundations, which will probably persist through changes of taste.” I don’t see why a woman could not do our roles. Female influence is quite large in social anthropology, so perhaps there is a problem of “chemistry” amongst females preventing the synthesis from emerging - this type and that type don’t get along - rather than “I could not do the synthesis.” Or maybe specialization is the problem: the space between anthropology and analytic philosophy is largely unoccupied. (Many incentives were presented against my occupying it, but I was determined. “It never happened”?) Apart from devising the synthesis, I also more or less tested out the synthesis while I was in hospital, leading me to my concern that it is too much for the working anthropologist outside of special contexts. Philosophically-minded people can come up with all sorts of ideas for anthropologists, but many may end up labelled toxic. Anyway, I am a bit proud of the synthesis, I confess, assuming it was not known in some less visible discussion club and not in the voluminous literature elsewhere. I can sit on the floor beside an enthroned Kant perhaps (see Williamson 2020: 104).

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