

“If it cannot predict, it is not science”: I argue social anthropology can

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Dialogue on names (fictional): "Now why do you want a name?" So that my works can be identified - that is one reason. "You need a number really."

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Abstract. This paper argues that social anthropology can predict some social change. It introduces a structural-functionalist theory of fashion to counter the objection that functionalist anthropology ignores social change. It proposes that we have probably misperceived the initial objection. It identifies a tempting assumption. Then it argues that the structural-functionalist theory of fashion enables prediction. The paper also features a little rhyme and a diary entry, which you might wish to skip past. The paper itself is PUBLISHABLE and important. (Draft was written fast though, forgive. No intentional use of AI, but does it add its own foxy word change/error sometimes?)

Metaphor war

As I bite into the core

*Pre-introduction chaotic diary. October 3rd 2025. (If you find this sort of stuff annoying or **disgustingly** unprofessional, THEN SKIP this part. “But I want to know gossip still.”)*

I am on fire this morning, it seems, as they say in basketball. Calm down or go with it? Essay writing as sport: the strategies are poorly understood, by me anyway. The ghosts of essayists past appear, each one with different advice. Well, maybe not really on fire! Let's challenge the newspapers somewhat. Nadia Lisovskaya, told me that she takes prediction as a criterion of science. I wasn't very polite to her when she was in Manchester, and complained about so much in 2003, but she gave me quite a lot of stuff to respond to. This must change, this must change, this must change, this must change, reorder this paragraph, can you see this is better like this?, “Okay I can,” this must change, this must change, this must change. I wrote an essay influenced by her in my second year of PhD, arguing that we must have a coherent system of colour concepts in order for colour language to be learnable. Chris Daly and I conflicted

severely in a supervisory board meeting. "Why is this relevant for philosophy?" he asked and I simply insulted him, calling him a bumpkin more or less. It was training, I suppose: 4 years early and to his face! Subtext? "We understand why you are amused. Even 1 year at UCL and you can't think like this about Frege's puzzle." But such people cannot be bumpkins by now. "I am not going in for such MOTHERING ever again." (Starmer needs to know this, if he doesn't already. He's in Crumpsall strangely, wife looking a touch Victoria Beckham? Anyway, they send you unmotherables next. Lucy Powell seems silent, but silence is communication too; Burnham: *Sade mon prochain*??? Dr Lisovskaya and I had this common assumption: if they are happy with everything, you are doing something wrong.) Anthony Hatzimoysis said that my argument is important, but warned me that I was absorbed with my own ideas and writing and not listening enough to others. Comedy sketch: the initial reception of Davidson in Oxford versus my essay reception in Manchester. "Economists have yet to understand the difference between an error and a mistake," an Oxford philosopher utters. A young Timothy Williamson is nodding his head crossly; "This is going to be a mess!" Jennifer Hornsby tearfully declares: happiness is not a suitable aim here on earth.

Fashion

British social anthropology in the functionalist period was functionalist (if we don't get involved in deconstructive reading strategies). It emphasized the social function of institutions. For Malinowski, different societies had different systems of institutions for meeting the needs that all humans have, such as for bodily comfort. For anarchist Radcliffe-Brown, institutions functioned to maintain a social hierarchy. But functionalism in general was criticized for ignoring social change: it portrayed societies as unchanging systems. In the corona virus period, I thought that it is wrong to simply assert that functionalism cannot deal with any social change and devised a functionalist theory of fashion, though it was actually focused on literary fashion. I have not shared it until now though.

A foreign literary writer appears who is not considered by the literary establishment to be the level of "our best writers" but considered above the rest at present. The rest are set the task of competing (or they simply do?), so that the

establishment can say, “Why do you we need you, foreign literary writer? Because we have these people.” He dies. The rest go back to their earlier level. Then another literary foreigner appears, different though, but also not considered not the level of “our best.” The rest are sent the task of competing, some of whom were involved in the last competition. A reader such as myself has an experience of changing fashions. But a functionalist social anthropologist can say that fashion is about maintaining social structure, or a structural-functionalist can. “There is this the best and there is the rest and there is no space for you in-between, foreign literary writer, and so the rest up their game.” My theory is influenced by the later stories in *The Penguin Book of British Short Stories* edited by Malcolm Bradbury. I wondered, “Hey, what is going on here? Is Adam Mars-Jones not simply a structuralist essay?” (Also try Bradbury’s entry, Fay Weldon, David Lodge, and Rose Tremain.) Then I realized what book by a single author this material resembles. This anthology is not like these old anthologies one can find on the Internet: Best Russian short stories, etc. The unstrategic anthologist who just picked the best and (seemingly?) most enduring stuff for the naive reader. Those days are over, if they ever were.

A dispensability assumption

I think the undergraduate and even postgraduate student is likely to think of the functionalism-and-social-change criticism as simply that functionalist anthropology ignores social change. But perhaps the original criticism is not quite this. Functionalism was taught by making analogies with biology. A society was a social organism and its institutions have functions. The depiction of a society as a stable social organism makes one think of homeostasis, or makes me think so anyway (more recent students have forgotten their school biology?). And homeostasis is not about zero change; it is about a system that regulates, keeping the organism alive. Critics at that time would probably have responded to my structural-functionalist fashion theory above by saying, “It needs to be able to deal with a change in social structure is what we actually mean. Not this microplasticity.” That leads me to contemplate a problematic assumption which I confess I am nevertheless attracted to.

(*Analogies dispensable assumption*) The biological analogies which feature in social anthropology texts are helpful but dispensable.

My worry is that you cannot understand what earlier debaters even mean without the analogies. I suspect Marilyn Strathern will say dispensable and Jeanette Edwards will say, “No.” I have to argue, “Dispensable,” to get Edwards as fieldworker? “She will be very nervous with you as theoretician”? If she still functions, albeit nervously, it will be a maximum-level problem for philosophy of social science and more, I feel.

Social anthropology can predict

Given the structural-functionalist theory of fashion above and an estimation of a new foreign literary writer as in-between the best and the rest, you can predict that the rest will raise their game. The newspapers will roll out their cashmere sweater range, to quote Kathleen Stock. (“Hint hint hint: you have no idea how posh these people are”?) And the question will appear, “Why do we need you? We have these people.” So I am rejecting at least premise (2) of this argument.

(1) If it cannot predict, then it is not science.

(2) Social anthropology cannot predict.

Therefore (by modus ponens):

(3) Social anthropology is not science.

References

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(What else I did in Corona virus season? Let’s try to beat this one. Third place at best.)

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