

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Teleologies of Structuralism

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Looking ahead, the centennial in 2016 of the posthumous publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* offers the opportunity to review structuralism's first century and its future prospects. During the past century, structuralism has been an insurgency creating ruptures against received tradition. Subsequently, to its theoretical critics, it has created a negative or limiting conceptual space. These critics are now collectively called *poststructuralists* in the American academy, thus reminding us of the significance of structuralism's earlier insurgency. Contemporary academic debates about human phenomena still invoke classic structuralist positions in discussing universalism versus relativism, cognitivism versus socio-cultural science, semiotics or hermeneutics versus deconstruction, and the like. Is this an inevitable yet ironic teleology that is itself a structural form in time?

To begin to explore these questions, we have constituted a three-campus consortium (Chicago, Notre Dame, and Toronto) around the subject of *Teleologies of Structuralism*. "Structuralism's First Century, 1916-2016: A Round-Table Prospectus," the first in a projected series of events, took place on May 21, 2013. The round-table attracted a standing-room crowd at The University of Chicago's Franke Institute, and was sponsored by the Center for the Study of Communication and Society. The lively panelists were Lenore Grenoble (Slavics and linguistics), John D Kelly (anthropology), Thomas Pavel (romance and comparative literature, social thought), Marshall Sahlins (anthropology), Haun Saussy (comparative literature, East Asian, social thought). (Lawrence Zbikowski, music, promised future participation.) Spanning a number of the humanities and social sciences, these speakers illustrated the living history of structuralism in the study of society, language, literature and the arts.

In opening statements, the panelists focused on structuralist ideas as intellectual forces. Grenoble spoke of the quiet assimilation of structural analysis into the discipline of Linguistics to the point of virtual invisibility. Kelly and Saussy each touched on the way structuralism became a solution to the problem of mere contingency in cultural forms. As Kelly termed it, structuralism offers one road out of the dilemma articulated long ago by Kant: whether it is reason or "the dismal reign of chance" that drives human history. Pavel interrogated the loss of aesthetics in the adoption of structuralism in the analysis of literary meaning. The subject of Sahlins' presentation was Lévi-Strauss—the figure who provided a model for many such adaptations across disciplines. Sahlins argued for the continuing relevance of structural analysis for sociocultural anthropology. The stimulating presentations and the discussion that followed pointed up the multiple relations between teleologies of, in, and for structuralism, and the reflexive moment that structuralist thought in effect has created.

Accordingly, we are planning a series of events and activities over the next several years to further examine these relationships of form, time, meaning, function, and purpose—including the way they have manifested in the history of the human sciences thus far. We propose for example thematizing the twinned tensions of structuralism and relativism on the one hand and functionalism and universalism on the other hand. These tensions continue to trouble the anthropological agenda as is revealed by browsing through current journals. We see these tensions in debates over the role of universal science in the very definition of anthropology. Further, we see them in the way that many contemporary political analyses tend to universalize power in societies' institutions, irrespective of local modes of cultural reflexivity.

Another of the trajectories of structuralism concerns the collective character of the social. We need to problematize how social theoretical projects account for what it means to be modern. Is modernity our collective cosmology, among what others? Such concepts as organic and mechanical solidarity, or enchanted cultural consciousness and its disenchantment, are but two—Durkheimian and Weberian—approaches to understanding the transformations of social collectivities over time. Structuralist thinking has attempted to dissolve the modern into the traditional and vice versa; it invokes for example only apparent oppositions—like bricoleur and engineer, the hot and the cold, the raw and the cooked—the better to construct images of scale and degree.

Critiques of structuralism have frequently and rightly emphasized an absence of attention to phenomenologies of affect, hierarchies of power and interest, and other ways that individuals experience society, government, corporate forces, and the state. However, too often, these critiques overlook the distinction between social forms as such and the structuredness of their workings. Still, the question remains whether or not particular regimes of value and meaning do not underlie these experiences—values and meanings that have been central to structuralism's agenda.

To stimulate a discussion of these and other issues, we propose to engage you our colleagues through various formats and venues. We are establishing a blog, [Teleologies of Structuralism](#), to report periodically on our progress and to invite comments. We hope to convene interlocutors at meetings and conferences, and we are actively soliciting your input (including bibliographic recommendations). Please write us at our email addresses. We see a great potential in bringing

such themes to bear on contemporary concerns of anthropologists and others in the human sciences. Recently published works in linguistic anthropology demonstrate that we as a sub-discipline are well-positioned to address the hermeneutics of pattern and the patternedness of hermeneutic reflexivity of subjects. They remind us that our concerns as linguistic anthropologists inevitably locate us in what turn out to be structures of power, structures of feeling, and structures of emancipation.

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