Study on the Changing Process of the Relationship Between Structure and Agency in the Anthropological Theory

Xiaofang Li*

Xichang University

Xichang 615000, China

Musan Luo

Minzu University of China

Beijing 100081, China

Abstract—**The study of the relationship between structure and agency has always been a hot topic in the theoretical research of anthropology. Each school tries to discuss it from its own theoretical point of view, which has been controversial for hundred years. From Durkheim's social holism or social determinism to Levi Strauss's structuralism, they tried to demonstrate the priority of structure. Malinowski, who emphasizes personal needs, and Barth, who emphasizes individual actions, they stand on the point of individual initiative. The two kinds of arguments did not combine before Geertz and Bourdieu, who introduce the relationship of structure and activity into the two-way mutual construction. This article attempts to sort out the relevant theories of anthropology schools and major anthropologists on the study of structure and activity, and then to explore the changing process of the relationship between them.**

Keywords—Anthropology; Structure; Agency

I. TAKE STATIC SOCIAL STRUCTURE AS THE RESEARCH OBJECT, AND EMPHASIZE THE DOMINANT ROLE OF STRUCTURE

Durkheim and Brown focus their attention on the static structure of human society, and emphasize the dominant role of society and structure on individuals. Durkheim starts from social determinism, and Brown developed Durkheim's concept of social facts, regarded the whole society as a structure composed of individuals, and analyzed the effect of structure on human beings.

Durkheim emphasized that society is a whole, and the study of society should proceed from the perspective of the whole. The society is composed of lots of individuals, which surpass the individuals without being affected by the individuals, and in turn, dominates and affects the individuals. Social phenomenon is a unique phenomenon that cannot be explained by physiology and psychology and can only be studied by social facts. When discussing how to study social facts, he believes that anthropologists must try to study social facts from the aspect of their independent existence, which is separated from their individual performance [1]. He emphasizes the compulsory effect of social facts on individuals, which is manifested in the restraint and control of individual behaviors. In addition to the individual's special consciousness in the society, the individual also has the collective idea shared by the whole society. The collective idea cannot be acquired from individual experience, but is imposed on people's consciousness by society. Durkheim regards the individual as an indispensable part of the social structure, but does not admit that the individual's consciousness and behavior can have an impact on the whole. Instead, he emphasized that the society shaped the individual's consciousness and dominated the individual's behavior. Therefore, he believes that the common problems in society are not personal problems or psychological problems, but social problems. In the book *On Suicide*, he made an incisive analysis of the social problem of suicide. The suicide phenomenon is the result of personal psychological activities on the surface, but the real reason lies in many social factors. As the founder of social determinism and holism methodology, Durkheim developed the ideology of Comte and Spencer's social organism, social realism and other ideas, and began to lead the long-term anthropological discussion on the relationship between human and society to the other end of the society.

Radcliffe-Brown, as a representative of the functional school, emphasizes function like Malinowski, but his academic ideas are deeply influenced by Durkheim, so he is partial to structure. Brown's view of social structure is largely based on Durkheim's thought--emphasizing the social structure as a social fact and avoiding social anthropology developing into the paradigm of individual psychology, which will ignore the initiative and symbolism of social individual behavior [2]. In his study of culture and society, he emphasizes the relationship between various parts and the overall structure. The social structure refers to the human relations in a cultural unity, including various groups of people and their positions in the group [3]. He also stressed that the human relations in society are dominated by "system", so we can understand and describe the social structure by studying the system presented in the personal relationship. Durkheim stresses that the society is static and balanced, and individuals are deeply influenced by social facts. While Brown believes that although the internal social structure is dynamic, it is also relatively stable in the overall form. At that moment, the focus on structure is mainly to regard society as a static structure. Through the analysis of the static structure, we can understand the behavior and consciousness of individuals in society, or through the study of the culture as a structure, we can understand the shaping of the individual by culture.

II. GRADUALLY PAY ATTENTION TO HUMAN THINKING STRUCTURE AND DYNAMIC SOCIETY

Levi-Strauss is in a brand-new era, when anthropologists have encountered a bottleneck in their research and need new theories to guide new directions. The emergence of this new thought is mainly reflected in the new interpretation of structure and agency. He introduced structure into the thinking mode of human beings and opened up a new field of anthropological research.

His ideas are mainly derived from the study of phones and phonemes in linguistics, from which he sees the structural relationship of binary opposition, and combines the traditional anthropological view of "human psychological consistency" with the stratification theory of consciousness structure of modern psychoanalysis school. He divides the social structure into four types: conscious mode, unconscious mode and statistical mode. He believes that anthropology should see through appearance to perceive the essence and mainly study "unconscious mode" [4]. It can be said that Levi Strauss's structuralism is an impact on structural functionalism. What he cares about is no longer the reality of the society, but takes thinking as the first essence in the anthropological culture research, from which he finds out different cultures and behaviors of human beings under different thinking structures. Actually, no matter the exploration of the actual social structure and symbolic system of the reality or the analysis of the thinking structure, they attempt to explain the basic structure that dominates human individuals or society from the overall consistency. Anyhow, the research on structure and agency ultimately has to return to human society and find new breakthroughs in the field, not just as a logical and mental discussion. Therefore, the latter anthropologists found a new way of explanation in the new social conditions and field work. The Manchester school was a representative during this period. They also focus on the function of the structure, what makes them different was that they lead the structure to dynamic research.

The Manchester school believes that contradictions and conflicts are the foundation of society, and the society can continue because of the conflicts and contradictions. The conflicts of the underclass social organizations contribute to the integration of the upper social organizations. This viewpoint no longer regards the stable balance of society as a fundamental way of existence, but focuses on the mutual transformation process of social structure in conflict and balance. Gluckman, a representative of the school, emphasizes the individual's "rebellion" behavior in the process of special rituals, believing that such behavior is an exaggeration of social conflicts, and the conflicts formed in specific rituals are conducive to resolving social tensions and achieving unity and stability. Another representative figure, Turner, holds that anthropology should pay attention to the dynamic behavior of people in social practice, rather than statically viewing individuals or societies in the structure. Meanwhile, the society is not stable but formed by various conflicting organizations. He studies the behavior and ritual process of individuals and organizations in the conflict. The rituals he studies are public. In the conflicts, the people who participate in the rituals surpass the boundaries of the conflicting parties and villages, and then the rituals can be expanded, which strengthens the connection among the villages and improves the social status of the parties. In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, he studies series concepts such as "integration", "liminality", "structure" and insists that society cannot be separated from the succession of "structure" and "integration", and no single mode can exist all the time. To a certain extent, the development of "structure" will definitely produce "anti-structure" and "anti-structure" will eventually return to "structure". Therefore, he said in the final comment, "society is more a process than a thing-- a dialectical process, which contains the successive stages of structure and integration.[5]" The process theory of Manchester school is different from the viewpoint of Durkheim and Brown that emphasizes the social structure. He emphasizes the contradictions and conflicts within the structure. He no longer regards society as a stable and static structure, but stresses that society can be continued because of the conflicts and contradictions and shift constantly in the contradiction and stability, which is a dynamic process.

III. THE THOUGHT THAT INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE DETERMINES SOCIAL STRUCTURE

It seems that the anthropological thought, which focuses on the dominant role of structure and society as a whole, is gradually shifting along with the discussion of the relations between individuals and society in other social sciences. But there is no consistency in time sequence, that is to say, three will be different voices on the discussion of the relations at the same time. However, generally speaking, it is gradually inclined to stress the study of individual initiative, and begin to focus on the discussion of individual needs and actions, which shows that the decisive role of individual initiative on structure.

As the founder of modern anthropology, Malinowski opened up the field investigation of anthropology and advocated that when studying a cultural phenomenon, it should be put into the whole society rather than be treated in isolation. It can be seen that Malinowski focuses on holistic research. Unlike Brown and Durkheim, he stresses the individual needs and insists that culture exists to meet people's needs. As a representative of functionalism, the "function" he concerns is the way to meet people's needs, whose connotation is the integration caused by the individual needs within the society, not the super-social comparison. Therefore, he attaches great importance to the description of human life in a single society which is strictly defined in time and space [6]. This way of describing human life in a single culture is most obvious in his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Although the ethnography with the milestone significance studies the cultural event of "Kula circle", the whole book is based on the ritual behavior of various tribes in the "Kula circle", and to understand the continuation of the whole society through the roles and reactions of people in the Kula transactions. Based on the studies of the individual needs, Malinowski gradually turned his attention to individuals and proposed that the premise of the emergence of culture is human needs, so human initiative can change the cultural structure.

As a student of Malinowski, Edmund Leach naturally emphasized the theory of individual needs. However, in addition to inheriting the view of Malinowski, he also pays

attention to the social structure as a structuralist. He connects the structure with the symbolic system and focuses on the dynamic research in the social structure. Different from the idea that the ritual conflict is to strengthen social stability, he believes that the nature of the whole society is turbulent, and society is in a state of constant change and possible change, because individual behavior cannot always conform to cultural norms. Cultural norms are only the result of social idealization, and individual responses to economic interests and political interests are dynamic and vary from person to person [7]. His research on dynamic structure and personal choice is also reflected in *Political Systems of Highland Burma.* In this book, he analyzes how different individuals and groups in the structure of Kachin Gonza society to gain influence and discusses the changing process of different institutional structures under the influence of people. In his view, the real Kachin society is not a hierarchy that is strictly organized by fixed classes and clearly defined power, but a system in which changes occur constantly and social mobility will occur. The mode of mobility can be to gain power and position through influence, or to be a revolutionary directly and negate the authority brought by high power [8]. It can be seen that in the social structure he stressed, the orientation of individual economic and political interests determines the direction of structural change.

If Malinowski's focus is still on human needs, then Barth is the anthropologist who really puts the research of individual action in the first place. Bart emphasizes that people are actors rather than agents, who are active and able to make their own choices. Therefore, everyone is a decision maker for his own actions and a person with rational choices. Everyone has interests and choices in society, so social interaction is essentially a kind of transaction, and social life is a process of interest selection and competition. He believes that institutions and customs cannot be directly observed, and people can only discover their existence by observing representative behaviors that follow customs. Cultural ideology has political significance only when it is expressed through concrete actions in the real world. Therefore, the political system is also the result of people's actions rather than the premise. All the material or immaterial resources in the structure, even though they may restrict human initiative, are also the external conditions for people to exert their initiative, so that people can achieve their own goals [9]. What we can find is that the theories of Durkheim and Brown emphasize that the structure or system shapes human behavior, and a person's behavior pattern can be seen by understanding the system. Barth pointed out that structure is not something that people try to maintain, but is unintentionally brought about by people's choices and strategies. People's actions can generate, maintain and change the system.

IV. STRUCTURE AND AGENCY MOVE FROM OPPOSITE TO COMPLEMENTARY

In the exploration of the relationship between structure and agency, whether structure determines agency or agency determines structure, there is a tendency of unidirectional determinism. Anthropology has been exploring these two modes of thinking for a long time. Both structuralism and action theory choose to discuss on their own side of the two camps. With the continuous development of anthropological theory and field, these two kinds of thinking modes began to be questioned. Some anthropologists try to combine the theories of the two camps and re re-explore the relationship between structure and agency. This kind of anthropologists, who put structure and agency in the theory of complementary and mutual construction, is mainly represented by Geertz and Bourdieu.

Geertz did not take the culture studied by anthropology as a set of behavior patterns any more, but as a meaning system and a context for understanding behavior. He pointed out that "culture is such a meaning web woven by human beings. Therefore, the analysis of culture is not an experimental science seeking for rules, but an interpretive science seeking for meaning. [10]" People live in the meaning system, which is created by human behaviors. So in the discussion of the relationship between culture and personal behavior, Geertz regards culture as a kind of meaning structure. On the one hand, the meaning structure is constructed by people's behavior, on the other hand, his meaning structure is used by people to explain their experience structure and guide their behaviors. Therefore, anthropologists should pay attention to the deep description and explain the meaning structure of behavior, so as to help people understand the behavior itself. When it comes to the relationship between social structure and culture, Durkheim and Brown hold that culture is derived from society and determined by society, so the social relationship is fundamental. But Geertz insists that the relationship formed by social interaction is the externalization of ideas and images, and culture is the fundamental. The relationship between them is not a matter of who decides who, but the different abstractions of the same phenomenon. The social structure looks at the problem from the functional result of action, while the culture is the meaning that people give to the action, so it needs to look at the problem from the perspective of significance logic. In Geertz's thought, the whole social action system is composed of three aspects: social structure, cultural structure, and personality structure. These three aspects are interdependent, that is to say, structure and initiative are mutually permeable and mutually supportive.

Actually, although Geertz's description of the relationship between structure and agency has been inclined to the complementary theory of the two, the relationship between the two is still a problem that has plagued social theory for a long time, and most anthropologists still stay in the discussion of who decides who. Bourdieu truly realized the combination of structure and agency. He walked out from the subjective and objective, material and spiritual controversy, and the current situation of binary opposition, and proposed the concepts of habitus, field, symbolic capital, etc. By analyzing their relationship, he built his practical theoretical system. The "practice" put forward by Bourdieu is opposed to rules and systems, which is not entirely the implementation of norms, rules and systems, meanwhile practice is not arbitrary and will be subject to certain restrictions. As the result of practice, habitus is a persistent and convertible system of potential behavioral tendencies. It is a structural structure that tends to play a role as a structured structure.13 In short, habitus is a

system of temperament, a sense of opportunity, interest and justice for everyone. It is the subjectivization of social structure, the first manifestation is immediacy, which has no strategy but has strategic effect. In addition, habitus is the embodiment of objective structure, reflecting the social memory of the body, which can reflect a person's social background. This is the deepest habitus, which is different among different ethnic groups and classes. Habitus is a kind of infinite generative ability, which can generate thoughts, perceptions, expressions and behaviors completely free, but what it generates is always limited by the historical and social conditions of habitus [12]. However, the symbolic capital is different under different conditions, and the habitus are different, so the fields constructed are different. On the contrary, the field is the producer of habitus. Historical and social conditions as a part of the field are also the limiting factors of the habitus. The position of the individual in the field is not fixed, but is constantly changing, so the personality of the individual will change accordingly, but ultimately subject to social habitus and objective conditions.

V. CONCLUSION

The debates and theoretical achievements on the relationship between structure and agency reflect the development of anthropology. Meanwhile, the debates provide different theoretical paradigms for solving the relationship between citizens and the state, individuals and society, and nations and states. From the initial binary opposition and one-way decision to the mutual construction which is generally accepted at present, it can be found that the development of discipline is constantly moving towards the wide and deep. Similarly, in the current relationship between individuals and society, citizens and the state, it is increasingly recognized that individuals can find their own places in the structure. Certainly, the emphasis on the state and society is naturally ingrained.

With the continuous development of society, the theoretical research paradigm of anthropology will continue to change, and the structure and agency will continue to study in depth, which is worth expecting.

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