

Structuralism in Geography

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Structuralism in Geography

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I. Introduction:

The term structuralism has been widely used in different fields of social sciences and humanities. It witnessed multifaceted contribution of several scholars from different subject domains like linguistics and semiotics, cultural anthropology, literary studies, psychoanalysis and others. However, the input of the French thinkers and philosophers was found to be dominant in deciding over the discourse line of structuralism (Warf, 2006, pp. 464-465). The initial development in the concept of structuralism basically came from the contribution of European scholars during the early twentieth century followed by the thinkers from Prague, Moscow and Copenhagen schools of linguistics. The structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) actually paved the journey of structuralism which was later on applied in a diverse range of fields based on different other perspectives and contexts with the advancement of time and discourse. His philosophy was based on the understanding about the relative meaning of the words or linguistic signs depending on the essentially different opposite meanings which are called as the binary oppositions since they appear to be in pairs. The concept of structuralism revived back its significance during the 1950s with the philosophy of structural anthropology led by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss who instigated the propagation of the structuralist movement in France. The structuralists advocated that the explanation of the observed phenomena should be claimed from the general structures that underpin the human culture and the behavioural pattern of the human agency in shaping the society in a particular manner. The general structures are not supposed to be identifiable within the surface properties of such phenomena and thus, require a more in-depth analysis to reveal that out (Johnston, 1986, pp. 97-135, Lippuner and Werlen, 2009). Structuralism is, therefore, itself a theory as well as the methodology which is guided by the research interest of the investigator in exploring the underlying structure with proper logic and justifications (Warf, 2006, pp. 464-465). The structuralist movement in France strongly influenced the works of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and other eminent writers like Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas who were the pioneers in unfolding the essence of structural Marxism philosophy – one of the various forms of Marxism. Their analytics on the power structure and the process left the imprint of structuralism primarily in the domains of economic, political and urban geography (Gregory et al., 2011, p. 725). Later on, during 1970s geographers took several opportunities in the light of structural Marxism to strongly critique the empiricist projects and the dimensions of spatial science which geographers used to manifest by the application of scientific techniques like cartography. Such critiques also include the activities of the humanistic geographers who used to challenge the limits of interpretations that come out of the spatial science analytics. The Marxist geographers were against the naive approach of understanding the human agency and in favour of unpacking the depth of social structure and the spatial economy by means

of the structural properties (Warf, 2006). With time, the legacy of structuralism in geography was largely left behind with the emergence of the philosophies like structuration, realism, and post-structuralism. However, the importance of linguistic studies, literary discourse, and analytics of power structure has remained unchallenged.

The present material will first focus on the different contexts of structuralism based on the contribution of different scholars in their respective subject domains and finally will discuss on how the geographers adopted the essence of structuralism in dealing with various geographical phenomena belonging to the different branches of geography.

II. Major contexts of structuralism:

The structure is something which is strongly dependent on the relations. There have been some typical forms of structuralism by means of the scholars' contribution at different contexts in revealing the structural underpinning of various phenomena. Such contexts include the language, signs and linguistics; culture and structural anthropology; literary theory, literature and mythologies; and psychoanalysis. Such contexts in the light of structuralism are summarized below-

A. *Language, signs, and linguistics* –

The meaning of structuralism starts with the concept of structure, the linguistic meaning of which is dependent on the mythos and logos that are considered to be the meta-dimensions of language. Ferdinand de Saussure who was first to put forward the structural linguistics suggested conceiving the language as a system. The language is expressed in terms of some signs which immediately start with the spoken language. Therefore, signs do not have any relation with the sound. Signs are consisted of two parts- signifier and signified. The first one is the expression and the second one is the content. Signs are the unifiers of both of these two to reflect a particular meaning, although, in the theory of language, Saussure considers signs to be in the arbitrary position because signs are derived from the historical and social convention and the resultant tradition of the communities. It is the community of the language who decides over the formation and creation of the signs. Therefore, signs neither reflect anything external nor anything about the internal relationship between signifier and signified, instead those represent the internal connections that define the relationship among the signs. A sign is constituted based on how it is different from the other sign. The meaning depends on such difference of signs from one another. Saussure emphasized more on the underlying structural system of language (*langue*) rather than the use of the language (*parole*).

The work of Saussure influenced many linguistic scholars between World War I and II. For instance, in United States Leonard Bloomfield theorized his own version of the structural linguistics like Louis Hjelmslev from Denmark. Some others like Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy who were basically from the Prague school of linguistics also continued the project of Saussure. However, during the 1950s the structural linguistics of Saussure was abandoned because of strong criticism.

B. Culture and Structural Anthropology –

Claude Lévi-Strauss, who has received a wide recognition to be considered as the father of structuralism, was mainly inspired by the works of Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Troubetzkoy from the Prague school of linguistics along with other scholars like Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. He continued to carry on the legacy of Saussure's structuralism during the 1950s by applying the model of structural linguistics in the domain of structural anthropology. While putting more emphasis on unfolding the underlying pattern of human thought process to develop a culture, he considered that the processes do not determine a culture, rather operate within it. According to the theory of structural anthropology, the meaning is believed to be produced and reproduced within the culture because of the practices, activities, and phenomena that serve the system of signification. Strauss's areas of work mainly include the cultural phenomena like mythology, kinship, and food preparation.

He was strongly influenced by the Prague school of linguistics while deriving the concept of binary contrasts or the binary opposition which briefly states that the meanings are not absolute, but a relative that could be understood with the help of the structured relationship among the elements of a cultural system. All the terms are supposed to generate something opposite of what is being meant. It signifies that in human understanding there is no particular meaning or value of any element; rather it depends on the meaning of the other elements or the opposites. For example, to know the meaning of hot, one has to know the meaning of the opposite difference that is cold. To study a particular thing, it is needed to study the related and associated things in a broader structural framework.

In his theory of structural anthropology, Strauss argued that the grammatical of culture in form of kinship, myth, and language is based on the structured codes and the hidden rules of a behavioural pattern that guide the practitioners of a particular culture. Such codes and hidden rules govern the participants to make their culture different from the others (Lévi-Strauss, 1973). The very method what he proposed to unveil such kind of codes and laws is to identify the meanings based on the binary opposition. Strauss found that the exchange of concepts between families, particularly in the exchange of women is a very important concept, upon which he proposed the universal codes and laws of exchange in society (Rendtorff, 2014, pp. 121-147). It actually means that the basic structure of the human thought process always remains same across all the cultures based on the understanding of binary opposition (Winthrop, 1991).

Many scholars were influenced by the structural anthropology from different parts of the world. For instance, Maurice Godelier and of France came up with a new idea where they combined Marxism with the structural anthropology. Apart from them, Rodney Needham and Edmund Leach from Britain, Marshall Sahlins and James Boon from the United States are some of the names of scholars whose academic contribution to reflect the influence of structural anthropology. The philosophy started facing strong challenged during the 1980s because of its inability to verify the assumption of

structural universality of the human mind and the exclusion of impacts of human agency over the basic structure of culture (Lett, 1987, Rubel and Rosman, 1996). However, the importance of considering the fundamental structure of human culture remains unturned.

C. Literary theory, literature and mythology –

Ronald Barthes (1915-1980), who was a professor of literature in France and a literary critique as well, has a significant contribution in the field of literature, literary discourse and the study of myths and mythologies. He adopted the essence of structural linguistics and structuralist approaches to interpreting the science of literature and language, especially in the analysis of writings and signs. His proposition was to unfold the relationship between signs, writings and the reality, particularly in the context of literature, poetry and the discourse of mythology in terms of language. Barthes put more emphasis on studying mythology not only in the fields of anthropology and religion but also in every sphere of the society, especially the contemporary one. According to him, myth is not actually defined by the content what it bears, instead, it is the way in which the context tries to convey the message in the society and also to maintain the truth and justification of the content which is being represented by the signs. In the line of de-Saussure, Barthes argued that the myths are to be considered as parole (signifier) rather than langue (signified) because it is the signifier that develops the system of signification and not the content that is signified by the myth. Anything which is developed on the basis of parole could be promoted as the discourse. Therefore there is every possibility to start with a new of discourse on individual myths. Therefore there can't be a particular rule to formally limit a myth to bear its content. It actually led him to establish a concept of generalized semiotics on the basis of which anything in the society could be considered as a myth and mythology (Rendtorff, 2014).

In his book *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes combined the generalized approaches of structuralist and the semiotics to the analysis of myths and mythologies in the society. While doing that, by virtue of the nature of his approach, he also combined Marxism to criticize the ideology of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois in terms of their basic structure of myth in which they used to live in and live by. In this way, he was strongly influenced by Sartre's existentialism which led him to take over the elements of unauthentic life to criticize the ideological superstructure of the society. It implies that his approach of structuralism and semiotics in assessing the mythical objects in the society has a critically political function to show the myths of daily life in the society expressed in different forms of publications and literature.

D. Psychoanalysis –

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) who was basically a French psychoanalyst and a psychiatrist as well received a wide range of academic recognition in the domain of psychoanalysis as he applied the structuralist approach as his working method of

analysis. However, his influence is more prominent in the writings of leading French intellectuals who later on, contributed significantly to the development of post-structuralist philosophy. Lacan is well-known for the development of Freudian psychoanalysis approach based on the contemporary theoretical basis. He put forward the scientific methodological approach of psychoanalysis in theory and praxis. According to him, the concept of the unconscious is a very important component in psychoanalysis and that is why he was strongly influenced by the domains like linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and mathematics while designing the line of action of psychoanalysis as a generalized theory to study about humanity. He was also inspired by the scholars of phenomenological discourse like Hegel, Sartre, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty which is reflected in his analytical proposition which claims the theoretical distinctions between the concepts like imaginary, symbolic and real.

In his Freudian school of psychoanalysis he emphasized on revealing the philosophical interpretation of the major concepts like desire, sexuality, subject, phallus, pleasure, libido, unconscious, symbolic order and the *sinthome*. According to him, the relations of human beings with their desires could be seen as a social phenomenon. Therefore, it is quite inevitable that the meaning of the social interactions and relationships would certainly reflect the structure of the human desires. As Lacan was trying to formulate a general theory of psychoanalysis, he borrowed ideas from the theory of Strauss and the models of linguistics. Besides that, he integrated the psychoanalytical approach in theorizing the concept of the unconscious in the light of structuralist analysis. He was of opinion that the way language is found to be structured, the unconscious could also be studied in that same way (Rendtorff, 2014). Lacan took help from the de Saussure's theory of linguistics and the theory of structural anthropology while analyzing the meaning of unconscious. He made use of the perspectives like signifier and signified to explicate the development of symbolic ordering over the history and culture. He realized that it is the language that gives place to the symbolic representation of desire and the unconscious relations between human beings. Therefore, the concept of the unconscious is supposed to be structured like language following the laws of structuralist linguistics (Rendtorff, 2014). According to him, the program of analysis related to structuralist and linguistics could be explained as psychological fantasies in the orderings of symbol and imaginary. Psychoanalysis was referred by him to be the science of structural laws that guide the significance of unconscious. So, what is more, important in psychoanalysis is that there should be a linguistic analysis of the signifier and signified in terms of their structures, as well as of the unconscious which could be manifested in the form of language.

III. Structuralism in human geography

Apart from the mentioned domains in the previous section, there are several other realms of social sciences and humanities that have widely used the essence of structuralism in their respective lines of discourse. Geography was no exception to this. The way geography was earlier influenced by the positivistic and humanistic approaches, most likely in the same way it was influenced by the domains of social sciences that were

either the sources of structuralist analysis or somehow were influenced by the approaches of structuralism earlier than geography. However, the reflection of structuralism in human geography is found to be conspicuous even earlier to 1970s when the main impact of structuralist approach is most likely acknowledged. Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus (Breitbart, 1981, Dunbar, 1981) the early anarchists, were found to be the practicing geographers. Gregory (1978) briefly recorded the work of Strauss while correlating that with human geography, although his work is not recognized to be a complete one in that regard. Actually, there have been limited contributions of the 'structure as construct' school and its scholars in relating structuralist approach with human geography and Gregory was not an exception in that case. However, an exception was the contribution of Jean Piaget (1896-1980) who belonged to the 'structure as construct' school but influenced the geographical research remarkably with a structuralist approach. His focus was on the acquisition of intelligence as the process of structural transformation. He argued that the development of a child's intelligence about the space and geometry is subject to time and phases that vary qualitatively from one another. In each phase of development, new material is integrated with the previously held concepts. Such materials are consolidated and coordinated in such a way that it develops a self-regulating structure in which all materials are fitted in an organized way, not in a random form. His idea was later on criticized by Gould (1973) who stated that in spite of being the pioneer in working on the child's psychological development process, Piaget was more concerned about the space and geometry, not much talked about the geographic image that a child retains while learning the things related to it. Later on, several other scholars also worked on the psychological developmental process of children, but all such studies attempted in revealing what people know and how that is being acquired by a particular process, rather than relating such investigations with the principles and arguments of structuralism. It could be because of the reason that there may remain a deeper structure of human consciousness which is very much relevant to the geographic research but was not studied during those days.

The most prominent entry of structuralist approach in the geographical researches could be evident through the works of Marxist geographers during 1970s when they strongly challenged the spatial science, sometimes represented in the form of cartography. According to Peet (1977), the growing interest in the geographers to adopt Marxist perspectives was because of the then western society's dissatisfaction to the existing structure and increasing frustration with the positivist approach that repeatedly failed to achieve the acceptable solution and changes related to the social problems. In this context, David Harvey's work 'Social justice and the city' (2010) acted as the stimuli for geographers to adopt the Marxist approach for the geographical research, because this approach is holistic and stressing more on the interdependence of the both economic and social issues in terms of production, consumption, and distribution. However, such borrowing of Marxist perspectives in geography was also debated in several grounds – from the adoption of the philosophy to the way it got applied in geography. A considerable number of geographers adopted the Marxist approach in presenting the manifold economic aspects of the capitalist societies but did not consider the fullest form

of Marxism to correlate the production system with the further consumption and distribution system which means they failed to connect the economic aspects with the social issues (Smith, 1977). Sometimes, it has been criticized as an approach which was called as Marxian rather than Marxist (Asheim, 1979).

The actual form of structuralist geography indeed acknowledges the importance of the production system and its organization that significantly influence the creation and the structuring of social processes at all levels of the society. So, naturally, it deals with all the dialectic relationships that exist between the social processes on one hand and the natural environmental and spatial relationships on the other hand (Peet and Lyons, 1981). Very significantly, no particular streamline was framed to channelize the Marxist geographers in initiating the revolution, unless the consensus of the critical theory scholars suggested that the appreciation of real facts in the light of Marxist analysis can only increase the power and self-reflection leading to the ultimate emancipation from all forms of dominance. Therefore, the Marxist geography develops a theoretical as well as a political base that talks on behalf of the common mass of the ordinary people to challenge the forms of destruction and exploitation by the international ruling class people (Peet and Lyons, 1981). So, Marxist geography basically calls for a holistic perspective to deal with the structure of the reality. Some scholars like Dunford (1980) suggested, although there is a need of retaining a holistic perspective, the individual branches of social sciences do have the proper justifications to appear as separate disciplines because they have their distinctive foci of attention. From this particular perspective, human geography has the scopes to set up its distinct line of discourse that could be defined as the – study of the structure and spatial forms that have been produced historically and specified by the mode(s) of the production system. Such arguments brought the human geographers to a consensus that geography should come up with its own nature of perspective which would be self-reflecting and powerful in revealing the structures and spatial forms of the social issues. It paved the development of structuralist geography in due course of time.

Structuralist geography appeared to be comprised of the critiques just like the humanistic geographers who were trained to criticize the insufficiency of the other approaches in interpreting the outcomes of the social processes. Structuralist geographers mainly criticize the approaches believing that individual decision-making cannot reveal the real structural process that underpins the creation and recreation of geography. The impact of structuralist geography is more dominant in some areas of human geography.

One of such areas is the economic geography where the major focus of structuralist works was found to be the geography of development as well as underdevelopment. Structuralist analysis of such phenomena transformed the unilinear economic growth with deterministic spatial spread to the Marxist political economy. The writings of various scholars like Brookfield, Brewer, N. Smith stimulated much in this context.

The contribution of structuralist approach is also prominent in social geography, especially the social urban geography that influenced a lot in transforming the orientation

of geographical research. In pre-structuralist perspective, geographers used to focus on the issues like who lives where in urban areas and also used to assume that there was a given set of social relations not changing over time, a mutual consensus about the rightness of such relations on the basis of which people would be allocated with a specific housing location and would be allowed to change their positions, and a free competition among the people to choose housing locations wherever they want. The structuralist perspective strongly challenged such assumptions by arguing that society is ever-changing and the relations are supposed to change accordingly. Such relations are altered rather by dissensus and sometimes even by conflict (Johnston, 1980). So, there remain several complex mechanisms that limit the free choice to select housing locations in the urban area. The contribution of David Harvey in this context is found notable.

Brian Berry (1969) termed political geography as 'moribund backwater' during the pre-structuralist period. The combination of idealist and positivist approach during the quantitative revolution in the 1950s and 1960s could not contribute much to political geography. Despite the electoral geography achieved more importance with positivist perspective (Taylor and Johnston, 2014), the actual revival appeared after the application of structuralist approach in its research orientation. Clark and Dear (1981) did the major contribution in political geography by integrating the theoretical issues related to the nature of state within the capitalist and many other modes of the production system. In the pre-structuralist time, such issues had not been considered to be studied under the domain of political geography.

In the historical geography, structuralist perspective provided a real method to study and interpret the pattern of the past. Besides that, if anybody is not interested into a specific pattern of the past, rather more interested in finding out the pattern of changes in several series of specific incidents of past, the structuralist approach is best suited in unfolding that as well. The contribution of Pred (1979) is notable in historical geography as he used the concept of structuration in his analysis.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the engagement of human geographers with structuralism was short-lived and worked as a transition when geographers took over some other approaches and dealt in more depth. "The move towards structuralism, never complete in geographical thought, represented a search for greater theoretical coherence and rigor (Peet, 1998, p. 112)." Structuralism ultimately did not give a satisfactory solution to find out the problems of empiricism, rather it took several forms of Marxism (like the structural Marxism) to provide a structural analytics of power and social processes (Gregory et al., 2011).