

## **The social organism analogy in British anthropology and analytic political philosophy**

**Structural-functionalist anthropology.** This approach dominated British anthropology from the 1930s to the 1960s at least. For our purposes, we can work with a simplified understanding of British structural-functionalist anthropology as having these commitments:

- Each society has a set of institutions which form a structure.
- Each institution functions to maintain that structure.

In this handout, I specify how the analogy between the object of study and an organism featured within this approach, before making a comparison with analytic political philosophy.

**1. Conveying cohesion.** An obvious reason for anthropologists speaking of the social organism is to convey the cohesive structure formed by institutions -- like organs of a body.

**2. Clarifying “function.”** A.R. Radcliffe-Brown uses the analogy to explain what his use of “function” means. He attributes functions to institutions in the sense that a biologist attributes functions (1952: 12). This sense allows for functions which are not intended.

**3. Synchronic studies.** Structural-functionalism traditionally focused on social systems without looking into their origins and while treating them as static. The plan was to come back to transformation laws (Evans-Pritchard 1961: 2). This was defended by comparison with studies of an organ system which can achieve knowledge by treating it as a relatively static system.

**4. Scientific status.** An analogy between the study of society and anatomical study of organisms was used to argue for the scientific status of anthropology (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 190).

**Analytic political philosophy.** The area of research known as analytic political philosophy treats John Rawls as its founding figure and the analogy features in his work, though less explicitly.

**1. Clarifying utilitarianism.** In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls associates utilitarianism with an argument that what is rational for society is analogous to what is rational for an individual. It can be rational for an individual to sacrifice part of themselves for the good of the whole. Likewise, a society may call for the sacrifice of an individual for greater overall happiness. Rawls objects to this as not taking seriously the distinctness of persons (1971: 29).

**2. Metaphysics of nations.** The chief use in analytic political philosophy is above, but Derek Parfit registers that Hegelians compare the nation to a super-organism, to convey that it is not just a set of individuals in a territory (it has a soul) or that it is a living thing. This is different from British functionalist anthropology, which treats a society as individuals in relationships.

### **References**

- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1961. *Anthropology and History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.
- Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.