

QESTION TWO

In this question, I'll do the second task first since the answers for this part could lay the background I need to complete the first task.

PART ONE

I'll present and compare the theories of Saussure, Durkheim, and Alexander in this part. Basically, this set of question is about epistemology, asking us how theorists answer the question of "how we think and why we seem obliged to think in certain ways."

Saussure

Before diving into Saussure's theories, it is noteworthy to mention that although Saussure's *Courses in General Linguistics* is about linguistics, he lucidly argues that signs are part of social life, and his theories could shed light on the understanding of other parts of social life, such as rites and customs (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.15, 17).

For Saussure, individuals are pre-dated by the cultural structure--a system of shared cultural codes. Accordingly, how individuals think/feel/characterize the world are *based on, constrained and influenced* by this very underlying structure. This view led Saussure to emphasize the study the interrelationship of symbols, signs, meanings within the cultural structure, and to downplay the research into individual acts. In Chapter three of *Courses in General Linguistics*, Saussure distinguishes "social from individual" as well as "essential from ancillary or accidental" by distinguishing language itself and speech. He makes it very clear that: "Language is not a function of the speaker. It is the product passively registered by the individuals. It never requires premeditation." "Speech, on the contrary, is an individual act of the will and the intelligence." In order to express his own thoughts, individuals must use the code provided by the language (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.13-14)" Thus, social conditions individuals by providing a *form* of thinking and speaking. Clearly, he rejects the dominant approach of individual psychology at his time, which focuses on the impacts of individual mental world, motional world on people's perception of world. His thoughts are also dialectically distinct from the Existialism, which rises after his time and accentuates individual freedom, choices, and responsibilities.

In addition to stressing the influence of cultural structure on individuals, he argues that the linguistic system is built by social convention, and thus brought social convention to the epicenter of the study of linguistics. His ideas regarding the arbitrary nature of signs reflect his emphasis on social convention. In *Courses in General Linguistics*, Saussure first rejects nomenclature, which regards a language, if reduced to its essentials, is “a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.65)” Then he presents his first principle of linguistics: the linguistic sign--link between signal and signification-- is arbitrary (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.67). In other words, there is no natural or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified, and there is no fixed universal concept. The relationship between the signified and the signifier is created by social activity (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.11). Thus, signs are the product of *social convention*. This thought anticipates Kuhn, and is a critique of Essentialism, according to which everything has essential characteristics. In fact, his playing priority to synchronic study of language over the diachronic study of language is closely connected to his thoughts on the arbitrariness of the signs. Precisely because signs are arbitrary, we could only study language from the internal relationship within the language system, and to study this relationship requires us to study them at a given time and within a given society.

Most importantly, the arbitrariness of the sign does not only refer to the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, but also refer to the arbitrary relationship between signs in a language system. Actually, signs are the concepts, categories, and, values by which a community uses to organize its world. Because of the arbitrariness of the signs, it would be meaningless to isolate a single sign from the united whole system to which it belongs (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.112). Saussure argues that the language itself can be nothing other than a system of pure values (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.110). In this system, the value of one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others. It is the relations in which an element reciprocally *compares* or *contrast* with other elements in the system that determine its value (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.113).

Saussure thus creates a science which studies the life of signs within the society. He asserts that linguistics is only a part of this general science, and laws which semiology discovers will find itself attached to a well-defined domain of human phenomena (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.115). According to Saussure, “for *any means of expression* accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on

convention, which comes to the same thing. (de Saussure, Bally and Sechehaye 1983, p.68)” Thus, to the extent that human actions function as signs, the underlying system of conventions could be studied with his analytical model.

In essence, Saussure’s theories suggest that language--a system of signs and value constructed by the social-- is an epistemological paradigm, which establishes the boundaries of epistemic options of thinking, feeling, and characterizing the world. Some commentaries have argued that Saussure’s theories do not leave room for agency and criticized his theories as “structural determinism.” It is true that in Saussure’s theories, individuals seem to be unable to be released from these cultural codes, and his focus on synchronic study of language has a weakness in reconciling statics with dynamics. Nevertheless, his theories do not limit how individuals use the given cultural codes to create the content of their thoughts. As Saussure reiterates in his book, “The language itself is a form, not a substance.” The same set of cultural codes/rules still could be applied differently. Hence, there could still be numerous combinations and possibilities of substance within the cultural structure.

Durkheim

Durkheim’s thoughts about how individuals think/feel/characterize the world are similar to his contemporary Saussure. He inherits from Rousseau the idea that social is a moral entity, which means that all of our ideas about public good and evil are generated by the society in which we live and not equal to the simple aggregation of individual ideas about good and evil. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim tried to demonstrate that above the individual there is society, which insides the individual but surpasses him (Durkheim 2001, p.342).

As Saussure, Durkheim emphasizes the underlying structure of the society, which contains the concepts and categories by which we perceive and organize the world. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim attempted to establish a general theory of universal categories of thought by breaking things down into collective representations, belief, and ritual practices, and found certain fundamental classifications, such as the binary codes of sacred and profane. In fact, religion is his metaphor of society. Durkheim argues that *religious forces are human forces, moral forces*. He writes, “We have established along the way that the fundamental categories of thought, and consequently of science, have religious origin...In short, it is said that nearly all great institutions are born of religion. Now, in order for the chief aspects of collective life to

have begun as merely diverse aspects of religious life, religious life clearly must have been the pre-eminent form and abbreviated expression of the whole collective life. *If religion generated everything that is essential in society, this is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.* (Durkheim 2001, p.314)” By investigating a single religion, Durkheim demonstrates the origin of our logical thoughts is actually from the society. His proof that individuals are motivated by supra-individual, social goals is an attack on utilitarian thoughts. The same as Saussure, Durkheim provides huge insights for subsequent social scientists to study the impersonal infrastructure of knowledge.

In the conclusion of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim distinguishes himself from the other two alternatives to study science of man. These approaches that claim there are “natural” things independent of the social are also rejected by Saussure. Durkheim writes, “Until now, we were faced with the following alternative: either to explain man’s superior and specific faculties by relating them to inferior forms of being—reason to the sense, mind to matter—which amounted to denying their specificity; or to attach them to some supra-experimental reality that was postulated, but whose existence no observation could establish. (Durkheim 2001, p.342)” For Durkheim, everything is constructed socially, even the most primordial categories, for example, time, space, and, causality, are culture creations (Somers 1999, p. 126)

On the other hand, compared with Saussure, Durkheim pays more attention to the enabling feature of the constraints, although Durkheim has also been criticized for overlooking agency. For Durkheim, freedom and liberation comes from the willing surrender of selves to the social whole. Put differently, individuals submit themselves to the society, and this submission is the very condition of individual liberalization.

Alexander

Both Alexander’s thoughts on sociological theory in general and his cultural sociology reflect how he thinks about the way individuals think/feel/characterize the world. In *What is Theory*, which we read in the beginning of this semester, he talks about the most general assumptions that each sociologist makes—the nature of action (rational/nonrational) and the problem of order (individualistic/collectivist), and points out four sets of combination of these presuppositions. He then criticizes the individualistic oriented theories. He wrote: “Individualistic theories are attractive and powerful because they preserve individual freedom in an overt, explicit, and complete way.”(I suspect this is also a consequence of social naturalism.) Nevertheless, “It ignores

the real threats that social structure often poses to freedom and, by the same token, the great sustenance to freedom that social structure can provide.” He continues to point out that collectivist theory has merit in subjecting the social control to explicit analysis; thus, collectivist thought represents a great gain over individualist thought both morally and theoretically. At the same time, he compares two possibilities of collectivist thoughts, “rational collectivist” and “nonrational collectives,” and suspects the rational collectivist has a reductionistic tendency. He writes, according to nonrational collective theory, in the process of socialization extra-individual structures become internal to the self. Finally he argues that theory should interweave the internal and external elements of collective control (Alexander 1987, p.13-15). Thus, his fundamental assumptions about the nature of action and the problem of order are nonrational and collectivist.

This preference over nonrational collectivist approach has lasted to his later works, but it is in his later works he develops his cultural analysis, which is inspired by Saussure and late Durkheim. In *The Civil Sphere*, he purposes to demonstrate how to get to the ideal of just--democratic--culture. Because he believes this goal is represented by the culture of civil sphere opposed to other spheres, he asks how we achieve the ideal of civil sphere, which is a place of solidarity. Before he presents his way of analysis, he dismisses two of alternatives to study culture. The first set of theories--the tradition of Thrasymachus, --falls under the category of rational/instrumental collectivist in his epistemological matrix for their focus on structure and material forces, such as economic and political power and more sophisticated forms of domination. Theorists like Marx, Bourdieu, and Foucault are classified by Alexander into this group. They are criticized for their reduction, ambiguity over cultural autonomy, abstract, and inability to find horizontal binding ties, which are regarded as essential elements sustaining democracy (Alexander 2006, p.39-43). The other alternative Alexander opposes is a pair of philosophical theories, communitarian approach and various Kantian theories, each of which neglects either universality or practice. Not surprisingly, this opposition to a presupposed human faculty of rationality is similar to Durkheim’s thought.

Alexander then gives his proposal—one that acknowledges the role of solidarity and moral ideas. He wishes to understand a civil society as arena not of solidarity narrowly defined in a communitarian and particularistic way but in univervalistic terms. In addition, this conception of solidarity and political culture is also tolerant of individual differences and more compatible with pluralization of interests (Alexander 2006, p.43-46)” In addition, he emphasizes that civil sphere--a relatively autonomic realm-- represents an

ideal of a horizontal relationship. It is a realm of structures, socially establishes consciousness, a network of understandings creating structures of feeling that permeate social life and run just below the surface of strategic institutions and self-conscious elites (Alexander 2006, p.43,54). He then points out the necessity to focus on the symbolic codes to study civil sphere. For him, civil sphere is a civil symbolic sphere, composing sets of homological symbols and antagonistic symbols (Alexander 2006, p.54, 56). This view to treat civil sphere as symbolic and horizontal relationship reflects his indebtedness to Saussure. Furthermore, he also takes the Durkheims' binary relations of the sacred and profane to develop his dichotomies of good and evil, such as civilized and anti-civilized, deserving and undeserving. Of course, he also emphasizes the Saussure's idea of the arbitrariness of the signs. According to Alexander, while signifiers do not change, signifieds could shift, meaning that social entities could change their position in binary divides (Alexander 2006, 55). By this way, he could handle both universalistic cultural structure and particularistic practices.

In essence, Alexander's theories suggest that people are internalized by the stable social structure of binary cultural codes. Consequently, we perceive the world through this structural lens. This is what he takes from Saussure and Durkheim. Yet Alexander should be given extra credits for his careful elaboration of his thoughts on agency. For Alexander, codes are internalized and become individuals' moral values. Thus, the structure is inside the actors, and codes are resources that could be deployed by actors in different ways. Given all the merits of Alexander's approach, I still have two concerns. The first one is similar to the common critique of Saussure's theories. Alexander seems to focus more on the synchronic study of cultural codes. As I have mentioned before, he feels signifiers are stable. Although this might be empirically true, he still needs to handle the historic perspective of culture. The other one is his handling of the relationship between different spheres. Though he does mention that cultural codes in the civil sphere are influenced by other spheres, the mechanism of this interaction is unclear.

In sum, Saussure, Durkheim, and Alexander all believe that the way with which we engage the world-- the epistemological infrastructure--are socially constructed. None of them believe that epistemology could rest on the certainty of the unchanging laws of nature. Just as Somers' put, claims to knowledge are always transmitted to us via some kind of cultural schema; they are culturally embedded—that is, mediated through symbolic systems and practices (Somers 1999, p. 125).

PART TWO: GROUPING

I will draw on Alexander's notion of autonomy of culture to conduct classification. As I have mentioned in the Part one, Alexander argues for an analytically autonomic approach to study culture. This approach treats culture as an independent variable rather than independent variable, and does not rely on forces outside culture, such as economic and political forces, to explain culture. In other ways, this is an endogenous explanation of culture. Consequently, theorists who provide an infrastructure of culture and clearly theorize what is inside the culture could be categorized into the group of "autonomy of culture."

According to this standard, Saussure, Durkheim, Alexander, and Somers are in, and Bourdieu and Foucault are out. Basically, Saussure, Durkheim, Alexander, and Somers all apply semiotic approach to specify symbolic structures of culture. Since I have presented theories of Saussure, Durkheim, and Alexander in the previous part, I do not repeat analysis here.

With regard to Sommers, she defines culture as "intersubjective public symbolic systems and networks of meaning-driven schemas organized by their own internal rules and structures that are loosely tied together in patterns of relationships." She clearly states that she separates the realm of culture from other social forces for the purpose to explore the internal dynamics of a cultural schema on its own terms (Somers 1999, p. 124-25). In *The Privatization of Citizenship*, after constructing her methodology of "a historical sociology of knowledge," she uses cultural schema of metanarrative—the combination of narrative and binary codes to develop her "Anglo-American citizenship theory."

As for Foucault and Bourdieu, they are categorized by Alexander as the unfortunate reductionist line—the tradition of Thrasymachus (Alexander 2006, p.43, 54). Because Foucault and Bourdieu have distinct theories on culture/ knowledge, I assign each of them a respective category. The theme I name Foucault is "power/knowledge regime." In stead of giving knowledge an independent role in analysis, Foucault mixes power and knowledge together and assists the inseverability of the goals of knowledge and power. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that the development of human sciences provide knowledge to let power works effectively. His brining power circulation into consideration distinguishes him from structuralism.

Finally, I will give Bourdieu the theme of "symbolic distinction." The same as Alexander,

Bourdieu also tried to demonstrate that culture could be an object for sociological study. However, the way he studies culture is distinct from Alexander. In *The Distinction*, Boudieu attempts to understand the role of symbolic systems of classification in production and reproducing social hierarchies. In his work, culture is more like a dependent variable determined by social structure rather than an independent variable.

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