

British social anthropology, wider processes, and causal overdetermination

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Abstract. British structural-functionalist anthropology famously faces an objection that it is incapable of dealing with the influence of wider processes. An analytical response to this objection, which at least needs to be registered, is that some wider processes can be ignored when there is causal overdetermination.

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The British structural functionalist anthropology of the 1930s to 1960s: did it die from objections or is it just awaiting better defenders? One of the objections is that it treats societies as self-contained entities and ignores wider processes affecting a given society, such as imperialism (see Werbner 2020). Surely a fatal objection.

But an attempted line of defence, in some cases, appeals to causal overdetermination. Causal overdetermination is when an effect has two different causes, each sufficient to bring about the effect, such as when two people I invite to dinner shoot bullets at me which kill me at the same time. The kind of overdetermination we are interested in is not this however. It is when a wider process would cause effect X but so would some internal process. Then we can model the society in a way which ignores the wider process and focuses on the internal process.

An example very loosely inspired by real life, which does not concern a whole society, is this: imagine a university criticized for buying up stellar academics instead of producing them. One might blame this on wider processes, in particular the increasing use of management techniques from the business world in the academic world. “A new vulgar

management from abroad took over who know little of the academic world, being basically business-minded. They are trying to buy their way to the top of the league.” But there is also an internal cause of a number of ambitious talented academics who will not actually realize their talents without such stellar figures, as if the status symbols these figures carry from elite institutions somehow activates the talent. Any competent management would conclude in favour of attracting such academics. (Characters with alternative approaches do not count as competent!)

Reference

Werbner, R. 2020. *Anthropology After Gluckman: The Manchester School, colonial and postcolonial transformations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.