

From where do things culturally diffuse? Paired systems

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Abstract. Diffusionism in anthropology posits centres of creativity from which things diffuse, such as ideas and innovations. But what sort of place is likely to be such a centre of creativity? I distinguish two cases, the second of which poses a problem for diffusionism.

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This was the centre from which things came

And also the victim of a cruel game

Why do societies A and B both have a certain quality? Diffusionism is quite an old theory, which posits that in a given period, a certain society is a centre of creativity and things diffuse from there. It was displaced by a theoretical revolution in 1920s anthropology (see Jarvie 1967: 11), but there is probably life in it still. In this paper, I wish to introduce a distinction that will feel obvious to many once stated, but I think there is a benefit in stating and illustrating it.

It is natural to suppose that a centre of creativity will be where the most spectacular creations come, for example an ancient region famous for its myths, its mathematics, its tragedies, its philosophy and more. But there is a different conception according to which the centre is a place of modest creations; neighbours know how to modify them so that they become more spectacular.

To illustrate this, imagine two villages. *Village 1*. In village 1, there is the original version of Cinderella, in which she is called Ninderella. A kindly spirit enables her to go to the ball, but she has body odour and some of the other girls there laugh at her and so she leaves the ball crying. This prince finds her, by the smell, and they marry. *Village 2*. In the neighbouring village, a clever person hears the story and decides to alter the version somewhat, a clever old woman let us say. She specifies a fairy godmother and introduces the need to leave before midnight, the glass slipper, and that as the means by which the prince locates the main character, now called Cinderella. That is the version which becomes famous. There is a diffusionism which posits centres like village 1, whose creations are not-so-spectacular but are later jazzed up.

In the fictionalized case described, it seems to me that quite a lot of credit has to go to the modifier in village 2. Whether a lot of credit has to go to the modifier depends on various considerations. How likely is it that someone else would come up with that modification? And if it is unlikely, is it because it is so hard to do even if one is directed to modify that material? “Add some sparkle to this.” “How?!” The addition of the glass slipper strikes me as like that. It is an inspired transformation, as described above. (Such transformations themselves have a feel of magic about them.) Or is it because no one else thinks to direct their energies in this direction? “If I am directed that way, I would have done that, but I would not do that by myself.” Or is it because few people can bear working with material from that source, owing to the moral qualities of the people say? One has to hold one’s nose, metaphorically speaking, and do the job. Or some other reason?

The more credit one wishes to give to the modification system, the less comfortable one will be with casting one place as the centre and the other as the place where ideas and

innovations have diffused – a mere receiver or taker of attractive goods. The paired system described is actually a problem for diffusionism. Such paired systems probably exist, with one party providing basic material to work with and the other adding some sparkle. There are a variety of other complicated relations, which are at least conceivable. My impression is that various communities of researchers interested in philosophy in England, all of them innovative, know how to borrow from each other but narrowly avoid plagiarism charges, and there is perhaps no suitable alternative to such a system.

Reference

Jarvie, I.C. 1967. *The Revolution in Anthropology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.