

RESEARCH ARTICLE		Reconciling Structuralism and History: Michel Foucault's Epistemological Revision of an Enduring Tension	
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Abstract			
This article addresses the problematic relationship between structuralism and history in the thought of Michel Foucault, particularly regarding whether it is characterised by opposition or compatibility or, more precisely, whether the opposition between them persists. While reconciliation between the two had previously been deemed unlikely in the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), subsequent efforts have emerged to resolve this conflict. Among these is Michel Foucault's contribution, which highlights the following key points: the assertion that the concept of structure represents a transcendence of the biological-evolutionary interpretation of history rather than of history itself; the synchronic dimension of structure has acquired a historical character and the principles of transformation and the distancing from interpretation have become shared factors between history and structuralism. This reconciliation has been made possible through methodological revision within the structuralist framework and the historical approach.			
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## 1. Introduction

Structuralism emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a philosophy that opposes philosophies on the subject established by Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Sartre, and others. It also arose as a methodology intended to address the epistemological and methodological shortcomings experienced by the human sciences in their pursuit of development.

The urgency of this aim became even more pronounced after structuralism proved effective as a method through the linguistic efforts of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), particularly in his work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). While it functioned as a philosophy opposing humanism, expelling the human being as the source of meaning, the agent of knowledge, and the driving force of history with its goals, this ideology is grounded in a methodological epistemology. It views phenomena as structures that organise themselves autonomously, without human intervention and emphasises the exclusion of the historical dimension. The synchronic aspect is regarded as the fixed, static component of the structure. Ferdinand de Saussure, the pioneer of structural linguistics, maintained that "in principle, there must be a complete incompatibility between structure and the diachronic dimension, and that there exists a correspondence between structure and the static aspect" (Labrousse et al., 1968 p. 42). Structuralism thus spread widely and specifically in France as a means of moving beyond the humanist tendency established by Marxism and existentialism. Marxism held that man is the agent of history, its maker, capable of shaping himself through his labour, transforming nature and the self. It further considered radicalism as the grasp of things in their essence, an essence which, in the case of man, is man himself. For Marxist philosophy, the starting point was man as a supreme being and the struggle against the social conditions that degrade his worth (Schaff, 1968, p. 5). Similarly, the new French generation sought to break away from existentialism, which Sartre represented as another form of humanism. Sartre considered man to be absolutely free and wholly responsible for him. His atheistic existentialism was consistent with the belief that if God does not exist, it is at least possible to believe in the existence of a being that existed before being defined by any abstract idea or fictitious God that being is man himself (Sartre, 1946/1964, pp. 13–14).

This humanism created a philosophical and epistemological crisis, compelling French intellectuals to break free from its hold and embrace structuralism, a movement significantly propagated in France by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), who considered it a model for the other human sciences. Lévi-Strauss followed Saussure's approach, believing an inherent conflict existed between the diachronic and the synchronic. The former is concerned with the origin of the structure as a historically situated system, whereas the latter focuses on the internal workings of the structure in its present state (Baghoura, n.d., p. 241).

Lévi-Strauss had a pronounced aversion to history, maintaining that the human mind is a single, shared structure. He rejected that primitive thought was illogical and that human reason gradually evolved to reach the modern, civilised mind. Such a view implies that man creates history, defines goals, and brings it to its complete form. Instead, Lévi-Strauss asserted that each form of thought has its inherent logic. He adopted a structuralist methodology that excluded the concept of time, devalued history, and considered development or progress not as objective truths but as merely subjective, illusory human impressions of succession and continuity (Dawai, 2000, p. 100).

However, has this view of the relationship remained unchanged, or has it evolved?

## Research Problem

This study examines the following central question: Are structuralism and history fundamentally incompatible in Michel Foucault's perspective? More specifically, does the view of a conflict between history and structuralism persist among philosophers and epistemologists, particularly in Michel Foucault's work?

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach based on collecting relevant sources and references, focusing on questioning and analysing the texts.

## Research Significance

The importance of this research lies in its renewed engagement with the problematic relationship between structuralism and history. It aims to demonstrate that the conflict between the two was a historically contingent phase. This opposition has diminished as epistemological studies of history and structuralism have evolved through methodological revision, enabling the development of a new academic and intellectual perspective on their interrelation.

## 2. The Epistemological-Historical Context and Principles of Reconciliation

### 2.1. The Epistemological-Historical Context

While Michel Foucault was influenced by structuralism through the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who drew from Saussurean structural linguistics, structuralism did not retain its original form but underwent methodological revisions. Similarly, history also experienced a methodological correction, moving beyond the boundaries of classical historiography. Consequently, new epistemological and historical contexts emerged, contributing to a shift in the perception of the relationship between structuralism and history, particularly in Foucault's thought.

Linguistic studies witnessed significant development after Saussure. Notably, the Prague Linguistic Circle made substantial contributions; although it remained faithful to certain aspects of Saussure's linguistic theories, it also introduced innovations and critiques. One of its key efforts was reconciling structure with the diachronic dimension, moving beyond Saussure's binary opposition between the synchronic and the diachronic as Jakobson stated, "Linguistics after Saussure rejected the misleading equivalence established by Saussure namely, synchrony versus diachrony, and the static versus the dynamic" (Jakobson, 1973/2002, p. 36).

This rejection restored the significance of the diachronic element within the structural analysis, considering language as a structure that transforms from within. This internal evolution from beginning to end is a temporal transformation, allowing language to be described historically and achieving satisfactory results in this field (Jakobson, 1973/2002, p. 37). The synchronic dimension of structure has thus acquired a dynamic character in the view of new linguists and their followers, such as André Martinet (1908–1999), who asserted that linguists have become aware of the dynamic nature of the synchronic dimension. He considered this issue a shared concern between linguists and historians, urging the latter to recognise that synchronic does not necessarily mean static (Labrousse et al., 1968, p. 57).

As for the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, he is known for his ambivalent stance towards history. While he expressed disdain for it, he also held it in esteem. He accepted history per se, but rather the version favoured by historians at the expense of other sciences, which interprets events as a continuity, where the present is seen as a linear progression from the past towards a developmental future. Such a view, according to Lévi-Strauss, conceals a humanist bias. He called for a disassociation between history and humanism, warning that if contemporary philosophy aligns with this particular view of history, it will commit an epistemological error obscuring the truth. Furthermore, reinforcing humanist tendencies within this view of history would also commit a metaphysical error, namely, falling into the illusion of freedom (Ibrahim, 1976, p. 97).

In support of this view, Lévi-Strauss published an article in 1949 entitled *Ethnology and History*, which was republished in 1958. This text confirms his positive outlook on the relationship between structuralism and history. He stressed the necessity of collaboration between ethnology and history for the construction of the human sciences, stating:

I hope that they will come to realise the urgency of restoring value to even the smallest histories and understand that ethnologists' cooperation is an asset for them, allowing them to extract, from the required mass of histories and narratives, some of the most solid materials with which we can continue building the human sciences together (Lévi-Strauss, 1983, p. 1231).

Conversely, among historians, Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) stands out for his monumental work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, published in 1949. Braudel was a leading figure of the Annales School and represented its second generation, which introduced significant innovations in history. He emphasised that structure itself now possesses a history, as reflected in the broadening of historical study beyond solely political subjects, including social, economic, and geographical phenomena.

Braudel proposed three distinct temporalities:

- **Event-based time**, which is short-term and relates to political and military events as well as the history of individuals;
- **Social and economic time**, which is associated with the history of societies and states and their economic structures, is a cyclical and contextual temporality that changes slowly;
- **Quasi-static time**, which concerns humanity's history and relationship with the geographical environment, extends over centuries and changes so gradually as to be almost imperceptible, even after many generations.

The *longue durée* is not static; its stability is relative and has a historical dimension. Braudel published an article in the *Annales* journal in which he stated that, from now on, structures will become a central subject of historical study. Consequently, there will no longer be a distinction between conscious historical processes and the unconscious structures within social life (Bourdé & Martin, 1983, pp. 267–268).

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was not isolated from this transformation in the relationship between structuralism and history. What, then, was his position regarding this epistemological development? He, too, declared in his methodological work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) that the opposition between the concept of process as it belongs to historical science and the concept of structure as it belongs to structuralism was of little significance. He acknowledged that although his archaeological method relies on historical analysis, it does not distance itself from structuralist analyses. In contrast, it is not the sole component of his method; structuralism forms a part of it. Foucault's methodological approach does not entail the wholesale adoption of the structuralist method within history. Instead, it is based methodologically on issues raised, concepts, tools, and results produced within historical research, which are not foreign to the structuralist approach (Foucault, 1972/1986, p. 15).

If Foucault had acknowledged this reconciliation, how would he have presented this convergence? What are the epistemological foundations or principles upon which it is based?

## 2.2. Principles of Reconciliation between Structuralism and History

Before presenting the principles of their reconciliation, it is important to note that, in Foucault's view, the problematic nature of the relationship between structuralism and history extends beyond France, even to America and perhaps Japan. According to Foucault, this conflict is, in fact, artificially constructed and arises from three main reasons: first, the issue originates within structuralism itself; second, it emerges from within the community of historians. On the first level, Foucault believes there is a lack of consensus among philosophers regarding a single definition of structuralism. On the second level, the problem also exists among historians; as there is no agreement on the definition of history, there is confusion between concept and practice, as their discussions about historical research often differ from their actual practice.

According to Foucault, the third reason is that the relationship between structuralism and history is intertwined with political concerns, being closely linked to the ideological orientations of bourgeois society (Foucault, 1994, p. 268).

Foucault further explains that history has often been made to interpret its development similarly to the evolution of living organisms. A society's history is analogous to biological, characteristically slow biological entities. The emergence of the bourgeoisie in history, for instance, was a cumulative process that followed a slow maturation and required a long, coherent historical trajectory. This slowness means that sudden changes are rare and exceptional. Through this ideological framing, the bourgeoisie possesses history, seizes power, and avoids any violent counter-revolution that might displace it. Such an ideological consecration protects bourgeois society from any threat to its authority, reinforcing the conviction that the trajectory of history is predetermined in favour of the bourgeoisie's continued dominance. Thus, the people are less inclined to revolt against it (Foucault, 1994, pp. 272–281). Therefore, history is conceived as progressing linearly towards a predetermined completion point set by the bourgeoisie.

This interpretation received official support through the evolutionary method, which was transferred from biology to the study of history because biological life proceeds in a predictable, linear fashion, much like social life throughout

history. The correspondence between the two was seen to justify methodological equivalence so that the scientific legitimacy found in biology was presumed to be present in history, with biology as its scientific model (Foucault, 1994, p. 280).

Such an interpretation of history reinforces the conviction that there is only one history for all societies and that history is preceded by an active subject who determines and controls its course toward a specific endpoint, thereby making it predictable. However, the epistemology of history shows that historical research has been renewed, and methodologies, including structuralism, have been revised in light of these developments. Given these changes, what are the principles of their reconciliation?

### 2.1.2. The Assertion of Structure as a Foundation for History

Structuralism's philosophical and methodological elimination of the subject was a deliberate effort to liberate history from the ideological employment of biological interpretation. Affirming the subject is, in fact, a perpetuation of a comprehensive, continuous conception of history. Thus, structuralism did not seek to abolish history but aimed to establish a rigorous methodology, elevating the scientific status of historical inquiry by adhering to the principle of structure. "Structuralism did not, at least in its beginnings, turn its back on history; it sought to establish a more rigorous and systematic history" (Foucault, 1994, p. 268).

According to Foucault, this attempt was embodied primarily in the work of three structuralists: Franz Boas (1858–1942) in ethnology, Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) in historical phonology, and Roland Barthes (1915–1980) in literature.

Taking Franz Boas as one of these examples, his application of the structuralist method, in Michel Foucault's view, represents a move beyond Edward Tylor's (1832–1917) Darwinian, evolutionary, and biological interpretation of the history of societies. Boas considered that societies are not only different from living organisms but also from one another. Each society possesses its specificity, necessitating the study of each society individually, as each is a distinct structure with a unique history. This history is not linear and does not develop from a simple to a more complex state; whether a society is complex or straightforward is determined by certain internal relations that define its specific character. Viewing societies as structures means that their development should not be interpreted like the evolution of living organisms; instead, their histories should be studied as the histories of human societies, not biological entities (Foucault, 1994, p. 269).

Historical events, as structures, change from within; their transformation does not originate from a subject external to the structure. The structure itself is formed internally, which affirms that it does not possess unity. It is discontinuous and distinct from preceding and subsequent structures. This necessitates the assertion that "structure is not continuity" (2001, p. 802) but is characterised by discontinuity.

The exclusion of the subject, the conception of society as a structure, and the emphasis on the non-continuity of structure through its internal organisation within history also imply that historical events are discontinuous. They lack unity and homogeneity, yet they exist within history itself. This, in turn, aligns with the methodological correction within historical research, which has come to recognise the principle of discontinuity as an important methodological tool. Discontinuity is no longer regarded as a defect or obstacle to be eliminated, as in traditional historiography, which sought to present history as homogeneous. Each event is now recognised as distinct within history; thus, history contains differentiated structures constituting its subject matter. Consequently, the principle of discontinuity has become a necessary methodological tool in the discourse of history for explaining its course, replacing the principle of continuity that characterised traditional history (Foucault, 1972/1986, pp. 10–11).

The affirmation of the structure of its internal organisation without continuity is an affirmation of history's discontinuity. This is not an opposition to history but rather the foundation of history in its new form, transcending its traditional conception.

### 2.2.2. The Historicity of the Synchronic

Structuralist linguistics traditionally considered the synchronic as a property of structure in opposition to the diachronic, which was associated with evolution. However, Foucault calls for a re-examination of structure: the synchronic, representing the present moment within structure, can no longer be regarded solely as such. It is, therefore, no longer opposed to what is historical but also possesses a historical dimension. Moreover, the historical is not limited to the diachronic, and the latter is not identical to history itself; it is merely one aspect. Accordingly, it must be acknowledged that both synchrony and diachrony are imbued with historicity (2001, p. 854).

The synchronic, or present, aspect of structure is not fixed. While the structure is characterised by discontinuity and is not a continuation of what preceded it, this does not mean that it is static. Instead, it possesses a dynamism that manifests in its current moment; it moves from within. Thus, the synchronic is dynamic. This is a concern that both linguists and historians should share. As a historian, Foucault aligns himself with the efforts of the new linguists who have advocated for this view, declaring that the issue has generally become clear among linguists and that historians, in turn, must heed it. They should avoid conflating the present, the synchronic, with the static (Labrousse et al., 1968, p. 57).

On the other hand, the epistemology of history has introduced numerous new principles to historical research, among which is that it no longer concerns itself solely with the past. The past no longer holds an exclusive claim to historicity; instead, historicity has also become a feature of the present, constituting a historical moment and serving as a starting point for the historian. The historian and epistemologist Marc Bloch encourages historians to focus on the present, begin with it, and analyse it. This attention to the present forms a methodological programme adopted by the Annales School, whose historians maintain that the past cannot be understood objectively except through a precise knowledge of contemporary events as current issues (Burguière, 1979, pp. 1354–1355).

### 2.2.3. The Principle of Transformation

The dynamism of the synchronic implies that transformations occur within the entire structure, among its interrelated elements. When a transformation takes place, change occurs. Thus, the very concept of change itself is altered. Previously, change was understood as linear, occurring sequentially, successively governed by the principle of cause and effect and subject to an overarching process encompassing the entire world. However, change arises from transformations specific to a particular structure. This does not negate change but instead replaces the monotonous type of change associated with continuous history:

The general, abstract, and monotonous form of change within which we readily think in terms of succession is replaced by an analysis of the different patterns of transformation ... identifying the transformations that constitute change and generally replacing the notion of process, the primary cause, and universal effect with an analysis of transformations in their specificity (2001, p. 705).

Thus, change has lost its abstract nature through the principle of transformations, which can be described in their immediacy and constitute the condition for change itself. The question is no longer posed in causal terms as to what caused the change; instead, change can only occur when other transformations affect the structure in its present moment. The transformations within the structure occur in the present time, which means there is a change in structures and, consequently, in history. This results in discontinuities within history, necessitating the assertion that separation or divergence of events stems from transformation. The transformation affects both structure and the course of history.

Foucault considers the principle of transformation a common denominator between structural and historical analysis; the two are interrelated. The transformations that occur at the level of the structure of a given text are identified by structuralist study. However, these internal transformations are linked to external, historical, social, and political transformations defined by historical analysis. He provides a practical example through the analyses of the French historian Georges Dumézil (1898–1986). His approach is based on comparing myths by identifying similarities and highlighting differences in their sequenced and organised forms.



The subject of comparison here is the Irish myth and the Roman myth. In the first, the hero is Cúchulainn, a child to whom the gods granted extraordinary, magical strength. He set out on a military mission to confront the threat his city's enemies posed. He defeated three soldiers consecutively at the gate of the enemy chief's fortress. However, he then entered a state of agitation because the power bestowed upon him by the gods during the battle made him extremely hot; he became intensely red and could not return to his city, as he posed a danger to its inhabitants. His fellow citizens sent a woman to calm him down, but she turned out to be his uncle's wife, and the law prohibiting incest barred him from such a relationship. They were forced to immerse him in a cold bath, but it became hot and could not withstand his body temperature. As a result, he had to be submerged in seven cold baths successively before he could enter the city without endangering its residents.

As for the Roman myth, the difference from the Irish myth is that its hero, Horatius, is an adult and is not endowed with magical or divine powers; his abilities arise from himself. He is more skilled in wielding weapons than others, and his victory was achieved with the support of two fellow soldiers. The danger he faces is not internal but external, stemming from his sister, who is allied with the enemies of Rome. The myth recounts that there were judicial proceedings to acquit the hero so he could regain his standing among others rather than averting danger through the magical or religious rituals present in the Irish myth. These differences indicate a transformation in the Roman myth, the conditions identified by structural analysis (Foucault, 1994, p. 275).

Identifying differences within the myth is a way of determining the conditions of transformation, which is the task of structural analysis. First, the hero is presented as an adult rather than a child; secondly, he is like other people and does not possess supernatural qualities. In this way, a series of further differences is established, and thus, the entire structure of the myth is transformed. The series of differences and, thus, the transformations arise from within the structure of the myth itself.

Furthermore, while the two myths reveal aspects of the lives of two different societies regarding their military, political, and legal organisation, the point is not to present them as mere reflections or representations of those societies. Instead, the aim is to transition to actual historical analysis to identify the transformations that affected Roman society, specifically, its transition from a society where military authority was vested in individuals to one characterised by collective, democratic military authority.

Dumézil traces the transformations within the Roman myth's structure and observes the transformations at the level of Roman society itself, showing its shift from an aristocratic society to a state society. This demonstrates that the transformations occurring within the structure of the myth are also conditioned by historical transformations in the structure of Roman society. "The Roman transformation of the ancient Indo-European myth is the result of the transformation of society, its military class moving essentially from a group of individuals to a society with a collective, and to some extent, democratic military organisation" (Foucault, 1994, p. 275).

Thus, the conditions for the transformation of the myth are internally defined from within the myth itself by structural analysis and externally defined by historical analysis and related to the historical transformation of Roman society militarily, politically, and legally. If transformation is the subject of structural analysis, it is also the subject of historical analysis; therefore, Foucault considers both structural and historical analysis interconnected (Foucault, 1994, p. 276).

#### 2.2.4. Exclusion of Interpretation

Michel Foucault presents another principle that affirms the reconciliation between structuralism and history: the principle of excluding interpretation. This emerges from the advent of what is termed categorical history and from the renewal of the concept of the event, whose epistemological significance has changed. The historical event is no longer seen solely as a prominent, visible, and pre-existing subject; instead, attention has shifted towards invisible subjects. While traditional history focuses on significant events such as wars, victories, the death of an emperor, the history of feudalism, or industrial development, categorical history uncovers latent, unknown, and invisible events, potentially revealing a multitude of series upon series. This means that the historian constructs them so they are subject to the principle of selection. However, how is this done? These events are constructed by collecting documents relating to the events chosen by the historian for study: "Categorical history defines its subject based on the set of documents

available to it" (Foucault, 1994, p. 276). The subject chosen by the historian is selected from the archive containing all the relevant documents.

The second step involves establishing connections between these documents according to the relationships that exist among them, without seeking the hidden, true meaning, that is, without interpreting them. Foucault provides a practical example of categorical history through the work of historian Pierre Chaunu (1923–2009), particularly in his book *Séville et l'Atlantique*. In this work, Chaunu documents the port of Seville, Spain's history, by collecting all documents related to the port, organising them into interrelated series concerning annual estimates of ship arrivals and departures, classifying them by country, and distributing them according to goods. Identifying the relationships among all these elements makes it possible to determine development trends, growth fluctuations, periods of stasis and decline and to describe cycles. Categorical history "relies on converting a vast quantity of documents on the same subject into handy numerical tables" (Ettimoumi, 2013, p. 184).

This concerns the internal relationships among the documents related to the port of Seville; likewise, external relationships are established with documents concerning the ports of America, the Antilles, England, and the Mediterranean ports. The collection of documents is not undertaken to present them as carriers of a particular meaning or as representations or reflections of social or intellectual life. Foucault observes that historians do not approach documents beyond their apparent meaning to reach a hidden truth about reality in all its social or intellectual aspects. Instead, they analyse documents according to the structure of their internal and external relationships. This historical analysis is identical to the approach taken by structuralists in their analyses of literary texts or myths, where they focus solely on identifying these specific relationships, not interpreting them as mirrors of reality (Foucault, 1994, pp. 277–280). Thus, documents are used to produce the subject matter, not to discover the hidden meaning behind their apparent content.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the stereotypical view emphasising the conflict between structuralism and history, particularly as established by the structuralist linguist Saussure, has been surpassed. This emphasis represents only a specific historical phase in the relationship between the two. Subsequent efforts, including that of Foucault himself, have taken a different direction, presenting a reconciled relationship that has become methodologically legitimate. This development stems from the methodological revision within structural analysis, which aligned with the methodological corrections that also took place in historical analysis. Affirming this reconciliation allows for a broader perspective on the relationship between structuralism and history and enables its academic activation.

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