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The Elementary Structures of Kinship

(*Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté*)

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CHAPTER I

Nature and Culture

I

Of all the principles advanced by the forerunners of sociology, probably none has been so confidently repudiated as the distinction between nature and society. In fact, it is impossible to refer without contradiction to any phase in the evolution of mankind, where, without any social organization whatsoever, forms of activity were nevertheless developed which are an integral part of culture. But the distinction proposed can admit of more valid interpretations.

It was taken up by ethnologists of the Elliot Smith and Perry school to construct a theory, which, although questionable, clearly reveals, beyond the arbitrary detail of the historical outline, the profound contrast between two levels of human culture, and the revolutionary character of the neolithic transformation. With his probable knowledge of language, his lithic industries and funeral rites, Neanderthal man cannot be regarded as living in a state of nature. His cultural level, however, places him in as marked a contrast with his neolithic successors as, in another way, writers of the seventeenth century are to be distinguished from writers of the eighteenth. Above all, it is beginning to emerge that this distinction between nature and society,[1] while of no acceptable historical significance, does contain a logic, fully justifying its use by modern sociology as a methodological tool. Man is both a biological being and a social individual. Among his responses to external or internal stimuli, some are wholly dependent upon his nature, others upon his social environment. For example, there would be no difficulty in establishing the respective origins of the pupillary reflex, and the usual position of the horse-rider's hands on the reins. But the distinction is not always as easy. The physico-biological and the psycho-social stimuli often arouse similar reactions, and it may be asked, as did Locke, whether a child's fear of the dark is to be explained as revealing his animal nature, or as resulting from his nurse's stories.[2] Furthermore, in most cases, the causes themselves are not really distinct, the subject's response representing an integration of the biological and social sources of his behaviour, as in the mother's attitude towards her child. Culture is not merely juxtaposed to life nor superimposed upon it, but in one way serves as a substitute for life, and in the other, uses and transforms it, to bring about the synthesis of a new order.

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[1] 'Nature' and 'culture' seem preferable to us today.

[2] In fact, it seems that fear of the dark does not appear before the twenty-fifth month: cf. Valentine, 1930, pp. 394–420.

If this general distinction is relatively easy to establish, a twofold difficulty emerges when it has to be analysed. An attempt might be made to establish a biological or social cause for every attitude, and a search made for the mechanism whereby attitudes, which are cultural in origin, can be grafted upon and successfully integrated with forms of behaviour which are themselves biological in nature. To deny or to underestimate this opposition is to preclude all understanding of social phenomena, but by giving it its full methodological significance there is a danger that the problem of the transition from the biological to the social may become insoluble. Where does nature end and culture begin? Several ways can be suggested for answering this dual question, but so far all have proved singularly disappointing.

The simplest method would be to isolate a new-born child and to observe its reactions to various stimuli during the first hours or days after birth. Responses made under such conditions could then be supposed to be of a psycho-biological origin, and to be independent of ulterior cultural syntheses. However interesting the results which modern psychology has obtained by this method, their fragmentary and limited character cannot be overlooked. In the first place, only the early observations can be valid, for signs of conditioning are likely to appear within a few weeks or even days, and hence only such very elementary reactions as certain expressions of emotion can in actual fact be studied. Furthermore, negative proofs are always ambiguous, in that the question always remains open whether a certain reaction is absent because its origin is cultural, or because, with the earliness of the observation, the physiological mechanisms governing its appearance are not yet developed. Because a very young child does not walk, it cannot be concluded that training is necessary, since it is known that a child spontaneously begins to walk as soon as it is organically capable of doing so.[1] Analogies can be found in other fields. The only way to eliminate these uncertainties would be to extend observation over several months or even years. But insoluble difficulties would then be encountered, since the environment satisfying the strict isolation requirements of the experiment is no less artificial than the cultural environment it purports to replace, in that, for example, during the first years of life, maternal care is a natural condition in the individual's development. The experimenter is locked in a vicious circle.

It is true that sometimes chance has seemed to succeed where artificial means have failed. Eighteenth-century imaginations were greatly stirred by the instance of "wild children", lost in the countryside from their early years, and enabled, by exceptionally fortunate circumstances, to continue living and developing outside the influence of any social environment. But it seems clear enough from past accounts that most of these children were congenital defectives, and that their imbecility was the cause of their initial abandonment, and not, as might sometimes be insisted, the result.[1]

Recent observations support this view. The so-called 'wolf-children' found in India never reached a normal level. One of them never learned to speak, even as an adult. Of two children discovered together some twenty years ago, the younger remained unable to speak, while the elder lived till six years of age, but had the mental age of a $2\frac{1}{2}$-year-old, and a vocabulary of scarcely one hundred words.[2] A South African 'baboon-boy', discovered in 1903 when probably twelve to fourteen years old, was considered a congenital idiot in a 1939 account.[3] It must be added that as often as not the circumstances of discovery are unreliable.

Moreover, these examples must be dismissed for a general reason which brings us directly to the heart of the problems to be discussed in this Introduction. As early as 1811, Blumenbach noted in a study of one of these children, 'Wild Peter', that nothing should be expected of such phenomena, for he made the important observation that if man is a domesticated animal he is the only one who has domesticated himself.[4] While it can be anticipated that, if lost or isolated, a domesticated animal, such as a cat, dog, or farm animal, will return to the natural behaviour of the species prior to the outside interference of domestication, such cannot be expected of man, since the species has no natural behaviour to which an isolated individual might retrogress. A bee, Voltaire said, having roamed far from the hive, which it can no longer find, is lost, but for all that, has not become more wild. Whether the product of chance or experimentation, these 'wild children' may be cultural monstrosities, but under no circumstances can they provide reliable evidence of an earlier state.

Man himself, therefore, cannot be expected to exemplify types of precultural behaviour. Is a reverse approach then possible, of trying to find among the superior levels of animals, attitudes and manifestations recognizable as the preliminary indications and outline of culture? Superficially, the contrast between human and animal behaviour provides the most striking illustration of the difference between culture and nature. If the transition does exist, it is not at the level of the so-called animal societies, as encountered among certain insects, for the unmistakable attributes of nature, instinct, the anatomical features necessary to it, and the hereditary transmission of forms of behaviour essential to the survival of both the individual and the species, seem united nowhere better than here. In these collective structures there is not even a suspicion of what might be called the universal cultural model, i.e., social institutions and systematized aesthetic, moral, or religious values. If any incipient stage to these human activities is to be discovered, attention must be directed to the other end of the animal scale, to the superior mammals, and more especially the anthropoid apes.

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[1] McGraw, 1944.

[1] Itard, 1962; von Feuerbach, 1833.

[2] Ferris, 1902; Squires, 1927, p. 313; Kellogg, 1931, pp. 508–9; Kellogg, 1934, p. 149. See also on this polemic, Singh and Zingg, 1942; Gesell, 1940.

[3] Foley, 1940, pp. 128–33; Zingg, 1940, pp. 455–62.

[4] Blumenbach, 1865, p. 339.

But research on the great apes during the last thirty years has been particularly discouraging in this respect. This is not to say that the basic components of the universal cultural model are entirely absent. With infinite trouble certain subjects can be made to articulate several monosyllables and disyllables but they never attach any meaning to them. To a certain extent the chimpanzee can use elementary tools and on occasions improvise with them.[1] Temporary solidary and subordinate relationships can appear or disappear within a given group, and certain remarkable attitudes might be recognized as suggesting unselfish forms of activity or contemplation. Recent experiments have established the existence, among chimpanzees, of certain rudimentary forms of symbolic thought. What is remarkable is that it is especially feelings, such as religious fear and the ambiguity of the sacred, normally associated with the noblest part of human nature, that are the most easily identified among the anthropoids.[2] But if these phenomena all plead by their presence, their paucity is even more eloquent and in quite a different way. The rudimentary outline they provide is less striking than the apparently utter impossibility, confirmed by all the specialists, of developing these hints beyond their most primitive expression. Consequently, the gap which a thousand ingenious observations were expected to close has in reality merely shifted, whereby it appears even more insuperable. When it has been shown that there is no anatomical obstacle to a monkey's articulating the sounds of speech, or even to his stringing syllables together, one can only be further impressed by the irremediable lack of language and the total incapacity to treat sounds uttered or heard as signs. The same must be acknowledged in other fields. This explains the pessimistic conclusion of an attentive observer, resigned after years of study and experimentation, to see the chimpanzee as 'a being hardened in the narrow circle of his own innate imperfections, "regressive" in comparison with man, neither desirous nor capable of tackling the path of progress'.[3]

But even the failures in the face of exact testing are not so convincing as the more general finding, which goes much more deeply into the problem, that general conclusions cannot be drawn from experiment. The social life of monkeys does not lend itself to the formulation of any norm. Whether faced by male or female, the living or the dead, the young or the old, a relative or a stranger, the monkey's behaviour is surprisingly changeable. Not only is the behaviour of a single subject inconsistent, but there is no regular pattern to

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[1] Guillaume and Meyerson, 1930, pp. 92–7; 1931, pp. 481–555; 1934, pp. 497–554; 1938, pp. 425–48.

[2] Köhler, 1928, appendix.

[3] Kohts, 1937, p. 531; 1928, pp. 255–75; 1930, pp. 412–47.

be discerned in collective behaviour. forms of activity, the external or internal stimulus, and rough adjustments, as influenced by successes and failures, seem to provide all the elements necessary to the solution of problems of interpretation. These uncertainties appear in the study of hierarchical relationships within the one group of vertebrates – a study, nevertheless, which can establish an order of subordination for the animals in their relations with one another. This order is remarkably stable, since the one animal retains the dominant position for anything up to a year. Yet frequent irregularities make systematization impossible. A fowl, subordinate to two others in the middle of the hierarchical table, nevertheless attacks the bird with the higher rank. Triangular relationships are observed in which A dominates B, B dominates C, and C dominates A, while all three dominate the rest of the group.[1]

It is the same with the relationships and individual tastes of anthropoid apes, among which such irregularities are even more pronounced: 'Primates are much more variable in their food preferences than rats, pigeons, and hens.'[2] In addition, the sex life of these anthropoids provides a 'picture that almost covers the entire field of sexual behaviour in man . . . all of the "normal" elements . . . also . . . the more conspicuous of the elements usually designated as "abnormal" in that they run up against social conventions.[3] The orang-utan, gorilla and chimpanzee especially resemble man in this individualization of behaviour.'[4]

Malinowski, then, is wrong when he writes that all the factors which define the sexual behaviour of male anthropoids 'are common to all individuals of the species. They work with such uniformity that for each animal species one set of data and only one has to be given . . . The variations . . . are so small and irrelevant that the zoologist ignores them and is fully justified in in doing so.'[5]

What then is the real state of affairs? Polyandry seems to prevail among the howler monkeys of Panama, since the proportion of females to males is 28 to 72. In fact, a female in heat has been observed to have promiscuous relations with several males, but without preferences, or an order of priority, or lasting bonds being definable.[6] The gibbons of the Siam forests live in relatively stable monogamous families, but sexual relations take place without discrimination between members of the same family group, or with an individual belonging to another group, thus proving, it could be said, the native belief that gibbons are the reincarnations of unhappy lovers.[7] Monogamy and polygamy exist side by side among the rhesus monkeys,[8] and while bands of wild chimpanzees observed in Africa vary from four to fourteen in number the question of their conjugal system remains unanswered.

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[1] Allee, 1942.
[2] Maslow, 1933, p. 196.
[3] Miller, 1931, p. 392.
[4] Yerkes, 1927, p. 181; Yerkes and Elder, 1936, p. 39.
[5] Malinowski, 1927, p. 194.
[6] Carpenter, 1934, p. 128.
[7] ibid. 1940, p. 19
[8] ibid. 1942.
[9] Nissen, 1931, p. 73.

It seems as if the great apes, having broken away from a specific pattern of behaviour, were unable to re-establish a norm on any new plane. The clear and precise instinctive behaviour of most mammals is lost to them, but the difference is purely negative and the field that nature has abandoned remains unoccupied.

This absence of rules seems to provide the surest criterion for distinguishing a natural from a cultural process. Nowhere is this suggested more than in the contrast between the attitude of the child, even when very young, whose every problem is ruled by clear distinctions, sometimes clearer and more imperative than for the adult, and the relationships among members of a simian group, which are left entirely to chance and accident and in which the behaviour of an individual subject today teaches nothing about his congener's behaviour, nor guarantees anything about his own behaviour, tomorrow. In fact, a vicious circle develops in seeking in nature for the origin of institutional rules which presuppose, or rather, are culture, and whose establishment within a group without the aid of language is difficult to imagine. Strictly speaking, there is consistency and regularity in nature as in culture, but these features appear in nature precisely where in culture they are weakest, and vice versa. In nature this is the field of biological heredity, and in culture, that of external tradition. An illusory continuity between the two orders cannot be asked to account for points of contrast.

No empirical analysis, then, can determine the point of transition between natural and cultural facts, nor how they are connected. The foregoing discussion has not merely brought us to this negative result, but has provided the most valid criterion of social attitudes, viz., the presence or absence of rules in patterns of behaviour removed from instinctive determination. Wherever there are rules we know for certain that the cultural stage has been reached. Likewise, it is easy to recognize universality as the criterion of nature, for what is constant in man falls necessarily beyond the scope of customs, techniques and institutions whereby his groups are differentiated and contrasted. Failing a real analysis, the double criterion of norm and universality provides the principle for an ideal analysis which, at least in certain cases and within certain limits, may allow the natural to be isolated from the cultural elements which are involved in more complex syntheses. Let us suppose then that everything universal in man relates to the natural order, and is characterized by spontaneity, and that everything subject to a norm is cultural and is both relative and particular. We are then confronted with a fact, or rather, a group of facts, which, in the light of previous definitions, are not far removed from a scandal: we refer to that complex group of beliefs, customs, conditions and institutions described succinctly as the prohibition of incest, which presents, without the slightest ambiguity, and inseparably combines, the two characteristics in which we recognize the conflicting features of two mutually exclusive orders.[1] It constitutes a rule, but a rule which, alone among all the social rules, possesses at the same time a universal character. That the prohibition of incest constitutes a rule need scarcely be shown. It is sufficient to recall that the prohibition of marriage between close relatives may vary in its field of application according to what each group defines as a close relative, but, sanctioned by no doubt variable penalties, ranging from immediate execution of the guilty parties to widespread reprobation, sometimes merely ridicule, this prohibition is nevertheless to be found in all social groups.

In fact, the famous exceptions and their small number which traditional sociology is often content to emphasize cannot be called upon here, for every society is an exception to the incest prohibition when seen by another society with a stricter rule. This being so, it is appalling to think how many exceptions a Paviotso Indian would record. When reference is made to the three classical exceptions, Egypt, Peru and Hawaii, and to several others which must be added (Azande, Madagascar, Burma, etc.), it must not be overlooked that these systems are exceptions only in comparison with our own, in that their prohibitions cover a more limited area. But the idea of exception is completely relative, with a very different meaning for an Australian aborigine, a Thongan or an Eskimo.

It is not so much, then, whether some groups allow marriages that others prohibit, but whether there are any groups in which no type of marriage whatever is prohibited. The answer must be completely in the negative, for two reasons: firstly, because marriage is never allowed between all near relatives, but only between certain categories (half-sister, to the exclusion of sister, sister to the exclusion of mother, etc.); secondly, because these consanguineous marriages are either temporary and ritualistic, or, where permanent and official, nevertheless remain the privilege of a very limited social category. Thus in Madagascar, the mother, the sister, and sometimes also the cousin, are prohibited spouses for the common people, while for the great chiefs and kings, only the mother, but the mother nevertheless, is *fady* or 'prohibited'. But there is so little 'exception' to the prohibition of incest that the native conscience is very sensitive about it. When a household is sterile, an incestuous relationship, although unknown, is taken for granted, and prescribed expiatory ceremonies are celebrated automatically.[1]

Ancient Egypt is more disturbing since recent discoveries[2] suggest that consanguineous marriage, particularly between brother and sister, was perhaps a custom which extended to the petty officials and artisans, and was not, as formerly believed,[3] limited to the reigning caste and to the later dynasties. But as regards incest, there is no absolute exception. One day my eminent colleague, Ralph Linton, told me that in the genealogy of a Samoan

[1] Dubois, 1938, pp. 876–9. [2] Murray, 1934, p. 282.

[3] Amelineau, 1895, pp. 72–3; Flinders-Petrie, 1923, p. 110.

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[1] 'If ten ethnologists were asked to indicate one universal human institution, probably nine would choose the prohibition of incest. Several have already formally designated it as the only universal institution' (cf. Kroeber, 1939, p. 448).

of eight consecutive marriages between brother and sister, only one involved a younger sister, and native opinion condemned it as immoral. Marriage between brother and older sister appears then as a concession to the law of primogeniture, and it does not exclude the prohibition of incest, since over and above the mother and daughter, the younger sister remains prohibited as a spouse, or at least not viewed with favour. Now one of the rare texts we possess in the social organization of Ancient Egypt suggests a similar interpretation. It is the Bulak Papyrus No. 5, which tells the story of a king's daughter who wished to marry her older brother, and her mother remarked, 'If I have no more children after those two, is it not the law for them to marry?'[1] Here also there seems to be a form of prohibition approving marriage with the older sister, but not with the younger. As will be seen later the scope of our interpretation is widened by ancient Japanese texts which describe incest as a union with the younger, to the exclusion of the older sister. The rule of universality, even in these perhaps extreme cases, is no less apparent than the normative character of the institution.

Here therefore is a phenomenon which has the distinctive characteristics both of nature and of its theoretical contradiction, culture. The prohibition of incest has the universality of bent and instinct, and the coercive character of law and institution. Where then does it come from, and what is its place and significance? Inevitably extending beyond the historical and geographical limits of culture, and co-extensive with the biological species, the prohibition of incest, however, through social prohibition, doubles the spontaneous action of the natural forces with which its own features contrast, although itself identical to these forms in field of application. As such, the prohibition of incest presents a formidable mystery to sociological thought. Few social prescriptions in our society have so kept that aura of respectful fear which clings to sacred objects. Significantly, as must be commented upon and explained later, incest proper, and its metaphorical form as the violation of a minor (by someone 'old enough to be her father', as the expression goes), even combines in some countries with its direct opposite, inter-racial sexual relations, an extreme form of exogamy, as the two most powerful inducements to horror and collective vengeance. But not only does this aura of magical fear define the climate in which this institution is evolving even yet in modern society, but on the theoretical plane as well, it envelops those debates with which sociology, since its inception, has, with an ambiguous tenacity, been concerned: 'The famous question of the prohibition of incest,' writes Lévy-Bruhl, 'this *vexata quaestio*, whose solution has been so sought after by ethnographers and sociologists, has none. There is no purpose in asking it. In the societies just discussed, it is useless wondering why incest is forbidden. The prohibition does not exist . . . There is no consideration given to prohibiting it. It is something that does not occur, or, if by some impossibility it does occur, it is unparalleled, a *monstrum*, a transgression

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[1] Maspero, 1889, p. 171.

spreading autophagy or fratricide? There is no more nor less reason for them to prohibit incest.'[1]

To find so ill at ease a writer who otherwise did not falter at the boldest hypotheses is not surprising if it is borne in mind that almost all sociologists exhibit the same repugnance and timidity in the face of this problem.

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[1] Lévy-Bruhl, 1931, p. 247.