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The Elementary
Structures of Kinship

(*Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté*)

Revised Edition

Translated from the French

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BEACON PRESS
BOSTON



CHAPTER II

The Problem of Incest

I

The problem of the prohibition of incest displays all the ambiguity which, on a different plane, undoubtedly accounts for the sacredness of the prohibition itself. This rule is at once social, in that it is a rule, and pre-social, in its universality and the type of relationships upon which it imposes its norm. Man's sexual life is itself external to the group, firstly, in being the highest expression of his animal nature, and the most significant survival of instinct, and secondly, in that its ends are to satisfy individual desires, which, as is known, hold little respect for social conventions, and specific tendencies, which, although in another sense, also go beyond society's own ends. However, if the regulation of relationships between the sexes represents an overflow of culture into nature, in another way sexual life is one beginning of social life in nature, for the sexual is man's only instinct requiring the stimulation of another person. This point must be taken up later. That it should provide a transition, in itself natural, between nature and culture, would be inconceivable, but it does give one reason why the change can and must necessarily take place in the field of sexual life above any other. It is a rule which embraces that which in society is most foreign to it, but also a social rule which retains what in nature is most likely to go beyond it. The incest prohibition is at once on the threshold of culture, in culture, and in one sense, as we shall try to show, culture itself. Let it suffice for the moment to note the inherent duality to which it owes its ambiguous and equivocal character. Rather than accounting for this ambiguity, sociologists have been almost exclusively concerned with reducing it. Their attempts fall into three principal types, which we shall distinguish and discuss here only in their essential features.

II

Following the popular belief of many societies, including our own, the first type of explanation attempts to maintain the dual character of the prohibition by dividing it into two distinct phases. For Lewis H. Morgan and Sir Henry Maine,¹ for example, the origin of the incest prohibition is really

¹ Maine, 1886, p. 228.

both natural and social, but in the sense that it results from a social reflection upon a natural phenomenon. The incest prohibition is taken to be a protective measure, shielding the species from the disastrous results of consanguineous marriages. This theory is remarkable in that it is required by its very statement to extend to all human societies, even to the most primitive, which in other matters give no indication of any such eugenic second-sight, the sensational privilege of knowing the alleged consequences of endogamous unions. This justification for the prohibition of incest is of recent origin, appearing nowhere in our society before the sixteenth century. Following the general pattern of his *Moralia* and impartially listing all possibilities without showing a preference for any one of them, Plutarch proposes three hypotheses, all sociological in nature, none referring to eventual defects in the descendants. Only Gregory the Great¹ can be quoted to the contrary, but his work does not seem to have had any influence on the thought of contemporaries or on later commentators.²

It is true that various monstrosities are threatened to the descendants of incestuous parents in the folklore of various primitive peoples, notably the Australian aborigines. But apart from the fact that this Australian aboriginal taboo is probably the least concerned with biological proximity (it permits unions, such as grand-uncle with grand-niece, the effects of which cannot be particularly favourable), it is sufficient to note that such punishments are, in primitive tradition, commonly expected for all those who break rules, and are in no way especially confined to reproduction. The extent to which hasty observations should be distrusted is well brought out in Jochelson's remarks:

'These Yakut told me that they had observed that children born from consanguineous marriages are generally unhealthy. Thus, my interpreter, Dolganoff, told me that it had been observed among the Yûkaghir that in case of marriages between cousins - which are contracted regardless of the custom of *n'exi'yini* . . . - the children die, or the parents themselves are subject to disease which frequently result in death.'³

So much for natural sanctions. As for social sanctions, they are based so little upon physiological considerations that among the Kenyah and Kayan of Borneo, who condemn marriage with mother, sister, daughter, father's sister or mother's sister, and with brother's daughter or sister's daughter, 'in the case of those women who stand to him in any of these relations in virtue of adoption, the prohibitions and severe penalties are if possible even more strictly enforced'.⁴

Furthermore, it must be remembered that since the end of the paleolithic

¹ Muller, 1913, pp. 294-5.

² Cooper, 1932.

³ Jochelson, 1910-26, p. 80. The Nuer call incest 'syphilis' because they see in one the punishment of the other (Evans-Pritchard, 1935, p. 11).

⁴ Hose and McDougall, 1912, vol. I, p. 73. These authors remark that this observation demonstrates the *arbitrariness* of the rules concerning incest, *ibid.* vol. II, p. 197.

era man has increasingly perfected cultivated or domesticated species through the use of endogamous reproductive methods. If it is supposed that man was conscious of the results of such methods, and also that he had judged the matter rationally, what explanation could be given as to how, in the field of human relationships, he reached conclusions running counter to those which his everyday experience in the animal and vegetable kingdoms continually served to prove, and upon which his very well-being depended? Moreover, if primitive man had been conscious of such considerations, why, instead of setting prohibitions upon himself, did he not turn to prescriptions whose experimental results had, at least in certain cases, shown beneficial effects? Not only did he not do so, but we ourselves still recoil from any such undertaking, and it has been only in recent social theories, denounced moreover as irrational, that the planned reproduction of man has been recommended. The positive prescriptions most commonly encountered in primitive societies, in association with the prohibition of incest, are those which tend to increase the number of marriages between cross-cousins (the respective descendants of a brother and a sister), and which, in this way, place identical forms of marriage, from the point of view of proximity, at the two extreme poles of social regulation: the marriage of parallel cousins (descended from two brothers or two sisters) is likened to fraternal incest, and cross-cousin marriage, despite the very close degree of consanguinity between the spouses, is regarded as an ideal.

Nevertheless, it is striking to see how contemporary thought is loth to abandon the idea that the prohibition of relations between immediate consanguines or collaterals is justified for eugenic reasons, doubtless because, as we have experienced in the last ten years, it is in the field of biological concepts that we find the last traces of deductive reasoning still prevalent in modern thought. A particularly significant example comes from a writer whose scientific work has contributed most highly in dispelling the prejudices surrounding consanguineous unions. East, namely, has shown, in some admirable work on the reproduction of maize, that the creation of an endogamous line results first in a period of fluctuations during which the type is subject to extreme variations, undoubtedly because of the resurgence of recessive characteristics which are usually hidden. Then the variabilities gradually diminish, ending in a constant and invariable type. In a work destined for a wider audience, the author, having recapitulated these results, draws the conclusion that popular beliefs about marriages between near relatives are largely justified, laboratory work merely confirming the prejudices of folklore, for, as one old writer said, 'Superstition is often awake when reezon iz asleep'.¹ This is so because 'objectionable recessive traits are common in the human race as they are in maize'.² But, except for mutations, this troublesome reappearance of recessive characteristics is explicable only where work is being done on previously selected types, the characteristics which reappear

¹ East, 1938, p. 156.

² *loc. cit.*

being precisely those that the age-long effort of the stock-breeder has successfully eliminated. With man, this situation is not to be found, since, as we have just seen, the exogamy practised in human societies is a blind exogamy. But more especially East's work has indirectly established that these supposed dangers would never have appeared if mankind had been endogamous from the beginning. If this were so, human races would probably be as constant and as definitively fixed as the endogamous lines of maize after the eliminations of variable factors. The temporary danger of endogamous unions, supposing such a danger to exist, obviously stems from an exogamous or pangenic tradition, but it cannot be the cause of this tradition.

As a matter of fact, consanguineous marriages merely match up genes of the same type, while a system having the law of probability as its only determinant for the union of the sexes (Dahlberg's 'amphimixis') would mix them haphazardly. But the nature of genes and their individual characteristics remain the same in both cases. Consanguineous unions need only be interrupted for the general composition of the population to revert to what might be expected on a basis of 'amphimixis'. Consanguineous marriages contracted long before therefore have no influence; they affect only the generations immediately following. But this influence is itself a function of the absolute dimensions of the group. In any given population, a state of equilibrium can always be defined in which the frequency of consanguineous marriage is equal to the probability of such marriages in an 'amphimixis' system. If the population goes beyond this state of equilibrium, the frequency of consanguineous marriages remaining the same, then the number of carriers of recessive characteristics will increase: 'The enlargement of the isolate brings with it an increase of heterozygosity at the expense of homozygosity'.¹ If the population falls below the state of equilibrium, the frequency of consanguineous marriages remaining 'normal' in comparison, the recessive characteristics are lowered at a progressive rate of 0.0572 per cent in a population of 500 with two children per family, and of 0.1697 per cent if the same population falls to 200. Dahlberg can thus conclude that 'as far as heredity is concerned these inhibitions do not seem to be justified'² from the standpoint of the theory of heredity.

It is true that mutations determining the appearance of a recessive defect are more dangerous in small than in large populations. In fact, the chances of a transition to homozygosity are greater in small populations. However, this same rapid and complete transition to homozygosity will sooner or later ensure the elimination of the dreaded characteristic. Consequently, in a small, stable, endogamous population, as exemplified by many primitive societies, the only risk in marriages between consanguines arises from the appearance of new mutations, a risk that can be calculated since the rate of appearance is known. But the chances of finding a recessive heterozygote within the group are slimmer than would attend marriage with a stranger.

¹ Dahlberg, 1937-8, p. 224.

² *ibid.* 1929, p. 454.

Even in connection with recessive characteristics arising from mutation within a given population, Dahlberg estimates that the rôle of consanguineous marriages in the production of homozygotes is very slight, because for every homozygote from a consanguineous marriage, there are an enormous number of heterozygotes which, if the population is sufficiently small, will necessarily reproduce among themselves. Hence, in a population of eighty, the prohibition of marriage between near relatives, including first cousins, would only reduce the carriers of rare recessive characteristics by 10 per cent to 15 per cent.¹ These considerations are important since they introduce the quantitative notion of population size. The economic systems of some primitive or archaic societies severely limit population size, and it is precisely for a population of such a size that the regulation of consanguineous marriages can have only negligible genetic consequences. Without fully attacking the problem to which modern theoreticians can only hazard provisional and highly varied solutions,² it can therefore be seen that primitive mankind was not in a demographic position which would even have permitted him to ascertain the facts of the matter.

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The second type of explanation tends to do away with one of the terms of the anonymity between the natural and social characteristics of this institution. For a large group of sociologists and psychologists, represented principally by Westermarck and Havelock Ellis, the prohibition of incest is no more than the social projection or reflection of natural feelings or tendencies, which can be entirely expanded by human nature. Quite important variations may be noted among those supporting this position, some deriving the horror of incest, the postulated origin of the prohibition, from the physiological nature of man, and others rather from his psychic tendencies. As a matter of fact, the old preconception of the 'voice of blood' has merely been revived, and here expressed more negatively than positively. This alleged horror of incest can only be manifested when a kinship relationship is supposedly known, or later established, between the guilty parties, and this sufficiently substantiates that its source cannot be instinctive. There remains the interpretation that this horror is based upon actual attraction, or the lack of it. Thus Havelock Ellis explains the repugnance for incest by the negative effect of daily habits upon erotic excitability, while Westermarck adopts a similar but more strictly psychological interpretation.³

¹ Dahlberg, 1937-8, p. 220.

² Baur, Fischer and Lenz, 1927; Dahlberg, 1930-1, pp. 83-96; Hogben, 1931; Haldane, 1938; cf. also ch. VIII below.

³ Havelock Ellis, 1906; Westermarck, 1891, vol. I, p. 20 et seq. and vol. II, p. 207 et seq. Westermarck's position provides curious variations. Moving away from the Havelock Ellis type of interpretation based on instinct, in the first edition of his *The History of Human Marriage*, he was to develop towards a more psychological conception, which is apparent in the second edition. However, towards the end of his life (Westermarck, 1934a, pp. 22-40), reacting against B. Z. Seligman and Malinowski, he returned not only to his 1891 position

The objection might be raised that these writers are confusing two forms of familiarization, the first of which develops between two individuals who are sexually united, generally bringing about a lessening of desire, and which a modern biologist declares, 'is one of the disturbing elements in every social system'.¹ The second prevails among near relatives and is thought to have the same result, although sexual activity, which plays the determining rôle in the first case, is obviously absent in the second. The proposed interpretation therefore begs the question, for without experimental verification there is no knowing whether the alleged observation on which it rests, viz., that sexual desire is less frequent among near relatives, is to be explained either by these relatives being physically or psychologically accustomed to one another, or as a consequence of the taboos which constitute the prohibition. Therefore, the observation is assumed at the very moment of its alleged explanation.

There is nothing more dubious than this alleged instinctive repugnance, for although prohibited by law and morals, incest does exist and is no doubt even more frequent by far than a collective conspiracy of silence would lead us to believe. To explain the theoretical universality of the rule by the universality of the sentiment or tendency is to open up a new problem, for in no conceivable way is this supposedly universal fact universal. Hence, if all the numerous exceptions were treated as perversions or anomalies, it would remain to be defined in what these anomalies consist, on the only level to which they might be referred without tautology, i.e., the physiological, which would undoubtedly be all the more difficult now that the attitude taken by an important modern school towards this problem runs completely counter to Havelock Ellis and Westermarck. Psychoanalysis, namely, finds a universal phenomenon not in the repugnance towards incestuous relationships, but on the contrary in the pursuit of such relationships.

Nor is it certain that familiarity is always regarded as being fatal to marriage. Many societies judge otherwise. 'The desire for a wife begins with the sister', an Azande proverb says. The Hehe justify their custom of cross-cousin marriage by the long intimacy between the future spouses, which is seen by them as the true cause of sentimental and sexual attraction.² And it is the very same type of relationship which Westermarck and Havelock Ellis regarded as the origin of the horror of incest that the Chukchee strive to make the model of exogamous marriage:

'Most of the marriages between relatives (that is, cousins) are concluded at a tender age, sometimes when the bridegroom and the bride are still infants. The marriage ritual is performed, and the children grow up,

¹ Miller, 1931, p. 398. This innate tendency of man to become tired of his sexual partner is common to him and to the higher apes. *ibid.* p. 386.

² Brown, 1934, p. 33.

but even to the belief that the ultimate origin for the prohibition was to be sought in a vague awareness of the harmful consequences of consanguineous unions (Westermarck, 1934b, p. 53 et seq.).

playing together. When a little older, they tend the herd together. Of course, the ties between them grow to be very strong, often stronger even than death: when one dies, the other also dies from grief, or commits suicide.

'Similar to these marriages are those between the members of families friendly to each other, though not connected by ties of blood. Sometimes such families agree to a marriage between their children even before the children are born.'¹

Even among the Indians of the Thompson River in British Columbia, where marriage between second cousins is treated and derided as incestuous, this hostility to even distant consanguineous marriages does not prevent men from being betrothed to girls twenty years younger than themselves.² Facts such as these could be multiplied indefinitely.

But there is an infinitely more serious confusion underlying the attitude under discussion. Why, if it resulted from congenial physiological and psychological tendencies, should the horror of incest be expressed as a prohibition so solemn and so essential as to be found enveloped by the same aura of sacredness in every human society? There is no point in forbidding what would not happen if it were not forbidden. Two answers can be given to this argument. The first is that the prohibition is only meant for certain exceptional cases in which nature has failed. But what proportion is there between the exceptions, which *ex hypothesi* must be extremely rare, and the importance of the regulations directed against them? In particular, if these errings were not regarded as harmful and dangerous, why should they be prohibited, let alone punished, with such extreme severity in many societies? The origin of the prohibition of incest must be sought in the existence, or in the assumed existence, of this danger for the group, the individuals concerned, or their descendants. We are brought back inevitably to the previous explanation. It is true that a comparison could be made with suicide, against which multiple sanctions are levelled by morality and often the law itself, even though self-preservation is a natural tendency in all living beings. But the analogy between incest and suicide is only apparent, for if society prohibits them both this prohibition applies in the first case to a natural phenomenon found commonly among animals, and in the second, to a phenomenon which is completely foreign to animal life and which should be regarded as a function of social life. Society expressly forbids only that which society brings about. Next, and in particular, society condemns suicide because it considers it harmful to its interests, and not because it constitutes the denial of a congenial tendency. A better proof is that, while every society prohibits incest, there is none which does not make room for suicide and does not recognize it as legitimate in certain circumstances or for certain motives when the individual attitude happens to coincide with some social interest. Accord-

¹ Bogoras, 1904-9, p. 577.

² Teit, 1900, pp. 321, 325.

ingly, the reasons why incest is prejudicial to the social order still remain to be discovered.

IV

The third type of explanation and the one just discussed have this in common, that they both claim to do away with one of the terms of the antinomy. In this way, they both contrast with the first type of explanation, which keeps both terms while trying to dissociate them. However, while advocates of the second type of explanation choose to reduce the prohibition of incest to some instinctive psychological or physiological phenomenon, the third group adopts the similar but contrary position of seeing it as a rule whose origin is purely social, its expression in biological terms being accidental and of minor importance. Because this last point of view is subject to more variations among its authors it must be set out in a little more detail than the others.

Considered as a social institution, the prohibition of incest has two different aspects. Sometimes it is only a prohibition of sexual union between close consanguines or collaterals, while at others this form of the prohibition, based as it is upon a definite biological criterion, is only one aspect of a broader system which is apparently without any biological basis. In many societies the rule of exogamy prohibits marriage between social categories which include near relatives, but, along with them, a considerable number of individuals for whom it is impossible to establish all but the most distant consanguineous or collateral relationships. In this case, it is an apparent caprice of the nomenclature to assimilate individuals who fall under the prohibition to biological relatives.

Advocates of the third type of interpretation give their particular attention to the broad and social form of the incest prohibition. But let us discard, without further delay, Morgan and Frazer's suggestions that exogamous systems incorporate methods for preventing incestuous unions, which are actually only a small fraction of the unions that these systems do prohibit. In fact, as is proved by societies with neither clans nor moieties, the same result could be achieved without cumbersome rules of exogamy. If this first hypothesis provides a highly unsatisfactory explanation for exogamy, it provides no explanation at all for the prohibition of incest. Much more important from our point of view are theories giving a sociological interpretation of exogamy, or else leaving open the possibility that the incest prohibition may have derived from exogamy, or categorically affirming the existence of such a derivation.

In the first group are included the ideas of McLennan, Spencer and Lubbock,¹ and in the second those of Durkheim. McLennan and Spencer saw exogamous practices as the fixing by custom of the habits of warrior tribes among whom capture was the normal means of obtaining wives. Lubbock outlined an evolutionary transition from endogamous group marriage to

¹ McLennan, 1865; Spencer, 1882-96; Lubbock, 1870, p. 83 et seq.; Lubbock, 1911.

exogamous marriage by capture. As opposed to wives gained endogamously, wives acquired by capture would have the status of individual possessions, and only they, for this reason, would provide the prototype for modern individual marriage. All these ideas can be discarded very simply, since, if they do not establish any connection between exogamy and the prohibition of incest, they fall outside our study, and if, on the contrary, they do offer applicable solutions not only to the rules of exogamy but to that particular form of exogamy which is the prohibition of incest, they are still completely unacceptable, for they would then claim to derive a general law, the prohibition of incest, from some special and often sporadic phenomenon, no doubt associated with certain societies but having no possible universality. They have this and several other methodological defects in common with Durkheim's theory, which is the most conscientious and systematic interpretation from purely social causes.

The hypothesis advanced by Durkheim in the important work which inaugurated the *Année sociologique*¹ has three characteristics. Firstly, it is based upon the universalization of facts observed in a limited group of societies; secondly, it makes the prohibition of incest a distant consequence of rules of exogamy; and, thirdly, these rules of exogamy are interpreted by reference to phenomena of a different order. Durkheim believed that the observation of Australian societies, which were regarded as illustrating a primitive type of organization formerly common to every human society, would provide the solution to the problem of incest. As is well known the religious life of these societies is dominated by beliefs affirming an identity of substance between the clan and the eponymous totem. The belief in this substantial identity explains the special prohibitions imposed upon blood, which is considered as the sacred symbol and the origin of the magico-biological community uniting members of the one clan. This fear of clan blood is particularly intense as regards menstrual blood, and it explains why, in most primitive societies, women are subject, because of their menstrual periods, and then in a more general way, to magical beliefs and special prohibitions. Consequently, the prohibitions relating to women and their segregation, such as in the rule of exogamy, would only be the distant repercussions of religious beliefs which originally did not distinguish between the sexes, but which changed with the link which became established in men's minds between blood and the female sex. In the final analysis, if the rule of exogamy prevents a man contracting a marriage within his own clan, it is because otherwise he would risk coming in contact with that blood which is the visible sign and substantial expression of his kinship with his totem. Since the totem of others is unaffected by prohibitions and does not contain any magical force, there is no such danger for members of another clan, and accordingly there arose the double rule of interclan marriage and the prohibition of marriage within the clan. As conceived nowadays, the prohibition of incest is

¹ Durkheim, 1898.

only a vestige or relic of that complex collection of beliefs and prohibitions, with roots extending into a magico-religious system where ultimately the explanation lies. Consequently, by proceeding analytically, we see that for Durkheim the prohibition of incest is a remnant of exogamy, that this exogamy is explicable in terms of the special prohibitions relating to women, that these prohibitions originate in the fear of menstrual blood, that this fear is only a particular case of the general fear of blood, and finally, that this fear merely expresses certain feelings deriving from the belief in the constancy of the individual clan member and his totem.

The strength of this interpretation proceeds from its capacity to systematize widely varying phenomena, which, when taken separately, are seemingly very difficult to comprehend. Its weakness lies in the fact that the connexions so established are fragile and arbitrary. Let us leave aside the prejudicial objection drawn from the non-universality of totemic beliefs. In fact, Durkheim postulates this universality, and it is highly probable he would maintain his position, in view of contemporary observations which in no way prove his theory, but which cannot give reasons to invalidate it either. But even accepting his hypothesis for the moment, we find no logical link between the various stages allowing them to be deduced from the initial postulate. The relationship linking each of the stages with its predecessor is arbitrary, and there is no *a priori* proof either for or against its existence. Take first the belief in totemic substantiality. We know that this belief poses no obstacle to the eating of the totem, but merely confers some ceremonial significance upon this eating. Marriage and, in very many societies, the sexual act itself have a ceremonial and ritualistic significance in no way incompatible with the claim that they represent a form of totemic communion. Secondly, the horror of blood, especially menstrual blood, is not universal.¹ Young Winnebago Indians visit their mistresses and take advantage of the privacy of the prescribed isolation of these women during their menstrual period.²

On the other hand, where the horror of menstrual blood seems to reach its culminating point, it is by no means obvious that the imourity should have predilections, or limits. The Chaga, a Bantu tribe living on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro, have a patrilineal social organization. However, the instructions lavished upon girls during initiation put them on guard against the general dangers of menstrual blood, and not against the special dangers to which people of the same blood would be exposed. Moreover, it seems to be the mother, and not the father, who runs the gravest danger:

'Do not show it to your mother, for she would die! Do not show it to your age-mates, for there may be a wicked one among them, who will take away the cloth with which you have cleaned yourself, and you will be barren in your marriage. Do not show it to a bad woman, who will take

¹ Van Waters, 1913.

² Radin, 1920, p. 393.

the cloth to place it in the top of her hut . . . with the result that you cannot bear children. Do not throw the cloth on the path or in the bush. A wicked person might do evil things with it. Bury it in the ground. Protect the blood from the gaze of your father, brothers and sisters. It is a sin to let them see it.¹

The Aleutian does not copulate with his wife during her menstrual periods for fear of bad hunting, but if a father sees his daughter during her first menstrual period, she risks becoming blind and mute. The dangers are all for her, not for him.² As a rule, a woman is impure during her menses, not only for her clan relatives, but also for her exogamous husband, and for everyone in general. This point is vital since Durkheim claims to derive exogamy from a combination of customs and prohibitions relating to women, of which it is presumably in some way the consequence, and from difficulties to which it might provide a solution. However, these prohibitions are not lifted when the rule of exogamy is applied, and they are imposed indifferently upon endogamous as well as exogamous members of the group. Moreover, how did the rule of exogamy appear if prejudices relating to menstrual blood were its only source? The prohibition of sexual relations with the wife during her menses would be enough to avoid any risk of pollution. If the rules of exogamy have no other function, they are superfluous and incomprehensible, especially when one considers the innumerable complications which they introduce into group life. If these rules have arisen it is because they satisfy other demands and fulfil other functions.

The sociological interpretations of Durkheim, as well as of McLennan, Spencer and Lubbock, have one basic defect in common. They attempt to establish a universal phenomenon on an historical sequence, which is by no means inconceivable in some particular case but whose episodes are so contingent that the possibility of this sequence being repeated unchanged in every human society must be wholly excluded. In being the most complex, the Durkheimian sequence falls most heavily under this criticism. It is possible to imagine that, in a given society, the origin of some particular institution is to be explained by some highly arbitrary transformations. History provides examples. But history also shows that, according to the society considered, such processes may result in widely differing institutions, and that where analogous institutions have found independent origins in various parts of the world, the historical sequences leading up to their appearances are themselves highly dissimilar. This is what is termed convergence. But if the results of a succession of immutably repeated events were always identical (as in the physical sciences), the conclusion could be reached with assurance that these events are not the reason for the phenomenon's existence but point to a law which alone provides the explanation. Durkheim does not propose any law which might account for the necessary transition in the human mind

¹ Raun, 1939, p. 559.

² Jochnelson, n.d., nos. 34-5.

from the belief in totemic substantiality to the horror of blood, from the horror of blood to the superstitious fear of women, and from this fear to the setting up of exogamous rules. The same criticism can be levelled at Lord Raglan's imaginary reconstructions. However, we have shown that there is nothing more arbitrary than this succession of transitions. Even if there were only these transitions at the origin of the incest prohibition, they would still have permitted other solutions, some of which at least should have eventuated, by the simple law of probabilities. For example, the prohibitions affecting women during their menstrual periods provided a very happy answer to the problem, and a number of societies could have been satisfied with it.

The ambiguity then is more serious than it seemed, bearing not solely or principally upon the validity of the facts involved, but also upon the way in which the prohibition itself must be conceived. McLennan, Lubbock, Spencer and Durkheim see the prohibition of incest, in comparison with current social conditions, as a survival from an altogether heterogeneous past. Consequently they are confronted with a dilemma, namely, if the whole institution is no more than a survival, how can the universality and vitality of the rule be understood, when only occasional formless traces of it might conceivably be brought to light, or does the prohibition of incest correspond in modern society to new and different functions? But this being the case, it must be acknowledged that the historical explanation does not exhaust the problem. Furthermore, might not the origin of the institution be found in those functions which are still current and are verifiable by observation rather than in a vague and hypothetical historical scheme? The problem of the incest prohibition is not so much to seek the different historical configurations for each group as to explain the particular form of the institution in each particular society. The problem is to discover what profound and omnipresent causes could account for the regulation of the relationships between the sexes in every society and age. Any different procedure would commit the same error as that of the linguist who believed that by studying the history of vocabulary he had exhausted the sum total of the phonetic or morphological laws governing the development of language.

v

This disappointing analysis at least explains why contemporary sociology has often preferred to confess itself powerless than to persist in what, because of so many failures, seems to be a closed issue. When it cannot tackle a problem of this importance, instead of admitting that its methods are inadequate and that its principles require revision and readjustment, it declares that the prohibition of incest is outside its field. It was in this manner that, in *Primitive Society*, where so many problems have been reopened, Robert Lowie came to the following conclusion regarding the question with which we are

concerned: 'It is not the function of the ethnologist but of the biologist and psychologist to explain why man has so deep-rooted a horror of incest. . . . The student of society merely has to reckon with the fact that the dread of incest limits the biologically possible number of unions'.¹ Another specialist writes on the same subject: 'It may be that it is impossible to explain or to trace the origin of any human custom that is universal; perhaps the most we can do is to correlate it with certain other conditions',² which amounts to the same thing as Lowie's renunciation. But the prohibition of incest would then clearly be the only case of the natural sciences being asked to account for the existence of a rule sanctioned by human authority.

It is true that, through its universality, the prohibition of incest touches upon nature, i.e., upon biology or psychology, or both. But it is just as certain that in being a rule it is a social phenomenon, and belongs to the world of rules, hence to culture, and to sociology, whose study is culture. In the Appendix to *Primitive Society*, Lowie, having perceived this very clearly, reconsiders the statement just quoted: 'Nevertheless, I do not believe, as formerly, that incest is *instinctively* repugnant to man. . . . We. . . . must consider his aversion towards incest as a former cultural adaptation'.³ The almost general failure of theories gives no justification for the drawing of any other conclusion. Instead, analysis of the causes of this failure should lead to the readjustment of those principles and methods which provide the only possible basis for a viable ethnology. In fact, how could rules be analysed and interpreted if ethnology should confess its helplessness before the one pre-eminent and universal rule which assures culture's hold over nature?

We have shown that each of the early theoreticians who tackled the problem of the incest prohibition held one of the three following points of view. Some put forward the natural and cultural duality of the rule, but could only establish a rationally derived and extrinsic connection between the two aspects. Others have explained the prohibition of incest solely or predominantly if not in terms of natural causes, then as a cultural phenomenon. Each of these three outlooks has been found to lead to impossibilities or contradictions. Consequently, a transition from static analysis to dynamic synthesis is the only path remaining open. The prohibition of incest is in origin neither purely cultural nor purely natural, nor is it a composite mixture of elements from both nature and culture. It is the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished. In one sense, it belongs to nature, for it is a general condition of culture. Consequently, we should not be surprised that its formal characteristic, universality, has been taken from nature. However, in another sense, it is already culture, exercising and imposing its rule on phenomena which initially are not subject to it. We have been led to pose the problem of incest in connection with the relationship between man's biological existence and his social existence, and we have immediately established that the

¹ Lowie, 1961, p. 15.

² Seligman, 1935, p. 75.

³ Lowie, 1935, pp. 446-7.

prohibition could not be ascribed accurately to either one or the other. In the present work we propose to find the solution to this anomaly by showing that the prohibition of incest is the link between them.

But this union is neither static nor arbitrary, and as soon as it comes into being, the whole situation is completely changed. Indeed, it is less a union than a transformation or transition. Before it, culture is still non-existent; with it, nature's sovereignty over man is ended. The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself. It sparks the formation of a new and more complex type of structure and is superimposed upon the simpler structures of physical life through integration, just as these themselves are superimposed upon the simpler structures of animal life. It brings about and is in itself the advent of a new order.