

THE PROBLEM OF INVARIANCE  
IN ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

In Iroquois and Algonquin legend there is the story of a girl who submits in the dark of night to a man she believes to be her brother. Every detail seems to identify him: physical appearance, clothing, a scratched cheek attesting to the heroine's virtue. When formally accused by her, the brother reveals that he has a second self (*Sosie*) or, more precisely, a double; the bond between them is so strong that everything befalling the one is automatically transmitted to the other: the torn garment, the wounded face. In order to convince his incredulous sister, the young man kills his double before her eyes, but with this single blow he pronounces his own death sentence, since their destinies are one.

Now, the victim's mother would like to avenge her son; she is a powerful sorceress and ruler of the owls. There is but one way to avoid her vengeance: the sister must be united with the brother, who will pass himself off as the double whom he has killed. The idea of incest is so

Translated by James H. Labadie.

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inconceivable that the old woman will not suspect the deception. The owls will not be duped, however, and they will denounce the guilty pair, who will nonetheless succeed in escaping.

The European listener has no difficulty in recognizing in this myth a theme rooted in the Oedipus legend: the very precautions taken to avoid incest serve only to render it inevitable; in both cases the *coup de théâtre* results from the identity of characters first presented as distinct beings. Is this mere coincidence—with different causes explaining that in both cases the same motifs are arbitrarily joined—or does the analogy spring from deeper reasons? In effecting the comparison have we not touched on a significant fragment of a whole?

An affirmative answer would constitute the brother-sister incest of the Iroquois myth as a permutation of that between mother and son in the Oedipus legend. The conjecture making the Indian myth inevitable—double personality of the masculine hero—would be a permutation of Oedipus' double identity, presumed to be dead but still living, a condemned child and a triumphant hero. To complete the demonstration we should have to discover in the American myths a transformation of the Sphinx episode, the only element of the Oedipean legend still lacking.

Now in this particular case (and this is why we have chosen it in preference to others) the test would be truly crucial: as Boas was the first to remark, riddles or enigmas are, along with proverbs, a genre almost completely absent among North American Indians. If, therefore, enigmas were to be found in the semantic entourage of American myth, they would be not the effect of chance but rather a proof of their necessity.

In all of North America we know of but two "enigma" situations unquestionably of native origin: among the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest there exists a family of ceremonial buffoons, described in myths as being born of an incestuous relationships, who ask riddles of their spectators. Now it will be recalled that the sorceress of the myth described above, who menaces the life of the hero, is a mistress of the owls. There are also Algonquin myths in which owls, or sometimes their ancestors, ask riddles of the hero under pain of death. Thus in America, too, riddles offer a doubly Oedipean character: on the one hand through incest and on the other hand through the owl, in which we may see an American Sphinx in transposed form.

Thus among peoples separated by history, geography, language, and culture, the same correlation between riddle and incest seems to exist. For the sake of comparison, let us construct a model of the riddle, expressing as best we can its constant properties in the various mythologies, and let us define it from this point of view as a question to which its is postulated that there is no answer. But, without here going into all the possible transformations of this statement, let us reverse the terms with this result: an answer for which there is no question.

This appears to be an utterly meaningless formula. And yet it is striking that there are myths, or fragments of myths, for which this symmetrical and inverse structure constitutes the dramatic mainspring. Time does not permit the recounting of American examples. I shall simply recall the death of Buddha, rendered inevitable when a disciple fails to pose the expected question, and, closer to us, the old myths reworked in the Grail cycle, in which the action is suspended by the hero's timidity in the presence of the magic vessel when he dares not ask "what it is used for."

Do these myths have an independent existence, or must they be considered as one species of a vaster genus of which myths of the Oedipean type merely form another species? Repeating the previous procedure, we shall seek to discover whether, and to what degree, the characteristic elements of one group may be viewed as permutations (which shall here be inversions) of elements characteristic of the other group. And this is indeed what happens: from a hero who abuses sexual intercourse, since he goes so far as to commit incest, we pass to a chaste and abstinent hero; a subtle character, who knows all the answers, yields to an innocent, does not even know how to question. In the American variants of this second type, and in the Grail cycle, the problem to be resolved is that of the *gaste pays*, that is, of summer revoked. Now all the American myths of the first "Oedipean" type are related to an eternal winter, which the hero revokes when he solves the riddles and heralds the approach of summer. To oversimplify greatly, Parsifal appears as an Oedipus in reverse—a hypothesis we would not have dared to envisage had it been necessary to compare a Greek source with a Celtic source but which imposes itself in a North American source, where the two types are present in the same peoples.

The demonstration is not yet concluded. As soon as it is established, within a semantic system, that there is between chastity and "the answer

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without a question" a relationship homologous to that between incestuous intercourse and "the question without an answer," it must also be admitted that these two statements, sociobiological in form, have also a homologous relationship with the two statements in grammatical form. Between the solution of the riddle and the incest there is a relationship, not external and in fact but internal and in reason, and this is why civilizations as different as those of classical antiquity and primitive America may associate them independently from each other. Like the solved riddle, incest brings together terms destined to remain separated: the son unites with the mother, the brother with the sister, as does the answer in successfully joining the question, contrary to every expectation.

In the Oedipus legend the marriage with Jocasta does not arbitrarily follow the victory over the Sphinx. Aside from the fact that myths of the Oedipean type (of which we now offer a precise definition) always assimilate the discovery of incest to the solution of a living riddle personified in the hero, on different levels and in differing languages, their various episodes re-echo each other, and they provide the same demonstration that is found in the old Grail myths in inverted form. The audacious union of masked words, or of blood relatives unknown to each other, engenders rotting and fermentation, unleashes natural forces—remember the Theban plague—while sexual impotence (as well as impotence to plot a proposed dialogue) dries up animal and vegetable fecundity.

To these two prospects which might attract his imagination—those of a summer or a winter equally endless, but one of which would be shameless to the point of corruption, the other pure to the point of sterility—man must resolve to prefer the balance and periodicity of seasonal rhythm. In the natural order this corresponds to the function fulfilled on the social level by exchanging women in marriage, exchanging words in conversation, on condition that both be practiced with the frank intention of communicating, that is, without ruse or perversion and especially without ulterior motive.

We have been content here to sketch the broad lines of a demonstration, to illustrate this problem of invariance which social anthropology is attempting to resolve along with other sciences but which, in social

anthropology, appears as the modern form of a question it has always asked: that of the universality of human nature.

Do we not turn our backs on this human nature when, in order to detect our invariants, we replace the data of experience with models for which we devote ourselves to abstract operations as does the algebraist with his equations? We have occasionally been accused of this. But aside from the fact that the objection is of little weight for the practitioner—who knows with what painstaking fidelity to concrete reality he pays for the liberty he grants himself in taking a broad view for a few brief moments—I should like to mention that, in proceeding this way, the social anthropologist is merely picking up on his own account a forgotten part of the program outlined for him by Durkheim and Mauss.

In the preface to the second edition of *Règles de la méthode sociologique* Durkheim defends himself against the accusation of having mistakenly separated the collective from the individual. This separation is necessary, he says, but he does not rule out the possibility that in the future “there will be conceived the possibility of a quite formal psychology, which would be a sort of common ground of individual psychology and of sociology. . . . It would be necessary,” Durkheim continues, “to attempt to learn, by the comparison of mythic themes, of popular legends and traditions, of languages, how social representations recall and exclude each other, how they fuse with each other or are clearly distinguished.” This research, he concludes, lies somewhat in the jurisdiction of abstract logic. It is curious to note how close Lévy-Bruhl would have been to this program had he not at first chosen to relegate mythic representations to the antechamber of logic, and had he not made the separation irremediable by later renouncing the notion of prelogical thought. But in this, as the English say, he “threw out the baby with the bath water” by denying to the “primitive mentality” the cognitive character he had conceded to it at the beginning and consigning it entirely to the area of affectivity.

More nearly faithful to the Durkheimian conception of an “obscure psychology” underlying social reality, Mauss oriented anthropology “toward the search for that which is common to all men. . . . Men communicate through symbols . . . but they are able to have these symbols, and to communicate through them, only because all have the same instincts.”

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Is not such a conception, which is also the author's, open to another criticism? The objection will be raised that, if our final aim is to reach certain universal forms of thought and morality (for the *Essai sur le don* ends in moral conclusions), why give a privileged place to the societies you call primitive? Should one not, by hypothesis, obtain the same results by taking any given society as a point of departure? It is this last problem which I should like to consider.

This is all the more necessary in that certain ethnologists and sociologists, who are studying societies in rapid transformation, may contest what seems to be the conception I implicitly form of primitive societies. It is possible to believe that their supposedly distinctive characteristics are but an illusion, the effect of our own ignorance of what really takes place. Objectively, these characteristics do not correspond to reality.

There is no doubt that the character of ethnographical inquiry is modified as the tiny savage tribes we used to study are absorbed into larger groups whose problems tend to resemble our own. But if it is true, as Mauss has taught us, that ethnology is an original mode of understanding, rather than a source of particular understandings, we must simply conclude that ethnology today is administered in two ways: in the pure state and in a diluted state. To seek to deepen its study precisely where its method is being blended with other methods, where its object is being confused with other objects, does not show a healthy scientific attitude.

What, then, are the reasons for our predilection for these societies which, for want of a better term, we call "primitive," though they certainly are not?

Let us admit frankly that the first reason is of a philosophical order. As M. Merleau-Ponty has written: "Each time the sociologist [but he is thinking of the anthropologist] returns to the living sources of his knowledge, to that which operates in him as a means of understanding the cultural formations furthest removed from himself, he spontaneously philosophizes." And, as a matter of fact, research in the field, where every ethnological career begins, is the mother and nursemaid of doubt, the philosophical attitude par excellence. This "anthropological doubt" consists not merely in knowing that one knows nothing but in resolutely exposing what one thinks he knows, even one's own ignorance, to the insults and denials inflicted upon one's dearest ideas and habits by those ideas and habits which may contradict them to the

highest degree. Contrary to what may seem apparent, we believe that it is in its most strictly philosophical method that ethnology is distinguished from sociology. The sociologist objectivizes, for fear of being duped. The ethnologist does not have this fear, since he is not condemned in advance to extirpate all its nuances and details, even its values—everything, in a word, in which the observer of his own society runs the risk of being implicated.

The anthropologist does, however, risk one danger in choosing a subject and an object radically distant from one another: that understanding, lawful prize of the object, may not reach its intrinsic properties but limit itself to expressing the relative and ever changing position of the subject in relation to the object. It is, in fact, quite possible that his supposed ethnological understanding may be condemned to remain as bizarre and inadequate as that which an exotic visitor would have of our own society. The Indian Kwakiutl, whom Boas sometimes used to invite to New York as an informant, was indifferent to the spectacle of skyscrapers and streets filled with automobiles. He reserved all his intellectual curiosity for the dwarfs, giants, and bearded ladies on exhibit in the Times Square area, for the workings of the Automat, and for brass knobs at the ends of the bannisters. For reasons that I cannot go into here, all these things brought his own culture into the picture, and what he did was to seek evidence of that culture in certain aspects of ours.

In their own way, do not ethnologists yield to the same temptation when they allow themselves, as they so often do, to interpret native customs and institutions anew, with the unavowed aim of making them conform more closely to the theories of the day? The problem of totemism, which several of us hold to be diaphanous and insubstantial, for years weighed heavily on ethnological thought, and we now realize that this importance grew out of a certain taste for the obscene and the grotesque, which was like an infantile malady of religious science: negative projection of an uncontrollable fear of the sacred, from which the observer has been unable to free himself. Thus, the theory of totemism was constituted “for us,” not “in itself,” and there is no guarantee that in its present forms it does not proceed from a similar illusion.

Ethnologists of my generation are confused by the repulsion which the research to which he had devoted his life inspired in Frazer. “A tragic chronicle,” he wrote, “of man’s errors: follies, vain efforts, lost time,

frustrated hopes.” We are scarcely less surprised to learn, in the *Carnets*, what a Lévy-Bruhl thought of myths, which, according to him, “no longer have any effect on us . . . [they are] strange, not to say absurd and incomprehensible . . . tales . . . [and] it requires an effort to take any interest in them.” We have, to be sure, acquired a direct knowledge of the forms of exotic life and thought lacking in our predecessors; but is it not also true that surrealism—that is, a development within our own society—transformed our sensibilities, and that we owe to it the discovery, or rediscovery, of a lyricism and an integrity in the heart of our own studies?

Let us then resist the charms of a naïve objectivism, while we understand that the very precariousness of our position as observers provides us with unsuspected guaranties of objectivity. Insofar as so-called primitive societies are very far removed from our own, we may encounter in them those “acts of general functioning,” mentioned by Mauss, which may well be “more universal” and have “more reality.” In these societies (and I am still quoting Mauss) “one grasps men, groups, and behaviors. . . . one sees them move as if mechanically, one sees masses and systems.” This observation, obviously enjoying the advantages of distance, no doubt implies certain basic differences between these societies and ours: astronomy does not merely require that the heavenly bodies be distant; it is just as important that time there flows in a different rhythm; otherwise the Earth would have ceased to exist long before the birth of astronomy.

The societies called “primitive” are, to be sure, situated in history; their past is as old as ours, since it goes back to the beginnings of the species. In thousands of years they have undergone all kinds of transformations: they have passed through periods of prosperity and crisis; they have known wars, migrations, adventure. But they have specialized along paths different from those we have chosen. In some ways they may have remained close to very ancient conditions of life; this does not exclude the possibility that in other ways they may be farther from these conditions than we are.

While a part of history, these societies seem to have developed or retained a special wisdom which impels them to resist desperately every modification of their structure which would permit history to intrude upon them. Those which had until recently best preserved their distinc-



tive character appear to us as societies predominantly inspired by a desire to maintain their own existence. Their way of exploiting their environment assures them at once a modest standard of living and the protection of their natural resources. Despite their diversity, their rules governing marriage offer to the view of demographers a common characteristic, which is an extreme limitation and constant maintenance of the fertility rate. Finally, a political life based on consent and admitting no decisions other than unanimous ones seems in them to be conceived for the purpose of excluding the use of that motive force in group life which utilizes such differentiating factors as party in power and opposition, majority and minority, exploiters and exploited.

In a word, these societies, which might be called “cold” because their internal environment approaches zero in historical temperature, are distinguished from the “hot” societies by their limited effective force and their mechanical method of functioning. The “hot” societies have appeared at various spots in the world since the neolithic revolution; in them, differentiations among castes and classes are endlessly sought after for the energy and upward movement they provide.

The importance of this distinction is primarily theoretical, for there probably exists no concrete society which, in its entirety and in each of its parts, corresponds exactly to one or the other type. The distinction remains a relative one in another sense as well if it is true, as we believe, that social anthropology follows a double motivation: a retrospective one, since primitive ways of life are on the point of disappearing, so that we must hasten to learn what lessons we can from them; and a prospective one, to the extent that we, aware of an evolution increasing in speed, already feel ourselves to be the “primitives” of our own great-grandchildren and seek to validate ourselves by drawing closer to those who were—and will continue to be for a short time—what some of us persist in remaining.

Neither, on the other hand, do the societies which I called “hot” possess this character in an absolute sense. When, after the neolithic revolution, the great city-states of the Mediterranean basin and the Far East instituted slavery, they constructed a type of society in which differentiations among men—some dominating, others dominated—might be utilized for the production of culture, at a speed inconceivable and un hoped for up to that time. In terms of this formula the mechanistic revolution of the nineteenth century represents less an evolution

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oriented in the same direction than it does the faulty outline of a different solution: still, for a long time, based on the old abuses and the old injustices while, at the same time, making possible the transfer to culture of that dynamic function which the protohistoric revolution had assigned to society.

If the anthropologist—God forbid—should be asked to predict the future of humanity, he would doubtless conceive it not as a prolongation or an extension of current forms but rather as a model of integration progressively unifying the characteristics proper to cold and hot societies. His reflections would resume a connection with the old Cartesian dream of placing machines at the service of men. They would follow the traces of this idea in the social philosophy of the eighteenth century even as far as Saint-Simon, who, by announcing the transition from “the government of men to the administration of things,” anticipated both the anthropological distinction between culture and society and the conversion which appears to us at least possible from the progress of the theory of information and from electronics: progress from a type of civilization long since inaugurated by historical “becoming,” at the price of a transformation of men into machines, to an ideal civilization which would succeed in transforming machines into men. At that point, when culture would have been integrally charged with the task of forging progress, society would be freed from the age-old curse which forced it to enslave men in order to make progress possible. History would henceforth be quite alone, and society, placed outside and above history, would once again be able to assume that regular and quasi-crystalline structure which, the best-preserved of primitive societies teach us, is not contradictory to humanity. It is in this admittedly Utopian view that social anthropology would find its highest justification, since the forms of life and thought which it studies would no longer be of mere historic and comparative interest. They would correspond to a permanent possibility of man, over which social anthropology would have a mission to stand watch, especially in man’s darkest hours.