

THE INVENTION OF PRIMITIVE SOCIETY

Transformations of an Illusion

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For Simon, Jeremy and Hannah

On fait de la science – et surtout de la sociologie – contre sa formation autant qu'avec sa formation. Et seule l'histoire peut nous débarrasser de l'histoire.

Pierre Boudieu (1982), *Leçon sur le leçon*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit

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CHAPTER 1

The idea of primitive society

This book is a history of the ways in which anthropologists have thought about primitive society. Speculations about primitive society have a long and complicated ancestry, but I am concerned with the distinctive and novel version of this idea which crystallized, with anthropology itself, in the 1860s and 1870s and which persisted until very recently (indeed, still survives, if no longer within mainstream anthropology). The idea of primitive society is intimately related to other potent and beguiling notions concerning primitive mentality, primitive religion, primitive art, primitive money, and so on. Nevertheless, the sociological thread in this discourse can be separated out quite easily, and I hope it will become apparent that it does make sense to treat it as a distinct topic.

The rapidity with which the anthropological idea of primitive society was worked out is very striking, but its persistence is perhaps yet more extraordinary. Conventional histories of anthropology describe a succession of quasi-philosophical theories – evolutionism, diffusionism, functionalism, structuralism, etc. Each reigned briefly and then was rudely overthrown. Yet all these theoretical traditions addressed the same idea of primitive society. The persistence of this prototype for well over a hundred years is the more remarkable since empirical investigation of tropical 'primitive' societies only began in a systematic way and on any scale in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Darwin and Maine

The moment at which the new idea took shape can be fixed only roughly. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* appeared in 1859. During

the following two decades a series of 'sociological' monographs appeared dealing with primitive society. These included classic studies by Bachofen, Maine, Fustel de Coulanges, Lubbock, McLennan, Morgan and Tylor. All shared a concern with the nature of 'primitive' society and religion. Virtually all assumed a direct progression from primitive society through various intermediate stages to modern society. Nevertheless, although these writers would all be lumped together as 'evolutionists' by later generations, Darwin's theory was not their common inspiration.¹

There is a paradox here, for Darwin's triumph stimulated a very un-Darwinian anthropology. As Darwinism won ground in Britain, broadly evolutionist kinds of thought gained fresh currency. Associates of Darwin like Huxley, Galton and Lubbock established a new space for evolutionary anthropological investigations within the field of the natural sciences and even in the humanities. Nevertheless, those untrained in biology were very likely to prefer a Lamarckian to a Darwinian view of evolution, if, indeed, they recognized the differences. Herbert Spencer – a crude Lamarckian – had at least as much impact on Maine or even Tylor and Durkheim as did Darwin.

Perhaps the main difficulty which Darwin's theory presented was his idea that evolution did not imply direction or progress, that it did not follow any plan. Darwin argued that natural selection worked upon more or less random individual variations. And while environmental changes were of decisive importance, they were unpredictable. Natural selection was an ineluctable process, but particular adaptations were the product of chance. It followed that history was not unilinear. Groups with the same origin would develop in different ways if they were isolated in different environments. One could accordingly trace the history of a species backwards in time, but there was no way of predicting its future path. It was also very difficult, if not impossible, to assess 'progress'.

These were new and radical ideas which were not in general shared by those contemporaries of Darwin who wrote about primitive culture or primitive society. They were much more likely to believe with Spencer that human history was a history of progress, and that all living societies could be ranked on a single evolutionary

¹ This argument was made powerfully – but perhaps with some rhetorical exaggeration – in J. W. Burrow's *Evolution and Society* (1966).

scale. They also generally accepted the classic Lamarckian ideas: that evolutionary change took the form of revolutionary leaps between one stage of development and another; that the impulse for these changes was internal rather than external; and that acquired traits were transmitted by heredity.

I would not wish to overstate the case. Some early anthropologists were indeed directly influenced by Darwin. Rather more were inspired (perhaps at second-hand) to adopt broadly evolutionist frameworks of argument. Only a few – including Henry Maine – took very little notice of Darwin or even of Spencer. But it is certainly correct that the early anthropologists were seldom Darwinians in the strict sense.

Nor is this altogether surprising, since the study of primitive society was not generally regarded as a branch of natural history. Rather it was treated initially as a branch of legal studies. Many of the key authors were lawyers, including Bachofen, Köhler, Maine, McLennan and Morgan. The issues which they investigated – the development of marriage, the family, private property and the state – were conceived of as legal questions. The initial source – the common case-study – was provided by Roman law. This shared legal background also distinguished the lawyer-sociologists from other contemporary 'anthropologists' such as Tylor or Darwin's friend Lubbock, whose primary concerns were with material culture and the development of religion. It was Tylor indeed who commented in 1865 that the study of such an issue as exogamy 'belongs properly to that interesting, but difficult and almost unworked subject, the Comparative Jurisprudence of the lower races, and no one not versed in Civil Law could do it justice'.²

When I come to discuss individual authors, the diversity of their intellectual sources will be evident. There were obvious continuities with writers of the Scottish and French Enlightenment, and more immediately with Herbert Spencer and the Utilitarians in England, and with Comte and the Positivists in France. Victorian constitutional historians like Macaulay, Stubbs, Freeman and Froude were transforming the tradition of universal histories associated with the Scottish Enlightenment. This new historiography particularly influenced Maine, but its impact can be traced upon other social evolutionists of the 1860s and 1870s.³ Some of the new

² Tylor (1865), *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, p. 277.

³ See Burrow (1981), *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*.

anthropologists were also stirred by the findings and the methods of German philology, mediated in Britain by Max Müller.⁴ And each particular author had his own idiosyncratic intellectual interests and drew on distinctive specialities – Maine on Roman law, Robertson Smith on Biblical scholarship, Frazer on the classics, and so forth.

Nor were the anthropologists responding to a single political concern. The Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica and the Civil War in the United States revived earlier European debates on slavery. The development of the Indian Empire and the colonization of Africa raised fundamental questions about the nature of government and of civilization itself. Intellectuals were also concerned – some almost obsessively – with the consequences of extending the franchise to new social classes. Particularly in continental Europe, there was great interest in the vitality of nationalist movements. All these political questions seemed apt for anthropological commentary, but they did not impinge upon every anthropologist to the same degree or in the same sort of way. For many, religious questions seemed still more urgent, as intellectuals began to come to terms with the challenge of Lyell and Darwin to the authorized Biblical account of history. One can in fact identify a transition in the 1870s from a central concern with political issues to a greater interest in religion.

In the end, however, it may be that something yet more fundamental than political and religious concerns informed the new wave of interest in human origins. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Europeans believed themselves to be witnessing a revolutionary transition in the type of their society. Marx defined a capitalist society emerging from a feudal society; Weber was to write about the rationalization, the bureaucratization, the disenchantment of the old world; Tönnies about the move from community to association; Durkheim about the change from mechanical to organic forms of solidarity. Each conceived of the new world in contrast to 'traditional society'; and behind this 'traditional society' they discerned a primitive or primeval society.

⁴ Max Müller gave a distinctly evolutionist cast to his historical reconstructions. Moreover, Darwin drew on theories of language development in *The Origin of Species* (1859). Nevertheless, the philological tradition was generally speaking evolutionist, if at all, only in a vague and old-fashioned way.

The anthropologists took this primitive society as their special subject, but in practice primitive society proved to be their own society (as they understood it) seen in a distorting mirror. For them modern society was defined above all by the territorial state, the monogamous family and private property. Primitive society therefore must have been nomadic, ordered by blood ties, sexually promiscuous and communist. There had also been a progression in mentality. Primitive man was illogical and given to magic. In time he had developed more sophisticated religious ideas. Modern man, however, had invented science. Like their most reflective contemporaries, in short, the pioneer anthropologists believed that their own was an age of massive transition. They looked back in order to understand the nature of the present, on the assumption that modern society had evolved from its antithesis.

The prototype of primitive society

The inspiration behind the new wave of books on primitive society was therefore very diverse. Darwin's theory was by no means the common source of the pioneer anthropologists. If one book is to be placed at the head of what became a new series, it is perhaps more appropriate to begin two years after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, with the appearance in 1861 of Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*. Although most of Maine's specific ideas were soon discarded, he placed on the agenda most of the central questions which were to preoccupy his rivals and successors for the next half-century. His contribution was not at the level of theory. Rather, he re-established and embellished a classic notion of the original human condition, and he made it seem directly relevant to the intellectual concerns of his contemporaries.

Maine's history (like the Old Testament and many classical sources) assumed that man was originally a member of a corporate family group ruled by a despotic patriarch. Later, patriarchal power provided the basis for larger associations. Later still, waifs and strays were brought in by adoption. The principle of patriarchal authority was diluted. Local association became increasingly important. Ultimately, societies based on kinship were replaced by societies based upon the state. This transition from blood to soil, from status to contract, was the greatest revolution in human history.

In the very year in which *Ancient Law* was published, a Swiss

professor of Roman Law, Johannes Bachofen, had appealed to some of the same sources – particularly Greek myth and Roman law – but he had concluded that man's original family structure was matriarchal. Bachofen's strange book had little impact, however. In 1864 the French scholar Fustel de Coulanges published *La Cité Antique*, which neglected both Maine and Bachofen, but gave an account of mankind's social and political history similar to Maine's, while introducing a new determinant, religious progress. In 1865 a Scottish lawyer, J. F. McLennan, reached a similar conclusion to Bachofen, but in ignorance of his work and directly in reaction to Maine. The publication of his *Primitive Marriage*, in turn, inspired an American lawyer, Lewis Henry Morgan, to develop the most influential of these new images of early society. His best-known book, *Ancient Society*, appeared sixteen years after *Ancient Law*. It echoed Maine's title and belonged to the same universe of discourse.

By the late nineteenth century two authorities had established themselves in Anglo-American anthropology, E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer. They sifted the arguments in every branch of the new discipline and asserted an orthodoxy. Together they adjudicated the disputes between Maine and his rivals, and settled the broad characteristics of primeval human societies. Primitive society was originally an organic whole. It then split into two or more identical building blocks. (This idea went back to Spencer.) The component units of society were exogamous, corporate descent groups. By the 1880s it was generally agreed (despite Maine's continued dissent) that these groups were 'matriarchal', tracing descent in the female line. Women and goods were held communally by the men of each group. Marriage took the form of regular exchanges between them. These social forms, no longer extant, were preserved in the languages (especially in kinship terminologies), and in the ceremonies of contemporary 'primitive' peoples.

It is striking how much agreement there soon was even on matters of detail. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, almost all the new specialists would have agreed with the following propositions.

- 1 The most primitive societies were ordered on the basis of kinship relations.
- 2 Their kinship organization was based on descent groups.
- 3 These descent groups were exogamous and were related by a series of marriage exchanges.

- 4 Like extinct species, these primeval institutions were preserved in fossil form, ceremonies and kinship terminologies bearing witness to long-dead practices.
- 5 Finally, with the development of private property, the descent groups withered away and a territorial state emerged. This was the most revolutionary change in the history of humanity. It marked the transition from ancient to modern society.

These ideas were also linked to the theory of primitive religion. The original religion was 'animism', a belief that natural species and objects had souls and should be worshipped. In the most primitive societies each descent group believed that it was descended from an animal or vegetable god, which it revered.

The persistence of an illusion

The rapid establishment and the endurance of a theory is not particularly remarkable if the theory is substantially correct. But hardly any anthropologist today would accept that this classic account of primitive society can be sustained. On the contrary, the orthodox modern view is that there never was such a thing as 'primitive society'. Certainly, no such thing can be reconstructed now. There is not even a sensible way in which one can specify what a 'primitive society' is. The term implies some historical point of reference. It presumably defines a type of society ancestral to more advanced forms, on the analogy of an evolutionary history of some natural species. But human societies cannot be traced back to a single point of origin, and there is no way of reconstituting prehistoric social forms, classifying them, and aligning them in a time series. There are no fossils of social organization.

Even if some very ancient social order could be reconstituted, one could not generalize it. If it is useful to apply evolutionary theory to social history, then it must direct attention to variation, to adaptation to all sorts of local circumstances, and so to diversification. And it does seem likely that early human societies were indeed rather diverse. Surviving hunter-gatherers certainly do not conform to a single organizational type.⁵ Since ecological variations constrain social organization, especially where technology is

⁵ However, this diversity is arguably a consequence (at least in part) of the relationships which have formed over recent centuries with settled agricultural populations.

simple, there must have been considerable differences in social structure between the earliest human societies. Not to put too fine a point upon it, the history of the theory of primitive society is the history of an illusion. It is our phlogiston, our aether; or, less grandly, our equivalent to the notion of hysteria. This conclusion, commonplace enough amongst modern anthropologists, raises all sorts of problems for the historian.

If there is a current orthodoxy in the humanities and social sciences, then it is perhaps relativism. It is indeed from within the social sciences that the present wave of unjudging and relativistic history of science is being attempted. The model is often the anthropological treatment of other cultures. The aim is to avoid culture-bound misapprehensions, to achieve phenomenological validity. It may even be suggested that to understand all is to forgive all.

However, it is one thing to set an argument in its context; it is quite another to pretend that it cannot be rejected. I start, on the contrary, from the supremely unrelativist assumption that the theory of primitive society is on a par with the history of the theory of aether. The theory of primitive society is about something which does not and never has existed. One of my reasons for writing this book is to remove the constitution of primitive society from the agenda of anthropology and political theory once and for all. (This is quite unashamedly a story with a moral.)

At the same time, criticism is not my main concern. I am more interested in accounting for the genesis of the illusion, and more particularly for its persistence. The persistence of the model is peculiarly problematic since various of its basic assumptions were quite directly contradicted by ethnographic evidence and by the logic of evolutionary theory itself. The difficulties were clearly stated by some of the leading scholars in the field (notably Westermarck, Boas and Malinowski). Notwithstanding, social anthropologists busied themselves for over a hundred years with the manipulation of a fantasy – a fantasy which had been constructed by speculative lawyers in the late nineteenth century. This is a fact which must provoke thought, and not among anthropologists alone.

There are basically two ways of accounting for the persistence of the old styles of thinking. One would appeal to continuing features of the political environment. The idea of primitive society could and did feed a variety of ideological positions. Among its most celebrated protagonists were Engels, Freud, Durkheim and

Kropotkin. Its birth may be related to the late Victorian surge of imperialism, and its perhaps terminal decline in the last two decades may be related to the end of the Empire. The rise and fall of nationalism is probably equally relevant. The idea of primitive society fed the common belief that societies were based either on blood or on soil, and that these principles of descent and territoriality may be equated with race and citizenship, the contrasting components of every imperialism and every nationalism. Yet the idea of primitive society was never merely an imperial myth, or a charter for nationalism. Nor, at the other extreme, was it ever exclusively identified with Marxism, despite the adoption of Morgan's theories by Engels. The evolutionist framework did offer both communists and colonialists the hope that although social institutions varied from society to society, they formed a single hierarchy, through which all would eventually progress. Yet while it could serve so many ideological purposes, it could at times also serve none.

Moreover, as anthropology became increasingly academic, so ideological factors became less decisive (though they were seldom insignificant). Increasingly the idea of primitive society was sustained by forces internal to the discipline of anthropology. Maine and his contemporaries established primitive society as the object of social anthropology. They posed strategic questions about the origin of the family, the state and religion. They also prepared a specialized set of tools. Primitive society then became the preserve of a new discipline, which soon developed a sophisticated, quasi-mathematical set of techniques for kinship studies. When this happened, the survival of the idea of primitive society was ensured.

As an initial rough approximation, the classic idea of primitive society persisted within anthropology – or with anthropology – because it was 'good to think'. It referred to ultimate social concerns, the state, citizenship, the family and so on. And it generated a specialized tradition of puzzle-solving.

The idea of primitive society probably could not have persisted within anthropology if it had remained static. But it did not. On the contrary, it lent itself to the most dazzling play of variations. This capacity for renewal facilitated accommodation to virtually any theoretical or political discourse, a process which allowed generations of scholars to feel that they were making genuinely novel contributions to their science.

Transformations

How best to conceive this combination of conservatism and innovation? The most famous modern characterization of scientific change is that of Thomas Kuhn. For Kuhn, significant changes are sudden and radical. The switch from one 'paradigm' to another involves a sharp break in continuity.

Scientific development depends in part on a process of non-incremental or revolutionary change. Some revolutions are large, like those associated with the names of Copernicus, Newton, or Darwin, but most are much smaller, like the discovery of oxygen or the planet Uranus. The usual prelude to changes of this sort is . . . the awareness of anomaly, of an occurrence or set of occurrences that does not fit existing ways of ordering phenomena. The changes that result therefore require 'putting on a different kind of thinking-cap', one that renders the anomalous lawlike but that, in the process, also transforms the order exhibited by some other phenomena, previously unproblematic.⁶

A number of historians of science have questioned the Kuhnian idea that science changes by way of radical changes of paradigm, or epistemological breaks (to use the continental phrase). They point to the continuities and demonstrate that many famous discoveries were anticipated, at least in part. A more original reaction is that of I. Bernard Cohen. While emphasizing the striking conservatism of even the most celebrated 'scientific revolutions', he is not tempted by those at the other extreme who are content to trace the sources of a new theory and then to describe it as a 'synthesis'. Instead he suggests that great instances of creativity – literary as much as scientific – may best be described as 'transformations'.⁷ He argues that Newton, for instance, 'certainly did not merely combine in a synthetic "stew" the principles of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, Descartes, Hooke and Huygens. Rather, he carefully selected certain ideas . . . and transformed them, giving each of them a new form which only then was useful to him'.⁸ Another example Cohen chooses is Darwin's 'transformation' of ideas which had been developed by Lyell and by Malthus. Darwin had been per-

6 Kuhn (1977), *The Essential Tension*, p. xvii. Critics had pointed out the difficulties in his use of the terms 'paradigm' and 'paradigm shift', and Kuhn here adopted Butterfield's homely allusion to putting on another thinking-cap.

7 Cohen (1980), *The Newtonian Revolution*, especially Chapter 4.

8 *Op. cit.*, p. 158.

sued by Lyell's idea that whole species were in historic competition for a place in the sun. Then he read Malthus and realized that he had to consider rather the chances of individual survival.

An observation of special relevance to the present book is that some ideas are especially apt for transformation, and that this particular quality may increase the chances of their survival, even if they turn out to be quite wrong. Cohen instances some of the crucial ideas which 'undergo successive transformations and continue to live on for a long time in science, such as atom, energy and impetus', but refers also to ideas like aether ('transformed into the imponderable fluids of heat, electricity and magnetism') which 'have a measured but fruitful existence and survive only as archaeological remains in the scientific language'.⁹

Precisely what Cohen means by a transformation is not entirely clear. Some of his examples seem to involve no more than a revision, more or less radical, of a specific idea; a scientist incorporates an older idea, but changes it slightly, or applies it in a new context. At other times Cohen invokes the notion of a mathematical transformation. This suggests a different kind of process, involving systematic shifts in a whole conceptual structure. In this sense, transformations might be as radical and complete as Kuhnian paradigm changes. Cohen also refers to the work of both Mach and Foucault, who certainly envisaged something in the nature of structural shifts in the development of scientific ideas.¹⁰

I am persuaded that the notion of transformations is a powerful tool in the history of science, but I would like to introduce the specific idea of transformation which has been developed by Lévi-Strauss, most systematically in his writings on myth. Lévi-Strauss argues that in mythology the mind

operates essentially through a process of transformation. A myth no sooner comes into being than it is modified through a change of narrator . . . some elements drop out and are replaced by others, sequences change places, and the modified structure moves through a series of states, the variations of which nevertheless still belong to the same set.

9 *Op. cit.*, p. 197.

10 Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 280–9. Cf. Foucault (1972), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; Mach (1898), *Popular Scientific Lectures*.

Moreover, these transformations of a myth do not simply result in minor changes, differences which can be reduced to 'small positive or negative increments'. Rather the transformations are accomplished by systematic manipulations of the myth as a whole, yielding 'clear-cut relationships such as contrariness, contradiction, inversion or symmetry'.¹¹

Lévi-Strauss believes that the human mind acts upon its raw materials in a highly constrained manner. It establishes structures and then manipulates them, almost mechanically. Moreover he insists that the kind of thinking which anthropologists have identified in exotic mythologies – what he calls mytho-logic – or in the ethno-science of hunters and gatherers is no different in principle from the most sophisticated scientific thought.¹²

Like Cohen, Lévi-Strauss also believes that similar kinds of innovation can be found in the arts and in the sciences. He refers approvingly to the remarkable first chapter of D'Arcy Thompson's masterpiece, *On Growth and Form* (1917), which cited the use of transformations in mathematics and in natural history, and equally in the botany of Goethe and the art of Dürer.¹³

If Lévi-Strauss is right, then scientists think rather like artists, and perhaps we all think, at least at times, like Amazonian Indians. Moreover, scientific theories may have a great deal in common with Amazonian myths. Yet there is one evident difference between the established ideal of scientific thought and what Lévi-Strauss calls 'the logic of the concrete', which operates by transforming structures. Scientific thought is ideally progressive. Each stage of understanding should be an advance on its predecessor. One does not go

11 Lévi-Strauss (1981), *The Naked Man*, p. 675.

12 In a famous passage he wrote that:

the kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and that the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of things to which it is applied ... man has always been thinking equally well; the improvement lies, not in an alleged progress of man's mind, but in the discovery of new areas to which it may apply its unchanged and unchanging powers. (Lévi-Strauss (1963), *Structural Anthropology*, p. 230)

13 At this stage the notion of transformations may seem a little mystifying. I hope that it will be clarified by examples, but in the meantime it may be helpful to recall something that the distinguished anthropologist Meyer Fortes used to tell me, to put me on my guard against the dodges of the English. The public-school types, he said, were trained to take the accepted arguments and to turn them upside-down; a purely mechanical trick, but one which produced the appearance of originality.

backwards in science. But if an argument proceeds – to put it crudely – by turning a previous argument on its head, then at some stage someone will effect a further transformation by setting it back in its former position. In short, a series of structural transformations is quite likely to end up where it began.¹⁴

I think that this is true, at least for much of anthropological discourse. It cannot be denied that formal transformations of the Lévi-Straussian kind abound in the history of the idea of primitive society. The various models of primitive society are typically straightforward, even mechanical, transformations of their predecessors. Indeed, this book is very largely an account of the transformations of an illusion within an increasingly hermetic professional discourse.

But that is not the whole story. There are also syntheses on the lines of Cohen's transformations. Different ideas are yoked together, sets of data placed in fresh juxtapositions. And some of the most influential figures did not effect significant transformations of any kind. Rather they gave current ideas an authoritative form. At the other extreme, a few individuals attempted to step outside the bounds of the established discourse. The recurrent characteristic mode of the innovators is, however, the structural transformation.

I concede that this book is not a good advertisement for the creative value of structural transformations. It is very largely a record of intellectual failures by famous anthropologists. My colleagues may in consequence accuse me of spreading despondency and gloom, or of wasting my time on ideas which have in any case been abandoned.

At this stage I would enter three defences. First of all, the ideas I deal with have not by any means been universally discredited. They may be unfashionable in mainstream anthropology, but they still flourish in the backwaters and are paraded in too many lecture

14 In an interview with me, Edmund Leach insisted that 'the sequence is always dialectical'. He illustrated this thesis from his own experience:

There was ... a point in my anthropological development when Malinowski could do no wrong. In the next phase Malinowski could do no right. But with maturity I came to see that there was merit on both sides. I see this as a Hegelian process, a very fundamental element in the way that thinking in the humanities develops over time. But when this sequence leads you round in a circle, you are not just back where you started. You have moved on a bit, or you have moved somewhere else. But always the process involves the initial rejection of your immediate ancestors, the teachers to whom you are most directly indebted. (Kuper (1986), 'An interview with Edmund Leach', p. 380)

courses before the wondering eyes of undergraduates. Secondly, the idea of primitive society was never the exclusive preserve of social anthropology. It infused the political and historical consciousness of several generations. Its history must be of consequence, even for many who are otherwise content to remain quite ignorant of anthropology. Finally, although the history I shall trace is rather deplorable, similar accounts could be given of many other intellectual traditions. We need to consider the ways in which we delude ourselves. If this book helps to explain the persistence of an illusion, then perhaps it may even hold out the promise of an escape from illusion.¹⁵

This book, then, is a critical history of an idea, its crystallization, transformations and persistence. I have not attempted to be exhaustive, to track down its every expression, to document every variant form it took. I am dealing with the central orthodoxy of social anthropology, and so it has been possible to focus on some central writers. They were especially influential, both in their own time and after. By and large they also produced the most powerful variants of the central model. Each of the writers with whom I shall be dealing can also stand for many others, since each refracted the concerns and influences which defined the study of 'primitive society' within a particular intellectual arena.

¹⁵ This may even be taken as a defence of anthropology, or at least of a sort of anthropology.

PART I

The constitution of primitive society