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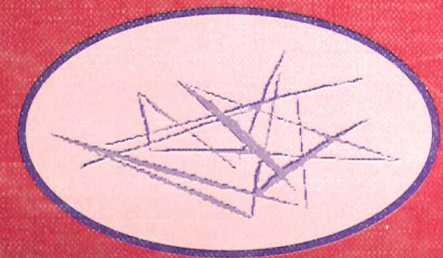


Moore

Visions of Culture

# Visions of Culture

*An Introduction  
to Anthropological  
Theories and Theorists*



Jerry D. Moore

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## Founders

Anthropology addresses a series of questions that humans have considered for millennia: What is the nature of society? Why do cultures change? What is the relationship between the person as an individual and the person as a member of a distinctive social group? What are the distinguishing characteristics of humanness? Why are cultures different?

The written record of such inquiries covers at least 2500 years. In 4th-century B.C. Athens, Aristotle pondered the organization of the state and used the organic analogy—the comparison of society to a living organism—which became a recurrent theme in 19th- and 20th-century anthropology. The 14th-century Arab geographer Ibn Khaldun explained the differences between cultures in terms of climate—passionate, expressive societies exist in warmer climates while restrained, impassive cultures exist in northern climates. In 1725, Giovanni Vico, a poor scholar in Italy, wrote *Scienza Nuova* and outlined a historical model of the evolution of human society. By the 1700s a wide range of moral philosophers were considering the nature of human cultures, drawing on ethnographic sources from Herodotus, Garcilaso de la Vega, Joseph Lafitau, and others.

So how can we call four men—Edward Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, Emile Durkheim, and Franz Boas—the “founders” of anthropology? First, because there are direct connections between modern anthropological issues and the ideas of these late-19th-century and early-20th-century scholars. A significant change occurred in the social sciences with the publication of Charles Darwin’s (1858) *The Origin of Species*. The directness of Darwin’s impact has been discussed by Stocking (1968, 1987), but it seems clear that the Darwinian theory of

biological variation served as a model for inquiry into the nature of human cultural differences. The mid-19th century is a threshold: earlier writers may have thought about cultural differences and the nature of humanity, but their approaches to understanding are distinct from post-Darwinian science. It is not that earlier scholars were unaware of cultural differences, but rather that they lacked "the slightest clue as to how cultural differences might be scientifically explained" (Harris 1968:18). Morgan, Tylor, Durkheim and Boas stand on this side of that intellectual divide, and thus their ideas remain more immediate and direct.

Prior to 1860, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "anthropology" meant the study of human nature encompassing physiology and psychology; after 1860, the word denotes a science of humankind "in its widest sense." This shift in usage marks a change in an intellectual field that the works of Morgan, Tylor, Boas and Durkheim partly created.

Second, each of these men were founders in a practical sense: they were instrumental in establishing anthropology as an academic discipline. Between 1860 and 1900, anthropology changed from a loose collection of shared interests into a formally defined science of humankind. Tylor, Morgan, Durkheim and Boas were directly involved in the creations of new anthropological institutions. Tylor held the first professorship of anthropology at Oxford, and he wrote the first anthropology text book. Morgan obtained support for anthropological research from the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. government. Durkheim outlined a new curriculum of social inquiry, founded influential journals, and established a cadre of students and colleagues who in turn would shape French social science through the 1970s. Boas would supervise the first American Ph.D. in anthropology, establish new journals and associations, and literally set the broad investigative boundaries of American anthropology.

Finally, Tylor, Morgan, Durkheim and Boas—though drawing on existing conceptual frameworks and ideas—articulated new sets of anthropological problems and proposed methods for their scientific study. In so doing, they developed ways of thinking about human culture that continue to inform our inquiries, and which definitely shaped the course of 20th-century anthropology. Tylor's definition of culture, Morgan's examination of social evolution, Durkheim's creation of a science of society, and Boas' insistence on viewing cultures in specific historical contexts—these positions form the landscape of the emergent field of anthropology as it developed from the late-19th century to the present. These men were founders. ♦

## Edward Tylor

### The Evolution of Culture



Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) is considered the founding father of British anthropology. Tylor was the first professor of anthropology at Oxford, he was active in establishing anthropological associations and institutions, and his ideas contributed to the intellectual debates of the late-19th century sparked by Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. His friend A.C. Haddon wrote that Tylor's books, "while replete with vast erudition, are so suggestive and graced by such quiet humour that they have become 'classics,' and have profoundly influenced modern thought. From their first appearance it was recognized that a mastermind was guiding the destinies of the nascent science" (Haddon 1910:159). When a contemporary, the religious scholar Max Müller, dubbed anthropology "Mr. Tylor's science," it was a recognition of Tylor's impact on the definition of a scholarly field.

Central to Tylor's contribution was his definition of culture:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. [1958 (1871):1]

In these opening lines of his major work, *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor first defined culture in "its modern technical or anthropological meaning" (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:9; cf. Stocking 1963). It is a definition of culture which Bohannan and Glazer (1988:62) note, "is the only one most anthropologists can quote correctly, and the one they fall back on when others prove too cumbersome."

And yet one of his most careful modern readers, George W. Stocking, Jr., writes "To judge by current textbooks, Tylor has little to say to anthropology today" (Stocking 1968:176). Contending that many of his later readers simply misunderstood his concept of culture (Stocking 1963), Stocking concludes that Tylor was not "one of the major investors in the general intellectual capital of the modern human sciences," dwarfed by figures like Marx, Freud, Weber or Durkheim (Stocking 1987:301-302).

Ironically, Tylor's lasting influence was greater on American anthropology than on subsequent British social anthropology (see, for example, Evans-Pritchard's [1981:91-94] curiously curt discussion of his eminent predecessor at Oxford). In contrast, an American anthropologist like Robert Lowie (1939) lauded Tylor as a careful scholar with a "serene willingness to weigh evidence." Varying assessments of Tylor and his American contemporary, Lewis Henry Morgan, led Meyer Fortes (1969) to suggest that Morgan gave birth to British social anthropology, while the very British Tylor fathered American cultural anthropology.

How do we make sense of such contradictory assessments? Why was Tylor so influential in his time? What is the lasting value of his ideas?

## Background

Born in 1832, Tylor's family were Quakers, then a religious minority, though one firmly part of the British middle class. Tylor's religion precluded education at Oxford or Cambridge, which only granted degrees to members of the Church of England. Tylor was educated in Quaker schools before joining the family foundry business at the age of 16. Tylor's Quaker upbringing also led to an agnosticism that tempered his studies of the origins of religion. Ackerman (1987:77) observes that Tylor's agnosticism led him to approach religions as intellectual systems rather than expressions of belief, noting that Tylor "cared more about creed than consolation."

In his early 20s, Tylor exhibited preliminary symptoms of tuberculosis, and "secure of a modest competency" in Marett's discreet phrase, Tylor left the family business and traveled to warmer latitudes to regain his health. In Cuba he met Henry Christy, a British businessman and avid archaeologist, and the two set off for a four-month journey through Mexico described in Tylor's first book, *Anahuac: Or Modern*

*Mexico and Mexicans* (Tylor 1861). *Anahuac* is a travelogue informed by wide reading and crafted with an eye for telling detail and an ear for dialogue.

From the port of Vera Cruz, Tylor and Christy traveled inland by stagecoach to Mexico City with frequent stops as the archaeologist Christy searched roadside gullies for obsidian arrowheads (1861:35). The travelers visited archaeological sites like Teotihuacan and Cholula, searched for potsherds in newly plowed fields, and compared the artifacts of Mexico with recent finds from Europe.

But most of *Anahuac* describes modern, not ancient, Mexico. Tylor and Christy toured sugar plantations, textile factories, *pulque* shops and haciendas. He describes Mexico's political instability and poverty. Tylor's anticlerical upbringing erupts in a rash of diatribes against the Catholic Church. His criticisms are so stinging that Tylor himself admits, "It seems hard to be always attacking the Roman Catholic clergy," but then proceeds to blame priests for the "doleful ignorance" and poverty of the population (1861:126). In *Anahuac* Tylor shows himself as an informed and observant, though not unprejudiced, writer.

Over the next four years, Tylor matured into a more serious student of human culture. In 1865 he published *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*, which outlined the analytical themes that he developed the rest of his life. "The early Culture History of Mankind," Tylor (1964 [1865]:137) wrote, "is capable of being treated as an Inductive Science, by collecting and grouping facts."

Tylor sifted through missionaries' accounts, explorers' journals, ancient texts, and ethnological reports to search for similarities in human cultures. "When similar arts, customs, beliefs or legends are found in several distant regions, among peoples not known to be of the same stock," Tylor (1964 [1865]:3) asked, "how is this similarity to be accounted for?" Essentially there are two possible explanations: the similarity is either the result of parallel invention—"the like working of men's minds under like conditions"—or it is evidence of contacts, direct or indirect, contemporary or historical—between the societies and the consequent diffusion of cultural knowledge.

Tylor's consideration of diffusion marks his early work, yet Stocking (1963:788) notes that Tylor increasingly emphasized the importance of evolution over diffusion or parallel invention. Sixteen years later, the scholar would conceive of his textbook *Anthropology* as "a

series of chapters demonstrating the fact and course of progression in various areas of life," almost exclusively emphasizing evolution.

Evolution and progress were important themes even in Tylor's first serious ethnological book. Nearly half of *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* . . . considers the evolution of language and symbols. Although admitting that there is "no evidence of man ever having lived in society without use of spoken language," Tylor describes certain societies with "a speech so imperfect that even if talking of ordinary matters they have to eke it out by gestures." Weighing alternate hypotheses, he suggests that such societies either are "the strongest case of degeneration known in the history of the human race or supply a telling argument that the gesture-language is part of the original utterance of mankind . . ." (Tylor 1964 [1865]:62–64). In his first serious anthropological book, Tylor sketches a handful of themes he will develop in later work: the interpretation of myth, native rationales of dreams, and the logic of sympathetic magic, among others. *Researches* also contains his initial methodological musings about how to document the evolution of human society (see, for example, Tylor 1964 [1865]:236–241).

*Researches into the Early History of Mankind* . . . was published by John Murray and Sons, publishers of the most important scientific writings of the 19th century, including Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. It was a measure of Tylor's growing status in the scientific community. By the late 1860s Tylor "had climbed into the scientific establishment," Joan Leopold (1980:19) writes, becoming the friend of Alfred Russel Wallace, Thomas Henry Huxley, and other eminent Victorians, writing articles and reviews for major periodicals and giving public lectures. Tylor's achievement was marked by his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1871, and the publication of *Primitive Culture*.

### *Primitive Culture*

In *Primitive Culture* Tylor sets out to reconstruct the history of human culture and immediately faces a major problem: how can humanity's prehistoric, unwritten history be known? Tylor closely followed contemporary archaeological discoveries of stone tools and extinct mammals in Great Britain and France, but fragments of bone and stone were not enough to reconstruct the "complex whole" of Culture or

Civilization. And so Tylor crafted his reconstruction on two principles: uniformitarianism and the concept of survivals.

The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, insofar as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action. On the one hand, the uniformity which so largely pervades civilization may be ascribed, in great measure, to the uniform action of uniform causes: while on the other hand its various grades may be regarded as stages of development or evolution, each the outcome of previous history, and about to do its proper part in shaping the history of the future. [1958 (1871):1]

Uniformitarianism was derived from Charles Lyell's multi-volume *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833). Lyell argued that the geological processes observable today—erosion, sedimentation, and so on—were the processes that shaped the Earth rather than spectacular, unique catastrophes like Noah's Flood. Observations of modern processes allowed for reconstructing the history of the Earth because the same geological processes were at work then as now.

This was also true for culture, Tylor argued, because culture was created by universally similar human minds and governed by the same basic laws of cognition. "Surveyed in a broad view," Tylor wrote:

. . . the character and habit of mankind at once display that similarity and consistency which led the Italian proverb-maker to declare "all the world is one country." . . . To general likeness in human nature on the one hand, and to general likeness in the circumstances of life on the other, this similarity and consistency may no doubt be traced, and they may be studied with especial fitness comparing races near the same grade of civilization. [Tylor 1958 (1871):6]

Setting aside for the moment the issue of "grade of civilization," Tylor's key point is that the processes of culture are similar for all people, regardless of where or when they lived, because human minds are similar (Tylor 1958 [1871]:159). This is the central logic of Tylor's uniformitarianism: culture or civilization consists of knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs and other mental constructs; since human mental processes are universal, human societies have developed culture along "nearly uniform channels," characterized by progress and expressed in the evolution of culture.

This has three implications. First, race does not explain cultural differences. Believing that it was "possible and desirable to eliminate considerations of hereditary varieties or races of man," Tylor contended

his study demonstrated "that stages of culture may be compared without taking into account how far tribes who use the same implement, follow the same custom, or believe the same myth, may differ in their bodily configuration and the colour of their skin and hair" (Tylor 1871 [1958]:7). Rather, if two societies have analogous cultural traits (pottery or monotheism or stock markets), it is because either a) the trait has diffused from one society to another, or b) because independent inventions have developed due to the similarly constructed human minds encountering similar situations.

Second, it means that societies with similar cultural traits may represent analogous stages in the development of human culture. Citing Samuel Johnson's fairly predictable insult "one set of savages is like another," Tylor surprisingly exclaims, "How true a generalization this really is, any Ethnological Museum may show" (1958 [1871]:6). Tylor quickly explains that these similarities are most pronounced in the realm of technology—the tools for hunting, fishing, fire-making, cooking, and so on—although cross-cultural similarities also exist in mythology, kinship, and other aspects of social life. Such parallels reflect similar stages of cultural development among existing societies and also allow us to reconstruct prehistoric societies. Since the laws of mind are uniform, the patterns of contemporary "primitive" societies must be similar to those of extinct prehistoric peoples, a "hypothetical primitive condition [that] corresponds in a considerable degree to that of modern savage tribes, who in spite of their difference and distance, have in common certain elements of civilization, which seem remains of an early state of the human race at large" (Tylor 1958 [1871]:21). Tylor essentially asserted, as Robert Ackerman (1987:78) states, that "human nature and development being relatively homogeneous, one might legitimately discover, in the behaviour of contemporary primitive peoples, living links in the evolutionary chain."

Third, Tylor's uniformitarianism allowed him to reconstruct the specific processes leading to a particular belief, moral, or set of cultural knowledge. Since culture was a cognitive construction created by similar human minds solving the problems of existence in a rational though often erroneous way, it was possible for Tylor to retrace the logical steps which led to a superstition, folk belief, or "irrational" practice.

Tylor's reconstruction of the evolution of human culture relied on the *comparative method* and the *doctrine of survivals*. The comparative method is based on a straightforward logic: similar objects are historically related. Apes, monkeys and humans have five digits because

those animals are historically related. The words *no*, *non*, and *nein* are similar because English, French and German share historical roots. By Tylor's time the comparative method had produced major advances in different fields. The method was evident in Georges Cuvier's (1769–1832) comparative zoology and in the major advances in comparative linguistics, particularly the discovery of a proto-Indo-European language reconstructed from linguistic fragments found in Sanskrit (Hoeningswald 1963).

The comparative method forms the basis of a history of origins. Tylor presents his version of the comparative method as a natural history of human culture: "A first step in the study of civilization is to dissect it into details, and to classify these in their proper groups" (Tylor 1958 [1871]:7). For example, "myths" may be classified into myths about the sun, myths about eclipses or earthquakes, myths about the names of places, myths about the establishment of a tribe, and so on. Each of these, he argues, is a species of the genus "myth," and ethnography becomes natural history. Tylor states, "the ethnographer's business is to classify such details with a view of making out their distribution in geography and history, and the relations which exist among them" (Tylor 1958 [1871]:8).

Temporal and spatial distributions of cultural traits may reflect different processes. Some patterns could result from contacts between different cultures and the diffusion of cultural traits. Other patterns could represent parallel resolution of similar problems of existence: fishnets are similar worldwide because there are only certain ways you can catch fish. But also patterns could be reflections of earlier stages of human culture, traits which Tylor named "survivals."

For example, throughout the United States you see signs like "Ye Olde Steak House," or "Ye Olde Coffee Shoppe" or—my personal favorite—"Ye Olde Pizza Parlor." Most Americans will pronounce the word as "yee" and recognize it as an archaic English word, but not know that "Y" was a symbol for the "th" sound and, thus, that "Ye" is simply "The." The symbol has survived, although its meaning is not really understood. "Ye" is a survival.

Tylor (1958 [1871]:16) defines survivals as "processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home and they remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved."

We say "God bless you" when someone sneezes because it is a survival, not because we still believe the soul is leaving the body. We

celebrate Halloween because it is a survival, not because we are placating the wild spirits on the night before All Souls' Day. We shake hands as a form of greeting because it is a custom, not to show that we are unarmed. We frequently use words, gestures, sayings, and practices whose original meanings have been lost but in our daily encounters nonetheless survive.

Survivals, Tylor argues, are not merely quaint customs, but are the vestiges of previous culture. "Children's sports, popular sayings, absurd customs, may be practically unimportant, but are not philosophically insignificant bearing as they do on one of the most instructive phases of early culture" (Tylor 1958 [1871]:111). Such "relics of primitive barbarism" allow the ethnographer to reconstruct earlier cultural patterns and ultimately define the evolution of culture.

Human history, Tylor believed, was characterized by progress. In technology, the development of firearms showed a clear progression from matchlock to wheel lock to flintlock to percussion cap to automatic weapon. The order of technological change is obvious: one innovation leads to another. The crossbow is clearly derived from the longbow, and no one would doubt the relationship even without a written record (Tylor 1958 [1871]:15). Similarly, other dimensions of culture can be seen as having a progressive relationship, demonstrating "that the main tendency from primaeval up to modern times has been from savagery towards civilization" (Tylor 1958 [1871]:21).

At this point Tylor pursues a tenuous line of logic: just as specific cultural traits may be vestigial survivals of an earlier culture, *entire societies* may reflect earlier stages of human evolution. A society which in the late-19th century used stone tools was not simply a society without metal tools, but literally a vestige of prehistory, a "Stone Age" culture. The study of extant "primitive" societies is the investigation of "primaeval monuments of barbaric thought and life" leading to a reconstruction of the stages of evolution through which humans—at least some humans—have progressed.

At this point Tylor's cautious argument swerves into essentially unreflective assumption and prejudice. Civilization, Tylor writes,

may be looked upon as the general improvement of mankind by higher organization of the individual and society, to the end of promoting at once man's goodness, power and happiness. This theoretical civilization does in no small measure correspond with actual civilization, as traced by comparing savagery with barbarism, and barbarism with modern educated life. So far as we take into account only material and intellectual culture, this is especially true. Acquaintance

with the physical laws of the world, and the accompanying power of adapting nature to man's own ends, are, on the whole, lowest among savages, mean among barbarians, and highest among modern educated nations. [1958 (1871):27]

Not surprisingly, Tylor's "physical laws" are the principles of Western science; alternative epistemologies are merely error-filled remnants of prescientific barbarism. Based on a society's mastery of "material and intellectual culture," one can assign a relative rank on an evolutionary scale:

Thus, on the definite basis of compared facts, ethnographers are able to set up at least a rough scale of civilization. Few would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in order of culture:—Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian. [1958 (1871):27]

Obviously many people would dispute this order, particularly Australians, Tahitians, Aztecs and Chinese. How can any ranking of societies be untainted by prejudice? The convulsions of the 20th century make it difficult to assume that "modern educated nations" successfully promote humanity's goodness, power, and happiness. Most modern readers stumble on the very ideas that Tylor took for granted.

Perhaps less obvious is the problem in considering entire societies as evolutionary survivals of earlier stages of human progress. The concept of a "survival" suggests that a cultural practice—"Ye" or "Gesundheit"—has been carried unchanged from the past into the present, and we can cite examples of such "survivals." But it is another matter to hold that an entire human group has been static, a fossilized representative of an earlier cultural stage. Tylor had no reason to think that the histories of the Australians or Tahitians were either brief or static and no basis to assume that such societies reflected earlier forms of human culture rather than just different, contemporary patterns. Simply, this was justified by Tylor's assumption of human progress.

### Progress and *Anthropology*

Progress is the backbone of Tylor's *Anthropology* (1881), the first textbook on the subject. Written for a popular audience, Tylor deletes most of the references to nonevolutionary processes in this book, focusing instead on the developmental issues of "how mankind came to be as they are, and to live as they do" (1960 [1881]:1). He emphasizes the progress of cultural development: "History . . . shows arts, sciences,

and political institutions beginning in ruder states, and becoming in the course of ages more intelligent, more systematic, more perfectly arranged or organized to answer their purposes" (1960 [1881]:11). In the balance of *Anthropology*, Tylor summarizes his discussions of language, technology and religion with a clarity and purpose rarely present in *Researches into the Early History of Mankind . . . or Primitive Culture*.

Tylor's evolution exhibits an uneven determinism. On the one hand, human history is framed by progress rather than degeneration, by transformation from the simple to complex, and by the trajectory from savagery to civilization. Progress, Tylor believed, did not end in the 19th century but was transformed from an unconscious tendency to a conscious tenet: "Acquainted with events and their consequences far and wide over the world, we are able to direct our own course with more confidence toward improvement" (1960 [1881]:275). Anthropology contributes to human progress; knowing the course of human history "from the remote past to the present, will not only help us to forecast the future, but may guide us in our duty of leaving the world better than we found it" (1960 [1881]:275). Tylor (1964 [1865]:539) writes "the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science." Perhaps Tylor's Quaker liberalism led him to embrace progress and reform (Stocking 1968).

Most of Tylor's adult life was spent in Oxford where he became Keeper of the University Museum in 1883. In 1884 Tylor was given a Readership in Anthropology and held that position until 1896 when he was named the first Professor of Anthropology. He lectured on the origins of human culture, myth and magic, and the distribution of cultural traits. After the publication of *Anthropology* Tylor spent his time teaching and developing academic institutions and anthropological associations rather than writing new works. But Tylor remained extremely influential on the development of British anthropology. He developed potential questions for researchers to ask in the field, he influenced scholars like James Frazer, A.C. Haddon, and W.R. Rivers, and gave numerous public lectures. *Primitive Culture* was reprinted ten times and was translated into Russian, German, French, and Polish during Tylor's lifetime.

Tylor retired from Oxford in 1909 as Professor Emeritus and his achievements were recognized by a knighthood in 1912. His final years were marked by decreasing mental clarity, and his friends lamented that Tylor never produced another work as great as *Primitive Culture* (Lang 1907; Stocking 1968).

## Conclusion

Edward Burnett Tylor shaped the development of anthropology as a field of inquiry. Tylor's comparative method was emulated by many scholars and then fiercely attacked by Franz Boas and other American cultural anthropologists. Tylor's ideas about the origins of religion would lead others, like James Frazer, to investigate religions as systems of knowledge and Tylor's concept of animism would remain a key contribution in comparative studies of religion (Sharpe 1986:56-58).

But of his contributions, it was Tylor's definition of the concept of culture that is most enduring. By arguing for the nonbiological basis of social difference, Tylor stepped away from the racial explanations which characterized Western thought since the ancient Greeks (cf. Harris 1968:140-141). By outlining general principles of social life, Tylor gave new directions to comparative inquiry into human life. And finally, in defining the cultural dimension of human existence, Edward Tylor created anthropology, the study of humankind. ♦

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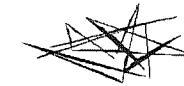
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## Lewis Henry Morgan

### The Evolution of Society



It is commonly alleged that the Victorian evolutionists based their conclusions solely on library research, sheltered from the vagaries of anthropological fieldwork or the complexities of interacting with real people. Bronislaw Malinowski, who revolutionized anthropological fieldwork in the 20th century (see Chapter 10), characterized the 19th-century evolutionists as “satisfied in reaching a rigid, self-contained entity” uncomplicated by the messy facts of cultural life (Malinowski 1944:31). Lewis Henry Morgan was the great exception.

Drawn to ethnography by his personal and professional ties to the Seneca Nation, a tribe of the Iroquois League, Morgan made extensive visits among various Iroquois groups. His notebooks and journals indicate “an acute and resourceful observer” (White 1958:4). Morgan also studied Native American groups in Kansas and Nebraska (1859–1860), the upper Missouri (1862), and the American Southwest (1878)—trips that involved intensive, if not prolonged, fieldwork. Robert Lowie (1930:169–170), an anthropologist and expert on the Crow, remarked that Morgan’s description of the Crow kinship system, though based on a brief trip, “was vastly superior to my own original attempt in this direction.” Lowie admitted, “my error seems the less pardonable because the essential facts had already been grasped by Morgan.” Combining field observations with extensive cross-cultural data, Lewis Henry Morgan produced masterful compilations of anthropological information.

So is there any truth to Malinowski’s criticism? Perhaps—but in Morgan’s case it is misplaced. It is not that Morgan was unconcerned with ethnographic data, but that Morgan analyzed those data within a

single evolutionary framework. Morgan's evolutionary approach was attacked by Boas, Kroeber, and others, but it also influenced the materialist approaches of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Leslie White. For example, Engels' 1884 *Origins of Family, Private Property and the State* is subtitled "which is based on the Findings of L. H. Morgan in his *Ancient Society*." Charles Darwin considered Morgan to be America's most eminent social scientist, and even a strict anti-evolutionist like Lowie (1936:181) could admire Morgan as "not a flashy intellect, but one of unusual honesty, depth, and tenacity. . . ." His career, one biographer suggested, "is one of the strangest in American intellectual history" (Resek 1960:vii).

## Background

Born in 1818, Morgan was raised on the frontier of western New York, and lived his life against the backdrop of manifest destiny, economic expansion and collapse, and American civil war. Trained as a lawyer, a Whig in personality and politics, an ardent supporter of the market and the Republic, it is hard to imagine a less likely contributor to Marxist theory than Lewis Henry Morgan.

Educated at Union College in Schenectady, Morgan embodied progress as an inevitable social process and as a personal code. Admitted to the bar in 1842 but unable to find legal work because of a lingering economic depression, Morgan occupied himself by penning lectures and articles on temperance, parallels between ancient Greece and mid-19th-century America, and other topics. In late 1844 Morgan opened a legal practice in Rochester, New York. Like many men of his time and class, Morgan joined a social club, the Order of the Gordian Knot, which originally drew on Greco-Roman themes. Yet gradually the association changed to emphasize uniquely American qualities and was renamed the Grand Order of the Iroquois, a change proposed by Morgan.

Morgan became consumed with the study of Iroquois culture, incorporating ethnographic facts into the protocols of the club. More serious activities soon followed. In the late 1840s, Morgan immersed himself in Iroquois studies. As he devoted more time to ethnology, Morgan's legal practice suffered, and Morgan decided to summarize his Iroquois research and then turn back to law. In six months, Morgan completed *League of the Ho-dé-no-sau-nee or Iroquois*.

The *League . . . of the Iroquois* summarized Morgan's studies about Iroquois religion, domestic architecture, government and social organization,

material culture, language, and place names. Richly illustrated with figures and maps, the monograph presented detailed ethnographic data, such as word lists, place names, and plans; it remains an invaluable source of information. Morgan's work received generally, but not universally, positive reviews. The American explorer and ethnologist John Wesley Powell (1880:114) described it as "the first scientific account of an Indian tribe given to the world." In contrast, the historian Francis Parkman argued that Morgan overemphasized the uniqueness of the Iroquois regarding "as the peculiar distinction of the Iroquois, that which is in fact common to many other tribes" (cited in Resek 1960:44). Parkman's criticism had merit: at this point, Morgan's anthropological knowledge was profound, but provincial.

During the next decade, Morgan attended to law and business, developing a modest fortune based on mining, land, and railroad interests. But in the late 1850s Morgan returned to ethnology, and specifically to studies of Iroquois kinship and social organizations.

Morgan discussed Iroquois kinship in the *League . . . of the Iroquois*, but in 1857 he read an expanded paper on "Laws of Descent of the Iroquois" to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The Iroquois kinship system surprised Morgan. For example, collateral kin were classified as lineal kin—the same terms are used for "Father" and "Father's Brother," for "Mother" and "Mother's Sister," and for siblings and parallel cousins. Descent among the Seneca was reckoned through the mother's line, and thus a child is a member of her/his mother's lineage, not father's. Morgan further observed that Iroquois political organization was an extension of kinship. "In fact," Morgan wrote, "their celebrated League was but an elaboration of these relationships into a complex, and even stupendous system of civil polity" (Morgan 1858:132).

In 1859 Morgan discovered that similar kinship systems were used by the Ojibwa of upper Michigan and possibly among the Dakota and Creek (White 1960:6–7). This led Morgan to a new approach to ethnographic data. Rather than solely document the folklore and nobility of the Iroquois, Morgan began to explore the relationships between different societies as reflected in shared systems of kinship. Morgan's greatest discovery, as anthropologist Leslie White (1957:257) put it, was "the fact that customs of designating relatives have scientific significance." That discovery was documented in Morgan's magnum opus, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*.

## Kinship and Evolution

Morgan began a global inquiry about kinship systems. Supported by the Smithsonian Institution and the State Department, Morgan sent a printed questionnaire requesting information about kinship terms to consular officials, missionaries, and scientists around the world. This cross-cultural survey combined with Morgan's own field research resulted in kinship data from 139 different groups in North America, Asia, Oceania, and ancient and modern Europe. (Africa, South America, and Australia remained essentially unknown.)

Morgan's goal was to trace the connections between systems of kinship and to explore their "progressive changes" as man developed through "the ages of barbarism" (Morgan 1871:vi). At this point, Morgan had not outlined the evolutionary scheme that forms the explanatory structure of his *Ancient Society*. Rather, Morgan approached kinship systems as if they were languages and models his analysis on the comparative method (see pp. 22–23). Just as scholars had demonstrated the development and historical relationships between different language families based on linguistic similarities, Morgan argued that, "In the systems of relationship of the great families of mankind some of the oldest memorials of human thought and experience are deposited and preserved" (Morgan 1871:vi).

Morgan argued that all kinship systems could be divided into two large groups—descriptive systems and classificatory systems. Descriptive systems—like that used in English—keep lineal relatives distinct from collateral kin; "Father" and "Father's Brother" are *not* given the same term. In descriptive systems there are fewer special kin terms and these terms are applied to kin who are relatively close to the speaker, referred to as "Ego" (Morgan 1871:468–469).

In contrast, classificatory systems treat lineal and collateral kin as if they were the same, distinguishing generation (Ego's Father vs. Ego's Father's Father) and gender (Ego's male cousins vs. Ego's female cousins), but using the same term for "Father" and "Father's Brother," for "Mother" and "Mother's Sister," etc., similar to the pattern Morgan first identified among the Iroquois.

In his survey, Morgan identified six families of kinship systems, three descriptive ones (Semitic, Aryan, and Uralian) and three classificatory ones (Malayan, Turanian, and Ganowanian). *Semitic* kin systems were found among Arabs, Hebrews and Armenians; *Aryan* systems were used by speakers of Persian, Sanskrit and all the European language groups, modern and ancient; whereas *Uralian* kin systems were found

among Turk, Magyar, Finn and Estonian populations. Of the classificatory systems, *Ganowanian* was a term Morgan invented (after the Seneca words for "bow and arrow"!) to cover all native North Americans; *Turanian* included Chinese, Japanese, Hindu and other groups of the Indian subcontinent; while *Malayan* subsumed Hawaiians, Maoris and all the other Oceanic groups in the sample.

These six families of kinship systems may be divided, Morgan wrote

. . . into two great divisions. Upon one side are the Aryan, Semitic, and Uralian, and upon the other the Ganowanian, the Turanian, and Malayan, which gives nearly the line of demarcation between civilized and uncivilized nations (emphasis added). [Morgan 1871:469]

This is a startling conclusion: the difference between classificatory and descriptive kinship systems marks the distinction between uncivilized and civilized. How could Morgan conclude this? How could he link differences in kinship systems to the levels of cultural advancement?

Morgan's logic was subtle, but flawed. First, Morgan argued that kinship systems were based on "natural suggestions," primitive ruminations "which arise spontaneously in the mind with the exercise of normal intelligence" (Morgan 1871:472), a point similar to Tylor's emphasis on the mental construction of culture (see pp. 20–22). Descriptive systems were natural inferences about descent when marriage was based on monogamy. Kinfolk, Morgan argued, would attempt to explain their relationships by referring to a series of married ancestors (Morgan 1871:472). Like Tylor, Morgan viewed culture as rationalizations about reality made by "savage philosophers," rationales which could be reconstructed by the ethnographer.

But then how do classificatory systems develop? Classificatory systems, Morgan argued, are also inferences from social relationships, but those where marriage is either polygamous, communal, or promiscuous. For example, Morgan discussed the Hawaiian kin classification in which Ego uses the same kin term for "Father," "Father's Brother," and "Mother's Brother" and another term for "Mother," "Mother's Sister," and "Father's Sister." Morgan interpreted Hawaiian kinship as reflecting

promiscuous intercourse within prescribed limits. The existence of this custom necessarily implies an antecedent condition of promiscuous intercourse, involving the cohabitation of brothers and sisters, and perhaps of parents and child; thus finding mankind in a condition akin to that of the inferior animals, and more intensely barbarous

than we have been accustomed to regard as a possible state of man.  
[Morgan 1970:481]

The classification systems are reasonable inferences based on promiscuous sex and indeterminate parentage (Morgan 1871:482–483). (I refer to my brothers' children as my children because I have intercourse with my brothers' wives, and how can I tell whose kid is whose? We're just one big happy family.)

Morgan inferred different social relations from distinct kinship systems, and then arranged them on a continuum from "most primitive" to "most civilized," from promiscuous intercourse to monogamy. But given the "natural stability of domestic institutions" (Morgan 1871:15), why would one system give rise to another? Why would classificatory systems evolve into descriptive ones? Why would kinship ever change?

Morgan offers a mix of explanations, each envisioning the "reform" of a previous state of society. When communal husbands defend their communal wives from other men, promiscuous society is partially "reformed." This begins a process which ultimately leads to "the family as it now exists" (Morgan 1871:481), i.e., the independent nuclear family based on monogamous marriage.

But the real change follows the invention of private property; at this point, Morgan dramatically expands the implications of his study.

There is one powerful motive which might under certain circumstances tend to the overthrow of the classificatory form and the substitution of the descriptive, but it would arise after the attainment of civilization. This is the inheritance of estates. [And] Hence the growth of property and the settlement of its distribution might be expected to lead to a more precise discrimination of consanguinity. . . . [Morgan 1871:14]

With the "rise of property, . . . the settlement of its rights, and above all, with the established certainty of its transmission to lineal descendants . . ." descriptive kin systems evolve and the nuclear family eventually develops. The family "became organized and individualized by property rights and privileges" (Morgan 1871:492). Social structure and economy are thus linked.

The British social anthropologist Meyer Fortes (1969:32) has written of Morgan's "combination of insight and confusion," arguing that Morgan's appeal to the role of private property was "pure guesswork—a projection of his private values as an American of his day in a society undergoing rapid economic expansion." Rife with assumption and reliant

on conjectural history, Morgan had no evidence that Hawaiian kin terms were remnants of a promiscuous horde or that "barbarous nations" were ignorant of inherited property (Morgan 1871:492).

Yet, Morgan was among the first to explore the importance of kin systems and their relationship to other aspects of human life, such as economy and politics. What began as a method for understanding the historical connections between societies was transformed into a scheme for understanding the development of all human society, the framework he elaborated in *Ancient Society*.

### *Ancient Society*

The central tenets of Morgan's classic are stated in the opening paragraph:

The latest investigations respecting the early condition of the human race are tending to the conclusion that mankind commenced their career at the bottom of the scale and worked their way up from savagery to civilization through the slow accumulation of experimental knowledge.

As it is undeniable that portions of the human family have existed in a state of savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still other portions in a state of civilization, it seems equally so that these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress. [Morgan 1877:3]

Thus the different portions of humanity—whether in Asia, Europe, Africa, Australia or the Americas—represented different points along a common line of progress. "The history of the human race," Morgan (1877:vi) observed, "is one in source, one in experience, and one in progress." Savagery in one culture, barbarism in another, and civilization in a third were not the result of different races being genetically condemned to backwardness or development; they were simply societies perched at different stages on a common progression of cultural evolution. Morgan writes:

It may be remarked finally that the experience of mankind has run in nearly uniform channels; that human necessities in similar condition have been substantially the same; and that the operations of the mental principle have been uniform in virtue of the specific identity of the brain of all the races of mankind. [Morgan 1978:8]

For Morgan the terms "savagery," "barbarism" and "civilization" represented well-defined stages of progress measured by four sets of cultural achievements: 1) inventions and discoveries, 2) the idea of government, 3) the organization of the family, and 4) the concept of property. The lines of progress were clearest in the field of inventions and discoveries because certain inventions necessarily preceded others (fire before pottery, hunting before pastoralism). Therefore Morgan chose technological developments as the primary but not sole "test of progress" marking the different stages of cultural evolution.

Morgan divided the earliest stage or "ethnic period" into *Lower Status of Savagery* which began with the earliest humans and ended with knowledge of fire and fishing, *Middle Status of Savagery* which began with fire and fishing and lasted until the invention of the bow and arrow, and *Upper Status of Savagery* which began with the bow and arrow but ended with the development of pottery.

The invention of pottery marked the divide between Savagery and Barbarism. *Lower Status of Barbarism* began with pottery and ended with the domestication of animals in the Old World and the irrigated agriculture and substantial architecture in the New World. Those developments marked the *Middle Status of Barbarism*, which lasted until the invention of smelting iron ore. The *Upper Status of Barbarism* began with iron smelting and continued until the development of a phonetic alphabet which marks the development of *Civilization*, a stage which continues, without additional subdivisions, to this day.

Morgan argued that the "successive arts of subsistence" were the foundation on which "human supremacy on the earth depended," suggesting that "the great epochs of human progress have been identified, more or less directly, with the enlargement of the sources of subsistence" (Morgan 1877:19). This materialist basis of cultural evolution has been considered Morgan's principal legacy by subsequent evolutionists like Marx, Engels, Leslie White (Chapter 13), Marvin Harris (Chapter 15), and Eleanor Leacock (Chapter 16). And yet, *Ancient Society* is not a coherently materialist theory, since it incorporates mentalistic explanations for changes in other arenas such as government, family, and property (see Service 1985:48-53).

Morgan's discussion of "Growth of the Idea of Government" comprises 60 percent of *Ancient Society*. By "government" Morgan referred to what modern anthropologists call social organization and political organization. Morgan explicitly distinguished social order based on kin ties (*societas*) from social order based on political ties (*civitas*):

The experience of mankind . . . has developed but two plans of government, using plan in its scientific sense. Both were definite and systematic organizations of society. The first and most ancient was social organization, founded upon gens, phratries and tribes. The second and latest in time was a political organization founded upon territory and upon property. Under the first a gentile society was created, in which the government dealt with persons through their relation to a gens and tribe. These relations were purely personal. Under the second a political society was created, in which the government dealt with persons through their relations to territory, e.g. the township, the county, and the state. These relations were purely territorial. The two plans were fundamentally different. One belongs to ancient society, the other to modern. [Morgan 1877:62]

Morgan briefly describes the organization of society based on sex, reprising his reconstruction of the communal and brother-sister families, then proceeds to his principal concern, the nature of the gens or, in modern anthropological terms, the lineage. In Morgan's terms the gens is a named social group of consanguineal kin (i.e. kin related by "blood," not marriage) descended from a common ancestor (Morgan 1877:63).

Whether matrilineal or patrilineal, the gens was the "fundamental basis of ancient society" found in cultures around the world and spanning the ethnic periods from Savagery to Civilization (Morgan 1877:64). When bound together into groups of two or more gens—which Morgan called "phratries," but today are known as "clans"—such kin-based social institutions provided the structure for the distribution of rights, property, and political offices. When a group of gens or phratries also had a single name for the entire group, spoke a single dialect, had a supreme government and an identified territory, then social order had reached the level of the tribe (Morgan 1877:102-103). In turn, when tribes coalesced into a single entity, a nation existed. Thus, Morgan argued that government evolved from promiscuous horde to brother-sister group families, from group families to gens, and then progressively through stages of phratry, tribe, and nation.

Morgan's scheme for the evolution of the family is largely derived from his discussions in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, but his treatment of property is more developed in *Ancient Society*. Arguing that the growth of property would "keep pace with the progress of inventions and discoveries" and that the possession and inheritance of property was regulated by progressive forms of social organization, Morgan directly linked concepts of property with

technological and social evolution (Morgan 1877:525–526). During the stage of Savagery, property was minimal and not inherited since it was buried as grave goods when the owner died. In the Lower Status of Barbarism, property increased in quantity but was distributed among the gens on a member's death without specific inheritance by spouses (Morgan 1877:530–531). By the Middle Status of Barbarism and with the development of agriculture, property increased in quantity and variety. New relationships developed between people and land, different forms of communal land ownership with individual rights to farm and use but not to sell (Morgan 1877:535–536). By the end of the Upper Status of Barbarism, two forms of land tenure evolved, state ownership and individual ownership, which became well-established by the ethnical period of Civilization (Morgan 1877:552).

But how did Morgan determine the relationship between ethnical periods, essentially defined by technological inventions, and forms of government and property? Basically in two ways. First, he proposed a plausible, but conjectural history, arguing that different forms of social organization or of property were necessarily based on earlier, simpler forms in the same way that metallurgy presumed the prior invention of fire.

Second, Morgan assumed that primitive societies were representative of earlier stages of social evolution, producing a relative ordering of social and property forms. With the exception of the Lower Status of Savagery, for which “No exemplification of tribes of mankind in this condition remained to the historical period,” primitive, non-Western societies represented the stages in cultural evolution, a point Tylor also made (see pp. 22–26) and that was later echoed by the French social theorist, Emile Durkheim (see Chapter 4). Morgan held that:

the domestic institutions of the barbarous, and even of the savage ancestors of mankind, are still exemplified in portions of the human family with such completeness that, with the exception of the strictly primitive period [i.e. Lower Savagery], the several stages of this progress are tolerably well preserved. They are seen in the organization of society upon the basis of sex, then upon the basis of kin, and finally upon the basis of territory; through the successive forms of marriage and of the family with the systems of consanguinity thereby created; and through house life and architecture; and through progress in usages with respect to the ownership and inheritance of property. [Morgan 1978:7]

Thus, an ethnographic study of the Australian aborigines or the Iroquois or ancient Romans was not a study of different cultures, but

of representatives of specific stages of cultural evolution. Civilized nations had progressed through similar stages, and profited by the “heroic exertions and the patient toil” of barbarian and savage ancestors, which was “part of the plan of the Supreme Intelligence to develop a barbarian out of a savage, and a civilized man out of this barbarian” (Morgan 1877:554).

## Conclusion

In many ways *Ancient Society* was Morgan's most important work and least convincing; it was influential and enraging. As noted above, Morgan's statements about the relationships between property relationships and social order were developed by Engels, and through Engel's work Morgan's ideas were spread world-wide. In response, Franz Boas would mount a severe critique of Morgan's and Tylor's “comparative method,” attacking the idea that humanity had passed through unilineal, progressive stages (see pp. 48–49).

In the 1940s Morgan's emphasis on the technological realm was recast by Leslie White (see Chapter 13) into a theory of cultural evolution; in fact, Morgan never seemed certain that “the arts of subsistence” were the causal determinants that White proposed, nor does White's work contain the mentalist elements found throughout *Ancient Society* suggesting that cultural developments were produced by individual will and rational choice (Colson 1974:10–11).

Though not without flaws, Morgan's contributions to anthropology remain essential and permanent. First, Morgan outlined the importance of the study of kinship systems, recognizing the significance of classificatory systems, the role of lineal descent groups in social organization, and the complementary patterns of kin-based political orders and those based on non-kin relationships. Second, Morgan conducted research that attempted to be systematic and global, anticipating by a century large-scale cross-cultural studies like the Human Relations Area Files. And finally, Morgan attempted to organize anthropological data in terms of an explicit framework of cultural evolution rather than simply treat cultural differences as ethnographic curios.

Lewis Henry Morgan died on December 17, 1881; he was 63 years old. His long-time friend, the Reverend Joshua McIlvaine (to whom *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* is dedicated), delivered the benediction, but only after first presenting an analysis of

the classificatory kinship system. It was a fitting tribute to Morgan's lifework, a body of work in which his confidence in reason's ability to discover the laws of nature is present on every page. ♦

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## Franz Boas

### Culture in Context



Franz Boas (1858–1942) shaped the direction of 20th-century American anthropology. His former student, Alfred Kroeber, wrote only months after Boas' death that "the world lost its greatest anthropologist and America one of its most colorful intellectual figures" (1943:5). Echoing this assessment thirty years later, George Stocking Jr. (1974:1) wrote, "there is no real question that [Boas] was the most important single force in shaping American anthropology in the first half of the 20th century."

Boas' influence was institutional, intellectual, and personal. Like Tylor and Durkheim, Boas played a pivotal role in moving anthropology into academia, in establishing associations and journals, and by creating essential networks of institutional support from the public, policy makers, and other scientists.

Boas defined the principal fields of inquiry that American anthropologists would pursue. His wide interests—spanning from biological anthropology to linguistics—gave American anthropology a topical breadth which is not really present in Great Britain or France, where anthropology is pre-eminently social anthropology, and archaeology and biological anthropology are separate fields. The fact that American anthropology has included socio-cultural anthropology, linguistics, physical anthropology, and archaeology—the so-called four fields approach—is partly a reflection of Boas' broad interests.

Boas created an anthropology very different from those of Morgan, Tylor, or Durkheim. Rather than assuming that cultural practices were explicable only in reference to broad evolutionary stages, Boas argued that they were understandable only in specific cultural contexts.

For example, Boas and the anthropologist O.T. Mason engaged in a spirited debate about the organization of ethnographic materials in museum displays: it is an unlikely subject for a fierce debate, but it produced an illuminating exchange. Mason, an evolutionist, proposed organizing ethnographic displays in the Smithsonian Institution by artifact classes—pottery, stone tools, musical instruments—regardless of their place of origin, displaying what Mason called "similarities in the products of industry." Mason wanted to illustrate the evolutionary parallels in human nature, arguing that cultural products stemmed from similar, universal causes.

Boas' response was quick and telling. Boas contended that cultural traits first must be explained in terms of specific cultural contexts rather than by broad reference to general evolutionary trends. "In the collections of the national museum," Boas (1887:486) wrote, "the marked character of the North-West American tribes is almost lost, because the objects are scattered in different parts of the building and are exhibited among those from other tribes." Instead of being presented in technological "stages," ethnographic collections should be "arranged according to tribes, in order to teach the peculiar style of each group. The art and characteristic style of a people can be understood only by studying its productions as a whole."

Over the next decade, Boas expanded this critique into a larger-scale attack on the theories of Morgan, Tylor, and other evolutionists. Boas' basic approach—culture was to be understood from detailed studies of specific cultures—was passed onto the first cohort of professional American anthropologists, individuals who would literally shape the field of anthropological inquiry: Alfred Kroeber (Chapter 5), Ruth Benedict (Chapter 6), Edward Sapir (Chapter 7), Margaret Mead (Chapter 8), and many others. In turn, Boas' students, as anthropologist Marvin Harris (1968:251) writes, "set forth the main lines of development of anthropological research and instruction at crucial institutions around the country." Thus Boas' personal contacts with his students extended his intellectual influence and shaped the institutions of American anthropology.

And yet, as Kroeber (1943:24) noted, ". . . It has long been notoriously difficult to convey the essence of Boas' contribution in anthropology to non-anthropologists" (a task at which Kroeber also failed). This difficulty, and the fact that Boas played a pivotal role in the establishment of American anthropology, make even a brief explanation of Boas' contribution of essential value.



## Background

The founder of American anthropology was born in northwestern Germany into a prosperous Jewish family that was committed to progressive education and politics. He wrote that he was raised "in a German home in which the ideals of the Revolution of 1848 were a living force," referring to the European revolutions that fought for universal suffrage, freedoms of press and assembly, and other liberal democratic reforms—revolts ultimately repressed by the military and monarchy. Of his parents' Judaism Boas (1939:19) wrote, "My father had retained an emotional affection for the ceremonial of his parental home, without allowing it to influence his intellectual freedom," and concluded, "my parents had broken through the shackles of dogma." By his own account, these influences shaped Boas' anthropology and his social activism.

Boas was educated in his hometown and then went off to study physics, mathematics, and geography in a string of universities. "My university studies were a compromise," Boas (1939:20) recalled, between an "emotional interest in the phenomena of the world," which led to geography, and an "intellectual interest" in the formal analyses of mathematics and physics. His doctoral dissertation was on the color of water, a topic emphasizing physics over geography; he received his doctorate in 1881 at the age of 23. Kroeber contended that Boas' education "as a physicist heavily determined his whole intellectual career," creating his "gifts for dealing with abstract form or structure and of intellectual precision and rigor" (Kroeber 1943:7).

After a year of military service, Boas was at loose ends; he wanted to study human societies, but lacked financial support. After a string of setbacks, in June 1883 Boas joined a German expedition to the Arctic to pursue research on the Inuit in order "to discover how far one can get, by studying a very special and not simple case, in determining the relationship between the life of a people and environment" (Boas 1974 [1882]:44). Supported by writing freelance articles for a Berlin newspaper, Boas spent a year on Baffin Island in Canada's Northwest Territories. Traveling by dog-sled during the Arctic winter in -50 degree temperatures, Boas charted the Baffinland coastline, collected Inuit legends, and observed rites and ceremonies. Ultimately, Boas was unsatisfied with his ethnographic research, calling it "shallow" and a "disappointment"; nevertheless, he recognized that the year in the Arctic "had a profound influence upon the development of my views . . . because it led me away from my former interests and toward the desire to

understand what determines the behavior of human beings" (Boas 1939:20–21).

Boas returned from the Arctic to uncertain prospects, unsuccessfully applying for jobs and fellowships in the United States, then working in Germany for 18 months before returning to America. In the fall of 1886 he worked for the Canadian Geological Survey in southern British Columbia conducting a brief ethnographic survey in the vicinity of Vancouver Island (Rohner and Rohner 1969). Returning to New York in 1887, Boas accepted a job as assistant editor of *Science*, and with some financial security, married and became an American citizen.

From his position at *Science* Boas extended his influence almost immediately. In 1888 the British Association for the Advancement of Science asked Boas to collect ethnographic data on the Northwest Coast. After a successful trip, the BAAS supported a second field trip to the Northwest Coast in 1889 in which Boas studied native languages, made anthropometric measurements, and investigated social organizations of the Kwakiutl and Tsimshian (Boas 1974a [1898]). In 1889 Boas obtained a teaching position at the newly founded Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where the first American Ph.D. in anthropology was granted under his leadership in 1892 (Kroeber 1943:12). In 1892 financial turmoil at Clark University led to a massive faculty resignation. Boas also left to join the anthropological staff at the Chicago World Columbian Exposition who were working on displaying Native American materials. A short-term position at the newly established Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago was followed by part-time work for the Smithsonian, another field trip to the Northwest Coast sponsored by the British Association, and unfulfilled hopes of a position at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. This professional turmoil was deepened by the death of his child (Hyatt 1990:33).

It was a dark and difficult time. Boas' letters from the field oscillate from quick descriptions of research accomplished to depressed accounts of financial insecurities, underscored by a deep longing for his wife and surviving children.

But in 1895 things began to change. John Wesley Powell offered Boas an editorial position at the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology, which galvanized the American Museum of Natural History into making a counter-proposal that Boas accepted. Appointed to the AMNH in December 1895, Boas finally obtained a permanent position. "No longer concerned with economic survival," Hyatt (1990:35) writes,

"he began to concentrate on the science of anthropology and its many applications."

From his base in New York, Boas began to influence American anthropology. In May 1896 he was hired as lecturer in physical anthropology at Columbia College and was appointed professor in 1899. He maintained his position at the American Museum of Natural History throughout this period and became Curator of Anthropology in 1901, weaving close ties between the AMNH and Columbia. Boas seized his opportunity with extraordinary energy and expertise. Harris (1968:252), a prolific scholar in his own right (see Chapter 15), writes:

Boas' accomplishments as a teacher, administrator, researcher, founder and president of societies, editor, lecturer, and traveler are exhausting to behold. To anyone who has ever worried about publishing or perishing, the fact that all this activity was accompanied by the publication of a torrent of books and articles is well nigh terrifying.

From 1895 till his death in 1942, Boas' resume becomes a blur of publications and accomplishments, almost as if he wanted to compensate for the frustrations of his early career. Boas became full professor at Columbia University in 1899 and was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1900. He helped establish the American Anthropological Association and revived the journal *American Anthropologist*. Boas founded the *International Journal of American Linguistics* in 1917, which continues to be published; helped establish an archaeological field school in Mexico; presided over a series of field research projects, particularly in the Northwest Coast, while continuing to publish constantly.

Boas authored six books and more than 700 articles; his bibliography records his diverse research (Andrews 1943). Most numerous are his articles and reports on his investigations in the Arctic and Northwest Coast; Boas' publications on the Kwakiutl, Tsimshian and other Northwest Coast societies total over 10,000 printed pages (Codere 1959). Boas made major contributions in the study of language. For four decades Boas taught two seminars at Columbia University: one on statistical methods, the other on North American Indian languages. Boas published extensively on Northwest Coast Indian languages and established a research agenda for recording Native American languages (Boas 1966c).

Third, Boas' work in anthropometry was a major field of endeavor with significant implications for public policy. In Boas' time, race was considered a fixed biological category; individual races were thought

to have specific properties—physical, mental, and cultural. Many formal studies defined racial variation based on cranial measurements rather than "obvious" characteristics like skin color. Skull form, it was thought, was a more stable property and thus a better basis for defining racial categories, yet the stability of cranial form had been assumed, never demonstrated. In 1911 Boas published the results of a massive study of the head form of 17,821 immigrants and conducted sophisticated statistical analyses of the data (remember, this was done without computers). Boas showed that cranial form was anything but stable, with significant differences between immigrant parents and their American-born children (Boas 1966a). Boas demonstrated that traits thought to be fixed, genetically inherited traits were actually modified by environment. And if such a stable racial trait as cranial form was influenced by environment, then *all* other racial classifications and characterizations became suspect.

In 1931 Boas gave his presidential address, entitled "Race and Progress," to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1966b). Boas summarized four decades of research, applying it to America's most cancerous social problem, racism. Throughout his career, Boas attacked racist pseudoscientific studies linking race and intelligence. Arguing that variations among individuals were greater than those between races, Boas concluded that "biological differences between races are small. There is no reason to believe that one race is by nature so much more intelligent, endowed with great will power, or emotionally more stable than another . . ." (1966b:13–14). Not only was Boas offended by bad science, but he drew on his personal experience of anti-Semitism; these factors produced an informed and fervent rejection of racism. Boas was involved in the establishment of the NAACP and wrote about race in popular magazines as well as in scientific journals (Hyatt 1990:83–99).

His 1931 speech was a central statement about a long battle against racism. Boas argued that because of intermarriage and mating there were no biologically "pure" races, and that, contrary to a then-common view, the "mixture" of races had no harmful consequences. Further, variations between individuals within races were greater than differences between races. Boas questioned the significance of IQ tests and discounted studies showing racial variations in intelligence. In addition to attacking the biological concept of race, he attacked the social concept. "Among us race antagonism is a fact," Boas stated. He then argued that America's great problem is a social stratification based

on racial characteristics which lead to divisive conflict (Boas 1966b:13–15). Boas concluded his AAAS address with this essential challenge:

As long as we insist on [socio-economic] stratification in racial layers, we shall pay the penalty in the form of interracial struggle. Will it be better for us to continue as we have been doing, or shall we try to recognize the conditions that lead to the fundamental antagonisms that trouble us? [1966b:17]

Boas continued to speak out against racism and by 1933 he was an early critic of Nazism. Boas attacked their racist policies, argued that Hitler and his leading supporters should be confined to an insane asylum, and wrote anti-Nazi polemics that the Allied underground smuggled into Germany (Herskovits 1943:45–46). Boas was a committed, public intellectual. (For more detailed discussions of Boas' diverse accomplishments in academic and public life, see Herskovits 1953; Hyatt 1990; Spier 1959; and Stocking 1974.)

## The Integration of Cultures

Like any developing scholar, Boas' opinions evolved over the course of his career, but his most consistently held position was that cultures were integrated wholes produced by specific historical processes rather than reflections of universal evolutionary stages. In his earliest works Boas wrote passages which could have been penned by Edward Tylor: "The frequent occurrence of similar phenomena in cultural areas that have no historical contact . . . shows that the human mind develops everywhere according to the same laws" (Boas 1966d [1888]:637). By the late 1890s, however, Boas had developed his critique of evolutionary frameworks and the comparative method. Boas argued that the comparative approaches of Morgan and Tylor were undercut by three flaws: 1) the assumption of unilineal evolution, 2) the notion of modern societies as evolutionary survivals, and 3) the classification of societies based on weak data and inappropriate criteria. These flaws were the targets of the Boasian attack.

Boas dismissed the evolutionary frameworks of Morgan, Tylor and others as untested and untestable. In his "The Methods of Ethnology" Boas summarizes the evolutionary position, which

presupposes that the course of historical changes in the cultural life of mankind follows definite laws which are applicable everywhere, and which bring it about that cultural development, in its main lines, is the same among all races and all peoples. [And] *As soon as we admit*

*that the hypothesis of a uniform evolution has to be proved before it can be accepted the whole structure loses its foundation.* [Boas 1966f (1920):281; emphasis added]

Boas undercut the entire basis of 19th-century cultural evolution. We might agree with Tylor and Morgan that certain technological processes have an inherent evolutionary order—fire must precede pottery making, flintlocks were invented before automatic rifles—but there is no ethnographic evidence indicating that matrilineal kin systems preceded patrilineal kin systems or that religions based on animism developed before polytheistic religions. Boas argued that this unilineal ordering is a simple assumption; there is no proven historical relationship nor any way to prove such a relationship. Therefore, evolutionary frameworks were unproven assumptions imposed on the data, not theories derived from ethnographic data.

Further, Boas argued, the unilineal classification of different societies assumed that different societies with similar cultural patterns (e.g., they used Hawaiian kinship classifications [see p. 33] or the bow and arrow) were at similar evolutionary levels.

On the contrary, he believed that very similar cultural practices may arise from different causes. Anthropology's primary task, according to Boas, was to provide "a penetrating analysis of a unique culture describing its form, the dynamic reactions of the individual to the culture and of the culture to the individual" (Boas 1966g [1936]:310–311). Boas did not assume (as some of his students did) that general laws of human behavior did not exist, but rather that those laws could be derived only from an understanding of specific historical processes.

We agree that certain laws exist which govern the growth of human culture, and it is our endeavor to discover these laws. The object of our investigation is to find the processes by which certain stages of culture have developed. The customs and beliefs themselves are not the ultimate objects of research. We desire to learn the reasons why such customs and beliefs exist—in other words, we wish to discover the history of their development.

. . . A detailed study of customs in their bearings to the total culture of the tribe practicing them, and in connection with an investigation of their geographical distribution among neighboring tribes, affords us almost always a means of determining with considerable accuracy the historical causes that led to the formation of the customs in question and to the psychological processes that were at work in their development. The results of inquiries may be three-fold. They may reveal the environmental conditions which have created or modified

elements; they may clear up psychological factors which are at work in shaping culture; or they may bring before our eyes the effects that historical connections have had upon the growth of the culture. [Boas 1966e (1896):276]

Thus Boas suggests that law-like generalizations can be based on adaptational, psychological, or historical factors, but only if documented by well-established ethnographic cases:

The comparative method and the historical method, if I may use these terms, have been struggling for supremacy for a long time, but we may hope that each will soon find its appropriate place and function. The historical method has reached a sounder basis by abandoning the misleading principle of assuming connection wherever similarities of culture are found. The comparative method, notwithstanding all that has been said and written in its praise, has been remarkably barren of definite results, and I believe it will not become fruitful until we renounce the vain endeavor to construct a uniform systematic history of the evolution of culture, and until we begin to make our comparisons on the broader and sounder basis which I venture to outline. Up to this time we have too much reveled in more or less ingenious vagaries. The solid work is still all before us. [Boas 1966e (1896):280]

## Conclusion

Franz Boas argued that detailed studies of particular societies had to consider the entire range of cultural behavior, and thus the concepts of anthropological holism and cultural particularism became twin tenets of American anthropology. In later years Boas grew even more skeptical about the possibility of deriving cultural laws. Writing in 1932, Boas concludes:

Cultural phenomena are of such complexity that it seems to me doubtful whether valid cultural laws can be found. The causal conditions of cultural happenings lie always in the interaction between individual and society, and no classificatory study of societies will solve this problem. The morphological classification of societies may call to our attention some problems. It will not solve them. In every case it is reducible to the same source, the interaction between the individual and society. [1966b:257]

Unfortunately, Boas did not articulate the relationship between cultural elements and cultural wholes. *Stocking* poses the unresolved paradox:

On the one hand, culture was simply an accidental accretion of individual elements. On the other, culture—despite Boas' renunciation of organic growth—was at the same time an integrated spiritual totality that somehow conditioned the form of its elements. [Stocking 1974:5–6]

Boas demolished the evolutionary framework, provided methodologies for the investigation of specific cultures and hinted at the relationship between individuals and society, cultural elements and cultural wholes—but never really answered *how* cultures become integrated wholes.

Due to Boas' enormous influence on the practice of anthropology in America, anthropological research took a decidedly anti-theoretical turn in the early 20th century, much research focusing on the differences rather than the similarities between societies. When cultural elements were held in common, they were interpreted as evidence of historical contact and diffusion and not unilineal evolution. The anti-evolutionary position would dominate American anthropology until the 1940s, when an evolutionary approach would be reformulated in the work of Leslie White (Chapter 13) and Julian Steward (Chapter 14).

Until his death in 1942, Boas continued his remarkably detailed, stunningly diverse studies of humanity, and his influence was felt for decades later as many of his students turned their attention to what Boas saw as the key nexus, the relationship between the individual and society. ♦

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## Emile Durkheim

### The Organic Society



The tradition of anthropological inquiry concerned with the character of social integration descends from the works of the French sociologist and educator Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). This line passes from Durkheim to his students, particularly Marcel Mauss (Chapter 9), and through them to the British school of social anthropology exemplified by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (see Chapter 11), Evans-Pritchard (Chapter 12), and more recently Mary Douglas (Chapter 20), and many others. These scholars share a concern with the arrangement and articulation of basic social segments: How are different kin groups, classes, and political and religious units structured such that a given, coherent society exists? With his analytical focus on social integration, Durkheim's influence permeates a wide range of anthropological endeavor, including British social anthropology, anthropological approaches to religion, and questions about the origins of the state and the evolution of social complexity.

Given the influence of Durkheim's ideas, it is hard to understand how little impact Durkheim had on early American anthropology. As one historian has noted, ". . . the American school of anthropologists (Ruth Benedict, Clyde Kluckhohn, Margaret Mead) owed a good deal to him, even, or chiefly, when they contradicted several of his conclusions" (Peyre 1960:23). The anthropologist Paul Bohannan (1960:77) wrote, "A few cultural anthropologists have roundly rejected Durkheim; others have rephrased him to their own ends; most have simply ignored him."

Why this lack of appreciation and indifference? Partly it was due to the barriers of language; only one of Durkheim's books, *The Elementary*

*Forms of the Religious Life*, was translated into English during his lifetime (in 1915), and his other classic, *The Division of Labor in Society*, originally written in 1893, was not translated into English until 1933. Some American anthropologists dismissed Durkheim for his lack of fieldwork, his assumption that certain societies (like the Arunta of Australia) were archetypally primitive, and for his apparent lack of concern with the details of ethnographic data. Yet, the more fundamental barrier which existed between American anthropologists and Durkheim and the scholars he influenced was a basic distinction between culture and society.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Tylor's definition of culture emphasized the intellectual, ideational aspects of culture—culture was shared, learned, patterned “knowledge.” For much of the 20th century, American anthropology has approached “culture” in this manner, distinguishing “culture” from “society.” For example, Alfred Kroeber (1952a:118–119) cited the “existence of cultureless or essentially cultureless subhuman societies” like those of ants or bees as evidence for the difference between society and culture (see pp. 73–74). Durkheim, intent on creating “a science of society,” was viewed as somewhat irrelevant by American cultural anthropologists. In an address to the 1950 American Anthropological Association, Kroeber dealt with Durkheim in a surprisingly casual manner:

Durkheim, to sum him up, may be rated a positivist; an empiricist in principle, but with only mild urge toward the use of wide context; like most of his countrymen [Kroeber engages in anti-French slurs] more interested in sharp principles than in variety of comparative data; not ethnocentric but yet little given to relativistic and pluralistic recognitions; and continuing to the end to believe that cultural phenomena can be adequately subsumed under purely social concepts. Durkheim left a school, but his actual constructive influence outside France has been slight, except on and through Radcliffe-Brown. [Kroeber 1952b:146]

From a current perspective, Kroeber's assessment of Durkheim is not only insulting but incorrect. Clearly this misappreciation involved more than language barriers; Kroeber, Lowie, and many other American anthropologists were cosmopolitan scholars comfortable in French. So either Durkheim's current status is misplaced or Kroeber and his colleagues were unable to understand the lasting value of Durkheim's ideas.

## Background

Emile Durkheim was born in 1858 to a Jewish family in the Alsace region of eastern France. Much of Durkheim's life was framed by conflicts between Germany and France, first in the Franco-Prussian War 1870–1871—in which France was crushed, Napoleon III captured, and Alsace ceded to the Germans—and later World War I. The destruction experienced by France and the Allies was severe, and like so many others, Durkheim lost many loved ones, including his son, André, and every one of his students except for Marcel Mauss. By all accounts, the war aged him before his time; he died at the age of 59. But this was all in the future.

As a youth, Durkheim was recognized for his brilliance and began to advance through the centralized hierarchy of the French educational system. Durkheim spent his adult life within this system, as an instructor at several lycées teaching philosophy to 17-year-old boys, and after a year's sabbatical in Germany, as a professor of social science at the University of Bordeaux. He was “called” to the University of Paris in 1902 and became a full professor there in 1906, teaching courses in education, philosophy, and sociology.

For Durkheim (1960:325), sociology was “the science of societies”; Durkheim's sociology lacked the emphasis on Western, industrialized society typical of American sociology. In the French university, sociology was taught as a dimension of philosophy, but the implications of Durkheim's teaching were felt in a number of other disciplines. Peyre (1960:15) writes that “sociology became a catalyst that transformed a number of other disciplines,” such as law, economics, geography, and anthropology and ethnology, exemplified by the works of Mauss (see Chapter 9) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Chapter 17) and several generations of French social scientists.

And so the paradox reemerges: how could such an influential scholar have so little impact on the early years of American anthropology? The answer relates, in part, to the interpretation of two of Durkheim's central themes: the ideas of mechanic solidarity versus organic solidarity, and the *conscience collective*.

## Mechanic and Organic Solidarity

In the preface to his first classic, *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim (1964:33) begins with an acute phrase, “We do not wish to extract

ethics from science, but to establish the science of ethics, which is quite different. Moral facts are phenomena like others; they consist of rules of action recognizable by certain distinctive characteristics." When we understand that for Durkheim "moral" implies not only value (as in the *moral* of a story) but also outlook (as in *morale*), then it becomes clear that he is describing the study of values, world view, and beliefs and proposing that they are amenable to scientific inquiry (cf. Bohannan and Glazer 1972:232). The specific focus of Durkheim's work was, in his words,

. . . the question of the relations of the individual to social solidarity. Why does the individual, while becoming more autonomous, depend more upon society? How can he be at once more individual and more solidary. Certainly these two movements, contradictory as they appear, develop in parallel fashion. This is the problem we are raising. [Durkheim 1964:37]

A moment's reflection shows that Durkheim is on to something. A hunter and gatherer, living as an integral part of a band, can also survive on his own; his social identity is as a member of a group even though he has all the skills necessary for individual survival. We, members of industrialized societies, living independently and often in isolation, rely on others to raise our food, fix our cars, determine the value of our labors, and so on; we are socially independent, but we cannot survive without others. *The Division of Labor in Society* is not about the *sexual* division of labor, but rather about how society can be alternately segmented or unitary and characterized by homogeneity or heterogeneity and yet, somehow, stay together.

In Durkheim's era, the division of labor was not an esoteric subject; it characterized the transformation of European life during the Industrial Revolution. It was at the heart of Adam Smith's analysis of the *Wealth of Nations*, it was central to Marx's critique of capitalism, and it was relevant to issues that touched off massive social upheavals, like the revolt of the Paris Commune in 1871, which was bloodily suppressed. The division of labor and the emergence of new social classes were themes for social analysis with real impacts, much like academic discussions of race and ethnic relations are immediately relevant to people in the United States today. And so Durkheim was attempting to understand, at least partially, how his own society had come into being.

To explore this question, Durkheim chose a comparative method, but it is a comparative method different in logic and intent than the comparative method employed by Tylor and Morgan (see pp. 22–23,

35), which involved identifying similarities in cultural traits to reconstruct historical connections. For Durkheim, the comparative method consisted of contrasting entire societies in order to identify dimensions of social integration.

Durkheim proposed that societies have different configurations of social integration or "solidarity." He argued that different societies could have distinct types of solidarity as the basis of social existence, and he called these "mechanical solidarity" and "organic solidarity." Mechanical solidarity "comes from a certain number of states of conscience which are common to all the members of the same society" (1964:109). Mechanical solidarity applies to societies in which all members have a common, shared, social experience, but who do not necessarily depend on each other to survive. This form of solidarity is called mechanical, Durkheim writes, not because ". . . it is produced by mechanical or artificial means. We call it that only by analogy to the cohesion which unites the elements of an inanimate body, as opposed to that which makes a unity out of the elements of a living body" (1964:130). In mechanical solidarity societies, Durkheim believed, the individual was directly and equally attached to society, normative values were shared and more important than individual ones, and special subdivisions within a society were either absent or weak.

This contrasts with societies in which diverse, interdependent subdivisions are linked by formal institutions into a single society. This form of solidarity Durkheim called "organic," in the sense of a complex biological organism:

This solidarity resembles that which we observe among the higher animals. Each organ, in effect, has its special physiognomy, its autonomy. And moreover, *the unity of the organism is as great as the individuation of the parts is more marked*. Because of this analogy we propose to call the solidarity which is due to the division of labor, organic. [1964:131; emphasis added]

Thus Durkheim outlined two models of social integration that characterized two contrasting societal structures. A mechanical solidarity society was "an absolutely homogeneous mass whose parts were not distinguished from one another, and which consequently had no structure" (in Giddens 1972:141). Organic solidarity societies, on the other hand,

are formed not by the repetition of similar, homogeneous segments, but by a system of different organs each of which has a special role, and which are themselves formed of differentiated parts. Not only are

social elements not of the same nature, but they are not distributed in the same way. They are . . . coordinated and subordinated one to another around the same central organ which exercises a moderating action over the rest of the organism. [Giddens 1972:143]

For example, a wide range of institutions in American society are in some sense dependent on the legal system: corporations, marriages and families, nonprofit organizations, political offices, and so on. Each of these institutions is separate and different, but subordinate to the rule of law which thus exercises its "moderating influence" over the different organs of American society.

The differences between mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity were so marked that the development of one form could only be at the expense of the other, and historically that meant the evolution of organic solidarity as mechanical solidarity declined.

Durkheim culled his examples of traditional, non-Western societies from the Bible, classical texts, and primitive ethnographies to show that such different groups as the Australian aborigines, the unspecified tribes of native America and Africa, and the tribes of Israel all exhibit mechanical solidarity (1964:176–178). In contrast, such different societies as the Franks and the early Roman republic exhibit organic solidarity (1964:183–185). On such slender empirical grounds, Durkheim deduced a set of historical expectations, a set of developmental hypotheses.

First, Durkheim proposed that, "Whereas lower societies are spread over immense areas relative to the size of their populations, among more advanced peoples population tends to become more and more concentrated" (in Giddens 1972:152). This process begins with the development of agriculture, "since it necessitates a life in a fixed territory . . .", and intensifies with industrialization. Second, the development of towns marks a threshold between mechanical and organic solidarity. Towns, Durkheim writes, "always result from the need of individuals to put themselves constantly in the closest possible contact with each other," presumably because their diverse tasks, parceled out by the division of labor, must be exchanged to be of value. In contrast, "As long as society is essentially segmental [and solidarity is mechanical], towns do not exist" (Durkheim (1972:152). Concurrently, the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity is marked by the "number and rapidity of the means of communication and transportation" (1972:153), the network that binds together the disparate organs of society.

Thus Durkheim outlined a model that not only categorized existing and historically known societies, but provided a theory about the evolution of different social forms. The shift from mechanical to organic solidarity resulted from the greater division of labor; with greater numbers of separate tasks, the need for integrating structures increased. In turn, the division of labor became more marked as greater concentrations of people lived in one place; that is because, as Durkheim hypothesizes, "If work becomes progressively divided as societies become more voluminous and dense, it is not because external circumstances are more varied, but because struggle for existence is more acute" (1972:153). Borrowing directly from Darwin, Durkheim argued that as more people live together, competition over resources intensifies and, in response, people pursue different economic niches, evolving into different social groups. Once the trend to greater concentration of population begins, a series of social consequences follow that are expressed by differences in the fundamental organization of society.

But apart from the laws and contracts and markets that bind a society together, what is it that gives a society a distinctive, common identity? Durkheim analyzed that question with a concept that is one of the more misunderstood ideas in the social sciences, the *conscience collective*.

## The Conscience Collective

The anthropologist Paul Bohannan (1960:77–78) wrote that "Durkheim, like all original thinkers, had to stretch the language he used for the exposition of his ideas to the limits, and perhaps beyond." The difficulty in understanding the notion of the *conscience collective* stems from the inherent ambiguity of the term compounded by the definitional nuances lost in the translation of the phrase from French to English. The French *conscience* combines both the sense of awareness associated in English with "consciousness" and the sense of a regulating function associated with "conscience." But in addition, *conscience* implies "that of which someone is (or many persons are) aware." Paul Bohannan writes, "the only suitable English word for this notion is the anthropologist's term 'culture.' Thus the French term *conscience* means three things: internalized sanctions, awareness, and perceived culture."

This combination of two concepts—being aware of something and the object of awareness—makes the term *conscience* so slippery for English speakers, and yet so important to Durkheim's work. "This



ambiguous assimilation of the knowing instrument and the known thing—of consciousness and culture—into a single concept was vital to Durkheim's thought," Bohannan writes (1960:79). "Encompassing what are for English-speaking thinkers, at least those in social science, two substantives, the knower and the known, Durkheim focused his attention on the verbal connection between them: the 'knowing,' or, as he called, it the process of representation" (Bohannan 1960:79).

The subtleties of *conscience collective* may have contributed to Durkheim's neglect in early American anthropology. For Boas (pp. 66–67) and Kroeber (pp. 73–74), culture consisted of learned and shared knowledge and behavior, expressed in such different ways as technology, social organization, or language. Further, cultural knowledge was both separate from the process by which it was obtained and distinct from the society which held that knowledge. Finally, few American anthropologists were interested in the process of cultural acquisition (enculturation) until the 1930s. And so not only did Durkheim's *conscience collective* combine two terms that English speakers would distinguish, but it also drew attention to the process of cultural knowing that early American anthropologists did not often consider. No wonder the idea seemed confusing or useless.

Yet *conscience collective* was pivotal in Durkheim's work because it connected the different patterns of social solidarity to the processes of enculturation within a particular society. *Conscience collective* has different properties in societies based on mechanical solidarity versus those based on organic solidarity. First, in mechanical solidarity the individual tends to have values or views which are shared with all other members of society; in that sense, as Giddens (1972:5) writes, "individual 'consciousness' is simply a microcosm of *conscience collective*," which is not the case under organic solidarity. Second, in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity, the *conscience collective* has a greater intellectual and emotional hold over the individual. Third, in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity the *conscience collective* has greater rigidity; certain behaviors are required or prohibited and everyone knows what they are, whereas in organic societies—like our own—there may be constant debates about acceptable behaviors or appropriate values. And finally, there is a difference in content. In societies associated with mechanical solidarity the *conscience collective* is broadly associated with religion; the sanctions for social norms come from the supernatural. In societies characterized by organic solidarity, the role of religion is diminished. Durkheim writes:

But, if there is one truth that history teaches us beyond doubt, it is that religion tends to embrace a smaller and smaller portion of social

life. Originally, it pervades everything; everything social is religious; the two words are synonymous. Then, little by little, political, economic, scientific functions free themselves from the religious function, constitute themselves apart and take on a more and more acknowledged temporal character. God, who was at first present in all human relations, progressively withdraws from them; he abandons the world to men and their disputes. [Durkheim 1964:169]

In this dramatic manner, Durkheim highlights the pervasive importance of religion in society, something that had not been studied systematically by social scientists to that point. Durkheim (1964:168) bemoaned the lack of "any scientific notion of what religion is," and set out to change that situation in his classic, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

### *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*

In this work, Durkheim set out to describe the basic elements of religious life by studying the most primitive social organization he knew of, the native peoples of central Australia. He outlined his method in the opening paragraph of the book:

[We] propose to study the most primitive and simple religion which is actually known, to make an analysis of it, and to attempt an explanation of it. A religious system may be said to be the most primitive which one can observe when it fulfills the two following conditions: in the first place, when it is found in a society whose organization is surpassed by no others in simplicity; and secondly, when it is possible to explain it without making use of any element borrowed from a previous religion. [1968:13]

Durkheim thus attempted to identify not only the elemental constituents of religion, but the origins of religion. Previously, two basic ideas had been advanced about the origins of religion. First was animism, an idea developed by Tylor that characterized religion as originating with an individual's explanation of misunderstood phenomena. Animism is the idea that spirits occupy all sorts of objects. Just as humans have different states of being—asleep and awake, living and dead—that imply the existence of an animating force, objects also have *anima*, and primitive religious activities revolve around avoiding, propitiating, or placating those spirits. An alternative concept, naturism, saw religion as an expression of natural forces and objects—weather, fire, the sea, lightning, and so on. Durkheim quotes a major

proponent of naturism, Max Müller, as writing, "at first sight, nothing seemed less natural than nature. Nature was the greatest surprise, a terror, a marvel, a standing miracle . . ." (Durkheim 1968:92). Religion, Müller held, arose from attempts to understand these phenomena. Thus animism and naturism similarly view religion as originating with individuals' explanations of natural phenomena.

Durkheim's approach was fundamentally different:

[R]eligion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So if the categories are of religious origins they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they too should be social affairs and the product of collective thought. [1968:22]

For that reason, Durkheim was interested in the totem as expressed by native peoples of central Australia. Totem refers to a category of things—animals, plants, celestial bodies, ancestral mythic beings—associated with a social group. The name of the totem, for example, "red kangaroo," refers to the clan associated with that totem. The totem is the name and emblem of the clan and is incorporated into the liturgy of religious practices. The totem is, Durkheim writes (1968:140), "the very type of sacred thing." Its sacredness is imparted to those things associated with it, its loss is the greatest imaginable disaster, and specific taboos transform the animal or object into embodiments of sacredness. Yet, a specific totem is only sacred to a particular clan and not to any other. Such a brief synopsis hardly does justice to Durkheim's analysis of totemism or the vast literature subsequent to his work, but it illustrates how Durkheim perceived the social nature of religion.

Durkheim emphasized the elemental properties of religion:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a Church, all those who adhere to them. [1968:62]

What makes religion distinctive is its focus on the sacred, which is itself a social construction. There is nothing inherently sacred or profane in the world. A place, a symbol, or a personality becomes sacred because it is socially classified as sacred. It is impossible to separate the object of worship from the process of socially defining the sacred: in

other words, the knower and the known (to use Bohannan's phrase) are indivisible, mutually created by the process of knowing.

What was true of sacredness was equally true of other shared cognitive categories, what Durkheim called "collective representations." Collective representations include such systems of knowledge as cardinal directions, temporal divisions, color categories, and social distinctions—classifications unique to different societies. The arbitrary yet very systematic nature of collective representations (e.g., all Americans agree that South is opposite of North and there are sixty minutes in an hour) indicate they are not simply products of individual musings about the nature of existence. The collective representations of religion are not derived from individual psychology because, Durkheim writes,

between these two sorts of representations there is all the difference which exists between the individual and the social, and one can no more derive the second from the first than he can deduce society from the individual, the whole from the part, the complex from the simple. Society is a reality *sui generis*; it has its own peculiar characteristics, which are not found elsewhere and which are not met with again in the same form in all the rest of the universe. [1968:29]

Collective representations exist because there are two different spheres of human knowledge, the individual and the social, and Emile Durkheim developed a theory of the social basis of cultural knowledge.

## Conclusion

The early American anthropologists criticized Durkheim's lack of field-work experience, his over-reliance on a few ethnographies, and his simplistic classification of very different societies into the category "primitive." But many American anthropologists also seem to have misunderstood what Durkheim was trying to do—attempting to build a theory of society.

Among Durkheim's many contributions to social science, this may be his most profound: the idea that there is a distinct realm of human existence, society, which is not derived from any other source. Society has characteristic structures that allow us to distinguish social forms, those based on mechanical solidarity versus those based on organic solidarity. We can perceive the origins of organic solidarity in those pure examples of mechanical solidarity that Durkheim called (1964:174) "the veritable social protoplasm, the germ out of which all social types would develop." Change occurred systematically, caused

by innovations in the economy that affected human population densities which then led to the increasing division of labor. Such developments are paralleled by changes in the *conscience collective*: in the degree to which an individual's belief represents everybody's belief, in the controlling power of belief, in the diminishing importance of religious institutions and the domination of secular ones. That issue Durkheim explores by showing that religion is eminently social, and not the extrapolation of individual musings to a larger audience. Along with other categories, the boundaries between sacred and profane are collective—social—representations. Therefore, understanding the different currents of human existence requires focusing on the social dimensions because it is there that the differences are created, defined, expressed, and transmitted. These are some of the key notions in the science of society created by Emile Durkheim. ♦

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## The Nature of Culture

The Boasian critique of the comparative method and evolutionary schemes created an analytical vacuum. If cultural patterns are not the reflections of earlier stages of human development that has run “in nearly uniform channels” in Tylor’s phrase, then what do cultural patterns reflect? If cultures are essentially the accidental accumulations of diverse traits and values brought together by specific historical circumstances of innovation, diffusion, and migration, how is it that cultures are integrated wholes? If, as Boas had written, “the causal conditions of cultural happenings lie always in the interaction between individual and society,” what is the nature of that interaction? What holds cultures together? What gives cultures their distinctive essences?

These questions plagued Boas’ students like Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, and Margaret Mead. And although the answers they arrived at were different, their respective explorations were framed by three concepts: the causal priority of culture, the concept of the microcosm, and the recognition that cultural knowledge was rapidly vanishing.

Boas’ specific critiques of unilineal evolution and racial explanations of behavior led to the general conclusion that culture could only be explained in reference to specific cultural patterns, that culture explains culture, a position known as *cultural determinism* (Hatch 1973:49). Thus, the idea of *cultural relativism* holds that one can only understand a specific society’s practices within its specific cultural context (Hatch 1983). Similarly, explanation requires understanding how historical processes of diffusion, migration, and invention produced a particular cultural pattern, the idea of *historical particularism* (Harris