

Schneider: Critique of the  
Study of Kinship

## 15 Institutions, Domains, and Other Rubrics

The quartet of kinship, economics, politics, and religion as institutions, domains, rubrics, or the building blocks of society or culture has been part of anthropology since its beginnings. In the mid-nineteenth century the problem for anthropology was to establish the history or development of civilization as this was embodied in European culture. Certain processes of historical development were assumed. Development proceeded from the simple to the complex, from the undifferentiated to the differentiated. European "civilization" was seen as the most recent, advanced, and highly differentiated form of social life known to man. To the extent that kinship, economics, politics, and religion were undifferentiated that society was "primitive," "simple," or "simpler."

An understanding of kinship must take into account the fact that it is one of this quartet of institutions, rubrics, or domains, with this long history, and that this quartet is treated as the most important set. Medicine, education, art, or myth, for example, are of lesser importance. Furthermore, there is a sort of theory of institutions which contributes to the ways in which kinship itself is formulated. The four distinct terms imply four distinct sorts of "things." This implies that each of these institutions constitutes a bounded unit. There is the further implication that each such bounded unit constitutes a system of some sort. Indeed, statements about "the economic system," "the kinship system," etc., abound. As "bounded" and as "system," it is implied that one can allocate concrete "pieces" or "parts" to one or another of these units, and that the institutions are to some degree concrete entities. Hence they can act as the "building blocks" of the society or culture.

Institutions, domains, and rubrics of this sort have been defined as organized around particular kinds of activities, or particular functions, and sometimes as combinations of the two. Religion, for example, is sometimes treated as that system of activities which embodies the ultimate values of the society (a Durkheimian view), sometimes as those activities that involve ritual, ceremony, and worship, and sometimes as anything having to do with a belief in the supernatural. The first stresses function, the second kinds of activities, the third a combination of the two.

Within this very general framework, institutions have been more specifically defined in a wide variety of ways by different workers over the last century and a half. The point is clear from the previous discussion of kinship. These different ways often articulate closely with particular theoretical positions, problems, and aims.

This leads to the next point. Whatever the particular task or theoretical stance—historical, developmental, evolutionary, functionalist à la Durkheim, functionalist à la Radcliffe-Brown, functionalist à la Malinowski, structuralist à la Lévi-Strauss, interpretivist à la Geertz, materialist à la Harris, Marxist à la Goody—the traditional quartet and the presumption of the special importance of the particular members of the quartet has survived intact. To put it in another way, the quartet of kinship, economics, politics, and religion has survived every shift of theoretical orientation, anthropological aim, and problem as well as every anthropologist (and I am sure it will survive me). This says something about the quartet which is worth stressing; it is so taken for granted, so embedded in the ways anthropology is performed, so widely used that there is no general theory of institutions but only the more or less implicit theories of particular persons or particular theoretical stances. If kinship can be studied and understood by Morgan, Maine, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, and Friedrich Engels as if it were the same object, the same monolithic institution, the same “thing” about which each of these can “discover” something different and reveal different “truths,” the implication is that there really is something quite real out there above and beyond any particular theoretician’s peculiar views: a truth waiting to be revealed. Epistemes may come and go. Social formations may appear and disappear. Structure can mean different things to different people. A habitus may seize one but not another anthropologist while praxis may be fitfully fashionable. But kinship, economics, politics, and religion have been here for more than a century and a half and have survived as an integral part of the vocabulary of every—and I mean every—anthropologist (indeed, every social scientist) despite the most devastating criticisms.

For example, one of the most common criticisms is that when institutions are defined in terms of function the discreteness or unity of the institution simply does not stand up under examination. Kinship is a good example. Kinship has been defined functionally, for instance, as that institution which attends to the production and reproduction of persons, so that children are produced and parents are reproduced, or sometimes more simply as that institution whose primary function is to order and attend to the problems of human reproduction (see Malinowski 1930a:28 for example). Note that an institution by this definition has a primary function, which implies that it also has other, secondary or derivative functions.

The difficulty, of course, is that examination of the situation in any society shows that this primary function is taken care of by customary activities that spread throughout the whole culture and social system and which are not confined to what is normally considered kinship. At the same time, there is far more to what is usually considered as kinship than simply dealing with the problem of reproduction, even if we allow for the possibility that

many if not all customs are multifunctional. On the other side, there are parts of what is traditionally defined as kinship that only remotely relate to reproduction, if they are related at all. Thus any given custom falls not into one institution or another, but spreads across all of them. This casts doubt on whether any institution can have a primary function at all. For example, if the primary function of kinship is ordering reproduction, and one problem is that of social placement, that is, setting the new member of the society in a particular nexus of social relations with a particular status, the difficulty is that there are a host of religious, economic, and political considerations which always enter into the system of social placement. The establishment of a son and heir to a sacred ruler is different from the establishment of a son and heir to a commoner, yet both entail not merely kinship considerations, but political, economic, and religious factors all of equal importance. Thus the boundedness of the notion of institution is dubious at best, and equally so any idea that institutions can be the building blocks of society or culture. Without some kind of boundedness and some degree of internal systematicity it is hard to see how society could be built of such amorphous blocks.

Let me make the same point in another way. Treating the quartet of institutions seriously has led to the consistent misinterpretation of the potlatch in terms of European notions of economics, which is as inept as the interpretation of Murugin as built on double descent with seven intermarrying lines or the view that Bali can be understood best as a centralized state headed by an absolute monarch.

I have slipped back into criticizing functionalism, which is all too easy. Is there any way of considering these institutions, domains, or rubrics without dealing with them functionally? Considered as forms of activity they again fail to make much sense. With bit after bit of culture the question arises as to whether this bit belongs to religion or to kinship, to economics or to politics? Is the reverence and respect that the Yapese *fak* pays to his *citamangen* a religious or a kinship matter? Or both? If both, what sense is there in distinguishing them by kind of activity?

The notions of the kin-based society and kinship as an idiom depend on the distinction between kinship, economics, politics, and religion. Where there are no such distinctions, there can be no way in which anything could be the special base on which a kind of society rested, nor can there be one form which serves as an idiom for the other forms. These two notions, kin-basedness and idiom, depend on more than just the distinction of kinship from all other aspects of culture and society. They also depend on the premise that at least four major aspects can be distinguished as functions for types of activity. If institutions, domains, rubrics like kinship, economics, religion, and politics do not stand up as analytic constructs, then it follows that kinship does not stand up either. Conversely, if kinship is accepted because it really is a

fundamental, distinct, systematic, bounded sociocultural unit, then necessarily the next question must be: What other similarly constituted units might there be? That question need not be answered by "economics, politics, and religion," but whatever units there are will be conceptualized in ways which are congruent with the ways in which kinship is conceptualized, and thus ways which are similar to economics, politics, and religion.

There are other ways of constituting the units out of which a society or culture is fabricated. One of the simplest analytic devices, and the one which I personally favor, is to first establish the units which the particular culture itself marks off. For Yap it is the *tabinau*, the *binau*, *pilung/pimilingai*, and so forth. For another culture it will be other units which can then be compared with Yap or any other culture and we can then proceed from those.

The quartet of kinship, economics, politics, and religion derives of course, from the spheres of life which European culture itself distinguishes. That is, they are metacultural categories embedded in European culture which have been incorporated into the analytic schemes of European social scientists. And they are the ideas which all social scientists fall back on under any sort of pressure, for they are ideas which everyone can understand. This is not intended as a critical statement, but as an observation. Theories come from somewhere. They are not made up out of thin air and without reference to the lives and experience of the theorists or those they speak to. That most of social science has its roots in the folk theories of European culture indicates its source but says nothing about its validity, utility, or applicability cross-culturally. On the other hand, experience has shown by now that to simply take the metacultural categories of one particular culture and use them directly as analytic tools with the assumption that they are somehow universally vital functions or kinds of activities just does not work. It is for this reason that I urge so strongly that the first step, prerequisite to all others in comparative work, is to establish the particular categories or units which each particular culture itself marks off; that is to say, the symbols and meanings of a particular culture. Once this is done, without being prejudiced by theories about functional prerequisites to social life or assumptions about universal activities, then comparison can begin and analytic procedures and tools can perhaps be developed.

The difficulties with the rubrics or institutions of kinship, politics, religion, and economics are legion and have been detailed more often than can easily be listed here, so I will list none of them. Suffice it to say that one further problem with the whole notion of kinship which I have barely touched until now is that it is embedded in a set of institutions, rubrics, or domains and that there is no satisfactory theory of these or any satisfactory way of justifying their existence or their distinction from one another, the primacy which the four major ones are given, the assumption of boundedness, of system, or

the assumption that they constitute anything more than a valiant attempt to use the constructions of European culture as tools for description, comparison, and analysis. Much of this book has taken it for granted that kinship could be treated as a unit and a thing. The criticisms centered on how that unit or thing was to be understood. It is now time to face the fact that the very notion of kinship, like that of economics, religion, or politics, is essentially undefined and vacuous: it is an analytic construct which seems to have little justification even as an analytic construct. It is to this end that I devoted so much space to the ways in which kinship is defined in the conventional wisdom.