

Frazer's faith in his own mentor was briefly rekindled. He wrote that he welcomed the description of the Aranda 'intichiuma' as

a very striking proof of the sagacity of my brilliant friend, whose rapid genius had outstripped our slower methods and anticipated what it was reserved for subsequent research positively to ascertain. Thus from being little more than an ingenious hypothesis the totem sacrament has become, at least in my opinion, a well-authenticated fact.³⁵

But soon his enthusiasm cooled. Spencer did not agree that the totem was being worshipped, and he even rejected Frazer's suggestion that there was at least an element of 'conciliation' of the totem.³⁶ Frazer began to question whether totemic rituals were religious. Perhaps they did not imply a belief in the divinity of the totem, were no more than crude magical exercises. If that was the case then they need have little bearing on the history of religion.

Taylor had already expressed his own scepticism. In an essay published in 1899 (the year in which Spencer and Gillen's monograph appeared), he reiterated his faith in animism. Totemism 'has been exaggerated out of proportion to its real theological magnitude. The importance belonging to totem-animals as friends or enemies of man is insignificant in comparison with that of ghosts or demons, to say nothing of higher deities.' The relationship of totemic beliefs to clan organization and exogamy was also put in question. Spencer had begun to express his doubts in letters to Frazer, and now Taylor concluded bluntly that 'Exogamy can and does exist without totemism, and for all we know was originally independent of it'.³⁷

35 Frazer (1890 (1900)), Preface to the second edition of *The Golden Bough*, p. xix.

36 Marett and Penniman (1932), *Spencer's Scientific Correspondence*, pp. 45-54.

37 Taylor (1899), 'Remarks on totemism', pp. 144 and 148.

CHAPTER 6

Totem and taboo

Taylor's authority was still unchallenged and his judgments carried great weight. In 1889, reflecting on Fison and Howitt's monograph, he had reviewed the state of thinking on exogamy and endorsed the theory of Morgan as modified by Fison. Ten years later, with the publication of Spencer and Gillen's book, he dismissed the theory of totemic religion, and denied its connection with exogamy. A decade later, in 1910, Frazer published a typically exhaustive review of the field. Where Taylor had dealt with exogamy and totemism in two lectures, Frazer's *Totemism and Exogamy: A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society* filled four large volumes. He painstakingly reviewed the theories and materials which had been produced, but his conclusions in the fourth volume by and large echoed Taylor's.

In totemism a man 'identified himself and his fellow-clansmen with his totem'. This does not, however, amount to a religion - 'it is a serious, though apparently a common, mistake to speak of a totem as a god, and to say that it is worshipped by the clan'. A man may be prevented from eating and killing the totem, but not invariably. Nor had totemism ever been universal. He specifically rejected Robertson Smith's thesis that there were traces of totemism in pre-Islamic Semitic religions. It was rather a peculiar mutation of the black races.¹

¹ Thus if civilisation varies on the whole ... directly with complexion, increasing or diminishing with the blanching or darkening of the skin, we may lay it down as a general proposition that totemism is an institution peculiar to the dark-complexioned and least civilised races of mankind. (Frazer (1910), *Totemism and Exogamy*, vol. 4, p. 14)

This forthright racism was of course in direct contradiction to Frazer's evolutionism, which took for granted that every human society had passed through the same stages of development.

Quite commonly members of a totemic clan were prohibited from marrying one another, but this generalization was also subject to numerous exceptions. Moreover, there were people in Melanesia and Australia who practised both exogamy and totemism without connecting the two institutions; and in some areas one of the customs might be found without the other. There was, then, a 'radical distinction of totemism and exogamy'.²

When it came to explaining totemic beliefs, Frazer was equally negative, dismissing all current ideas, including his own of the day before yesterday, that totemism was to be understood as an organized system of cooperative magic. This was to overrate the philosophical subtlety of totemic man. It now appeared to him that totemism was simply the effect of the primitive theory of conception. Ignorant of the biology of conception, savages assumed that local natural objects somehow quickened the child, and this led to ideas of individual totemism.

Frazer therefore shared Tylor's scepticism about totemic religions. With Tylor again, he pretty much endorsed the now established theory of primitive social organization. Drawing especially on Fison he argued that an original two-class system had developed into a four- and then an eight-class system. Such systems might be associated with the tracing of descent in either the female or the male line. The classes probably arose by way of segmentation. The purpose of these systems – and they were certainly deliberately designed – was progressively to rule out more and more relatives as marriage partners. This was due to a fundamental dread of incest.

The class system also imposed a classification of kin. Father's brothers' children and mother's sisters' children were members of a man's own exogamous class, and were called brother and sister. His mother's brothers' children and father's sisters' children were members of the other class, and intermarriage with them was possible. This classificatory system of kinship terminology 'simply defines the relations of all the men and women of the community to each other according to the generation and the exogamous class to which they belong'.³

Also in 1910 an American student of Boas, Alexander Golden-

weiser, published a yet more negative summary of the situation, in which he dismantled even more conclusively the elaborate structure which had dominated anthropological theory for a generation. With his more incisive style – and unburdened by hostages to fortune – his critique was more swiftly and completely accomplished.⁴

Up to this point, the story of totemism may appear to conform to the orthodox notion of scientific progress. McLennan put up a new theory – or rather, he yoked together two established theories, one about the primeval society, another about the original religion. Robertson Smith elaborated the idea. Frazer systematized it. Then came ethnographic tests by the Australian specialists. These failed to confirm Robertson Smith's ideas. Tylor expressed scepticism. Finally, Frazer and Goldenweiser independently reviewed the accumulated evidence, and concluded that totemism as a religion was a dubious construct, and certainly never universal; and that it had no necessary connection with exogamy.

But the story could equally be rewritten to emphasize the political reasons for the theoretical shift. Tylor was the dominant figure in British anthropology in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and he saw no reason to concede that totemism should share the limelight with animism. Frazer himself was engaged in developing his own reputation, which involved distancing himself from his mentor Robertson Smith. That was enough to put paid to the theory of McLennan and Robertson Smith, both of whom had long passed from the scene.

On the other hand, neither Tylor nor Frazer had a special investment in the theory of exogamy, and they were content to exalt the claims of their Australian clients. Power within the intellectual establishment was certainly at the least a crucial part of the story, for when an outsider formulated a devastating critique of the established theory of the evolution of the family he was largely ignored.

Westermarck and the family

Edward Westermarck, a Finn, was drawn into anthropology as a result of reading Darwin's *Descent of Man*.⁵ His starting-point was an interest in the origins of sexual shame and morality. Reading Darwin he found that, according to some scholars, primitive man

2 *Op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 10.

3 *Op. cit.*, p. 124.

4 Goldenweiser (1910), 'Totemism, an analytical study'.

5 Westermarck (1927), *Memories of My Life*.

was sexually promiscuous. He learnt to read English and began to follow up Darwin's sources – Morgan, McLennan and Lubbock. Initially he was inclined to credit the theory of primitive promiscuity, despite Darwin's own reservations; but quite soon he began to doubt that customs could be interpreted as survivals of early forms of organization. Gradually he became more and more sceptical of the orthodox reconstructions of primeval marriage and began to collect fresh information. He pursued his researches in the British Museum and sent out questionnaires to missionaries and others. When he finally published his findings in 1891, at the age of thirty, he was a master of the field.

The theoretical inspiration of Westermarck's encyclopaedic *History of Human Marriage* (1891) was strictly Darwinian, free of any Lamarckian vestiges. Perhaps the first orthodox application of modern evolutionary theory in anthropology, it was enthusiastically endorsed by Alfred Wallace (who shares the credit with Darwin for the formulation of modern evolutionary theory).⁶

Following Darwin, Westermarck included the primates in his argument. The higher mammals care for their own young. This is especially true of the higher apes and, above all, of 'the man-like apes'. The gorilla and chimpanzee 'lives in families, the male parent being in the habit of building the nest and protecting the family ... Passing from the highest monkeys to the savage and barbarous races of man, we meet the same phenomenon.' Everywhere 'it is to the mother that the immediate care of the children chiefly belongs, while the father is the protector and guardian of the family ... the simplest paternal duties are ... universally recognized'.⁷

The universal existence of the family is to be explained by natural selection. The protection of the husband/father offers mother and children an advantage, given the small number of progeny among humans, the extended period of gestation, and the length of time during which the child is unable to fend for itself. The male protector need not always be the biological father, but each female requires a male partner who will also protect her offspring. Where this protection is provided, more children will survive.

Writing to Westermarck, Tylor admitted that he was largely

6 See Wikman (1940), 'Letters from Edward B. Tylor and Alfred Russel Wallace to Edward Westermarck'.

7 Westermarck (1891), *History of Human Marriage*, pp. 14 and 15.

persuaded by his arguments,⁸ but he was now entering the long twilight of his dotage, and he published nothing further on the matter. In the next generation Westermarck was ignored by Rivers, the central figure in the study of social organization in Britain.⁹ The one leading scholar of the next generation who did pick up his argument was another exotic immigrant, the Pole Bronislaw Malinowski.

Malinowski on the family in Australia

Like many of his generation of anthropologists, Malinowski began as a natural scientist. After taking a first degree in physics in Cracow he studied in Germany under Wundt, a pioneer in the field of experimental psychology and a polymath with an interest in ethnology. In 1910, at the age of twenty-six, he moved to the London School of Economics to work with Westermarck. Here he completed a study, begun in Germany, on the problem of the family among the Australian aborigines.

Malinowski felt a special intellectual kinship with Westermarck, to whom, he once wrote, he owed more than to any other scientific influence. For his part, Westermarck welcomed Malinowski's study of the Australian family as a model of its kind.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Malinowski's study of the Australian family (*The Family among the Australian Aborigines*, published in 1913) was far more than a straightforward reprise of Westermarck's masterpiece. Central to the argument were two novel assumptions – novel, at least, in the mainstream anthropology of the time. First of all, context was crucial. The operation of any institution is modified by other institutions with which it is associated. Consequently the family will have specific and perhaps unique features in any particular society. Secondly, an institution is also informed by the perceptions,

8 See his letters in Wikman (1940), 'Letters from Edward B. Tylor and Alfred Russel Wallace to Edward Westermarck'.

9 In 1913 Rivers delivered a course of lectures at the London School of Economics which were published in the following year under the title *Kinship and Social Organization*. In the preface he notes that 'A few small additions and modifications have been made since the lectures were given, some of these being due to suggestions made by Professor Westermarck and Dr Malinowski in the discussions which followed the lectures'. It would be fascinating to know more about these suggestions.

10 See Firth (1957), 'Malinowski as scientist and as man', pp. 5–6.

emotions and ideas of the people who use it. In short, the 'family' must be studied in operation. As Westermarck indeed had insisted, it was not the ideal of family life which counted, not the rules and pious formulae, but the practice.

It had been widely reported that the Australian aborigines were ignorant of physiological paternity. If one concentrated on practice rather than ideology it was apparent that the mother's husband had special responsibility for her children, and that the unit of mother, children and mother's husband was a recognizable and important isolate. It followed that 'individual' relationships of kinship, traced through the father in a matrilineal society, were significant. They coexisted with 'group' kinship relationships. Relationships of descent were evidently secondary, and emphasis on one line of descent did not exclude the use of the other.

Freud's 'Totem and Taboo'

If the foreign prophets in England were ignored, it is equally the case that the leading Anglo-American anthropologists could not impose their views on foreign scholars. To some of the enquiring minds on the continent, Frazer's new compendium was a challenge rather than a warning. At the same time as Malinowski's fundamental critique of kinship theory appeared, Durkheim in France and Freud in Austria harked back to the assumptions of the previous century, and produced the most brilliant and influential formulations of classic totemism.

In 1912 Durkheim published his *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (English translation, 1915). The following year Freud's *Totem und Tabu* appeared. The fame and influence of these books were to rival, perhaps surpass, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* itself. And both authors set out to explain the connection between the taboo on the totem and the rule of exogamy within the clan. Freud and Durkheim – especially Durkheim – were familiar with Frazer's work and with other recent sources; but all doubts were brushed aside in the pursuit of a grand foundation myth for Western civilization. They were closer in their inspiration to Robertson Smith and to the Frazer of *The Golden Bough* than to Tylor or the later Frazer.

Freud's thesis was certainly the most imaginative version of totemism. It had little impact within anthropology, but it was also perhaps the most influential in the intellectual world at large in the

long run. His starting-point was Darwin, or at least a book by Andrew Lang and an obscure English author (Lang's cousin), J. Atkinson. Atkinson's *Primal Law* (1903) was one of the flood of idiosyncratic fantasies on human social origins which had been launched with the work of Maine and McLennan, but it is notable since it is among the very few which began from Darwin's reconstruction of the early human band.

In *The Descent of Man* (1871) Darwin had reviewed the evidence for the social organization of various primate species. He emphasized the importance of sexual jealousy and rivalry, and concluded that early man probably 'lived in small communities, each with a single wife, or if powerful with several, whom he jealously guarded against all other men'. Alternatively, a powerful male might have lived alone with several mates and their offspring, like the gorilla. When a young male matured he would be engaged in a contest by the dominant male. Either the older male would be killed or the young would be expelled. 'The young males, being thus expelled and wandering about, would, when at last successful in finding a partner, prevent too close interbreeding within the limits of the same family.'¹¹

Atkinson speculated that mothers would in time rebel against the expulsion of their sons. First the youngest son would be allowed to stay, then others. The prohibition on incest would have been introduced to guarantee the old male's sexual monopoly of his spouses. Freud's fantasy was more violent. There would have been an uprising of the young males against the patriarch, motivated by the desire to share his women. This act of parricide was the more heinous since the patriarch was also revered as a god. A guilty memory of the terrible crime would haunt mankind. Totemic taboos and sacrifices were acts of appeasement, the totem standing for the murdered god. Rules against incest were also instituted in reaction to this awful deed.

Freud believed in the inheritance of acquired traits. That was why the descendants of the original parricides – all mankind – still dealt with their ancestral guilt by making the totem taboo and banning incest. But he also believed that as the individual grew up he relived the experience of the race. Ontogeny recapitulated phylogeny. Therefore every boy had to deal with a guilty desire to

¹¹ Darwin (1874), *Descent of Man* (second edition), p. 901.

murder his father and marry his mother. This was the 'Oedipus complex'. Neurotics (who were very like both primitives and children) failed to resolve their ambivalent feelings for their parents. They protected themselves from their conflicting urges by obsessional practices which were private versions of incest taboos.

Freud's own totemic myth did not impinge upon the major traditions of anthropology until the 1930s, and then only marginally. By that stage totemism was so discredited that Freud's influence imposed itself despite *Totem and Taboo* rather than because of it. The Durkheimian version, in contrast, was seen as a challenge from the very first, not least because it was based upon a detailed reading of the Australian sources.

Durkheim and the anthropologists

As the founding father of modern French social science, Émile Durkheim's writings have been the subject of an immense body of exegesis.¹² Virtually all accounts of his sociology are dominated by his theory of religion. This seems reasonable, on the face of it. After the early works – notably *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893; English translation, 1915), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) and *Suicide* (1897) – Durkheim devoted himself to problems of religious sociology, and his next (and last) major study, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, published in 1912 (English translation, 1915), fifteen years after *Suicide*, is generally regarded as his masterpiece.

Nevertheless, Durkheim himself did not expect this study of religion to represent the crowning achievement of his career. His nephew, Marcel Mauss, reported that on his death-bed Durkheim had made a supreme effort to begin writing his planned book on morality, which he had looked forward to as the 'but de son exist-

12 The study of Durkheim was transformed by Stephen Lukes' excellent *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (1973). A good sampling of current French research on Durkheim is to be found in P. Besnard (1983), *The Sociological Domain: The Durkheimians and the Founding of French Sociology*. On Durkheim's use of ethnology see especially V. Karady (1981), 'French ethnology and the Durkheimian breakthrough' and (1983), 'The Durkheimians in academe. A reconsideration'. See also W. P. Vogt (1976), 'The use of studying primitives: a note on the Durkheimians'. For Durkheim's theory of totemism, see Robert Jones (1977), 'On understanding a sociological classic'; (1981) 'Robertson Smith, Durkheim, and sacrifice'; and (1986) 'Durkheim, Frazer and Smith'. On his theory of kinship see my essay (1985), 'Durkheim's theory of primitive kinship'.

ence, fond de son esprit'.¹³ Moreover he also set great store by his uncompleted work on the family. He had written only part of it (in Bordeaux between 1890 and 1892), but these pages were so precious to Durkheim that he would not be separated from them, even when he travelled. Durkheim had 'wished to devote the rest of his life to this comparative natural history of the family and marriage up to the present'.¹⁴ He had taken personal responsibility for the sections on the family and marriage in the *Année Sociologique* when it began to appear under his editorship, in 1898. Towards the end of his life he had even considered cutting the planned book on morality, and making it into an introduction to the book on the family.

In fact these three projects – the studies of religion, morality and the family – were closely united in Durkheim's mind. Durkheim's fundamental concern had always been to provide a scientific basis for morality. He viewed this as a matter of urgent political necessity. He was a secular republican, wary of the political power of the Catholic Church. He was also a Jew – and a Jew from Alsace, at that – a member of a newly-enfranchised minority, but one very much under threat. It was in 1894 that Dreyfus was prosecuted for treason, and his trial unleashed a frightening alliance of militarists, Catholic reactionaries and anti-Semites.

A secular morality required a theory of religion and a theory of the family. Conservative writers believed that church and family were the sources which fed morality. If a new moral order was to be established, appropriate to the social forms which were emerging, then alternative sources of morality had to be constituted. This was not a promising venture unless it could be shown that religion and the family system had not been constant, but had changed as fundamental social forms had altered. Ethnology offered precisely this assurance. The new consensus asserted that the family was a recent innovation, and that religious beliefs had evolved through various stages and were in imminent danger of being displaced by science.

Like Engels then, Durkheim was clearly attracted by the relativizing potential of ethnology. If things were very different in the past, they may be very different again in the future. The present institutional arrangements are not facts of nature, they are human

13 Karady (1969), *Marcel Mauss, Oeuvres*, vol. 3, p. 475.

14 *Op. cit.*, p. 480–1.

constructs. There were other reasons too for Durkheim's interest in ethnology.¹⁵ The Durkheimians were seeking an academic niche, and it made tactical sense to lay claim to an unclaimed field of scholarship. Finally, the appeal to ethnology also made sense in terms of Durkheim's evolutionism. This owed much to Spencer and nothing to Darwin, who in any case had little influence in France at the time, even among natural scientists.¹⁶

Spencer believed that all societies shared a common point of origin. Moreover, the original institutional forms were never lost, but were simply recombined in various, more complex, new forms. (This was a form of social Lamarckism. Spencer was himself a believer in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and Durkheim shared the Lamarckian assumptions, which were common currency in France at the time.) Durkheim further concluded from these premises that institutions could be most easily understood in their simplest, original form, and that if they were studied in a primitive state their relations with other institutions would be most readily apparent. All these considerations reinforced the appeal of ethnology.

Durkheim on the family

In his early lectures on the family and in *The Division of Labour*, which appeared in 1893 (1915 in English translation), Durkheim accepted the orthodox Anglo-American account of the evolution of the family from an original horde by way of matriarchy and patriarchy; but he situated this conventional model in a new, more sociological context. Spencer had speculated that the original society must have been unicellular, as it were, and internally undifferentiated. By segmentation it gave rise to more complex social forms. The original horde split into two, yielding a society made up of two clans (or moieties). Durkheim identified this type of system with the Australian society described by Fison and Howitt. Morgan had described the Iroquois as having eight clan units, and so clearly they were a yet more advanced system, having segmented not once but three times. The terminology for these segments was

15 See Karady (1981), 'French ethnology and the Durkheimian breakthrough'.

16 See Corning (1982), 'Durkheim and Spencer'. The best account of Spencer is Peel's *Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist* (1971). He has also edited a valuable reader (1972), *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution*. Medawar has a marvellous essay on Spencer in his *Pluto's Republic* (1982).

borrowed from the anthropologists, but the terminology for the structure which they formed was Spencer's. 'The horde which had ceased to be independent, and become an element in a more extended group, we call the clan. Peoples formed by an association of clans we call segmentary clan-based societies [sociétés segmentaires à base de clans].'¹⁷

The repetitive, internally undifferentiated units of the segmentary, clan-based social system were bound together by what Durkheim called 'mechanical solidarity'. This society of clones was very different from the modern social structure, which was based on the division of labour. The specialized elements of a modern society were intricately related to each other in a web of interdependencies. People in such a society had a very different sense of how they fitted into the broader society. Instead of mechanical solidarity, such societies created 'organic solidarity'.

Family units were the typical elements of the ancient social system, though a clan system might just as well be based upon local groups. In modern societies, however, the family had lost its pivotal social role. Other, more specialized, institutions had taken over many of its erstwhile functions. Accordingly the family became smaller, feebler, and more internally differentiated. The old ties of descent, which had regulated communal property relationships, were now less important, while the individualized conjugal bond had become relatively more significant.

True to his Spencerian views, Durkheim believed that the earlier family forms survived on the margins of the more evolved institutions. The kindred, for example, surrounds the modern nuclear family, recalling the extended patriarchal family of an earlier period. 'The modern family contains within it, as if in miniature, the whole historical development of the family.'¹⁸

Durkheim's main point was that the form of the family was a function of the social structure. In the old segmental type of society, the units all had to be alike, though they might be organized on the basis of consanguinity or of locality. That was a secondary issue. 'The organization with a clan-base is really only a species of a larger genus, the segmental organization. The distribution of

17 Durkheim (1893), p. 150.

18 Karady (1975), *Emile Durkheim, Textes*, vol. 3, p. 73.

society into similar compartments corresponds to persisting necessities.¹⁹

If family organization was structured by other, more significant, overarching forms of social organization, then clearly it made little sense to talk about the abstract advantages of one or other kind of family institution. Nostalgia for 'traditional' family forms was irrational. 'The family of today is not more or less perfect than that of old: it is different, because the circumstances are different. It is more complex, because the environment in which it exists is more complex: that is all.'²⁰

In *The Division of Labour* Durkheim argued that the family was withering away, and that its moral, disciplinary and organizational functions would be taken over by corporations which were economically specialized, that is, by professional associations. The new organic societies and their institutions were no less moral or natural than the old clan-based systems, although they were inevitably more evolved, more complex, more differentiated. Criticizing Tönnies, Durkheim wrote in 1889: 'I believe that the life of the great social agglomerations is just as natural as that of the small communities. It is neither less organic nor less internalized [interne].'²¹

But was there not something *natural* about family organization? Le Play, for example, had argued that the family was in some sense prior to, and independent of, society, and that it was a primordial source of moral values. The French ethnologist Letourneau had insisted that the primitive family forms were more natural than, and morally preferable to, our own. Westermarck, in his *History of Human Marriage* (1891), had argued that the basic family institutions were derived from our primate ancestors. If arguments of this type were correct, then the value of the family was not contextual at all, but independent of other social institutions. The family would be a natural and permanent institution.

The issue was vital to Durkheim's whole attempt to formulate a scientifically-based morality. If certain institutions, notably the family, were 'natural' to man then, although they might 'evolve', they could not be jettisoned without serious risk. But if they

19 Durkheim (1915b), *The Division of Labour in Society*.

20 Karady (1975), *Emile Durkheim, Textes*, vol. 3, p. 25.

21 *Op. cit.*, p. 390.

were social artifacts then they might well be replaced by more sophisticated institutions.

In 1895 Durkheim realized that Robertson Smith's theory of totemism offered a powerful, fresh perspective on these questions.²² Above all, the theory of totemism promised to relativize both the family and religion at a single stroke. He began to work out the implications of this theory in a long essay, 'La prohibition de l'inceste et ses origines'. It was given pride of place in the first issue of the *Année sociologique*, which appeared in 1898.

The origin of the incest taboo

Durkheim began by restating the old idea of totemism. Totemic clans were exogamous and matrilineal. Clan members believed themselves to share a common substance of some kind with each other and with their clan totem. Exogamous (localized) patrilineal clans developed later, but they adopted the exogamous rules of the uterine clans by way of analogy. He added that the Australian 'marriage-classes' resulted from the combination of exogamous uterine clans and exogamous patrilineal local units. In time, more complex family forms developed, and the rules of exogamy were adapted accordingly.

Yet while Durkheim's description was orthodox, he rejected the explanations of exogamy which were available to him. The leading anthropologists had explained exogamy in terms of the clan structure. (He cited Lubbock, Spencer, Morgan and McLennan.) These writers assumed mistakenly that exogamy was in essence a general prohibition of marriage with consanguines. Durkheim countered that the exogamy rules might also prohibit marriage with non-relatives, and that certain very close blood relatives might be marriageable, including, for example, mother's brother's children in a

22 In 1907, in a letter to the editor of a scholarly journal, he wrote:

it was only in 1895 that I clearly recognized the crucial role played by religion in social life ... for the first time I found the means to tackle the study of religion sociologically. It was a revelation to me. The course of 1895 marks a line of demarcation in the development of my thought, to the point that all my previous researches had to be started afresh in order to harmonize them with these new opinions. This was due entirely to the studies of the history of religion which I had recently undertaken, and notably to reading the works of Robertson Smith and his school. (Durkheim (1907), *Revue néo-scholastique*, pp. 606-7, 612-14)

The meaning of this statement has been endlessly debated (for example, Jones (1985), 'Durkheim, totemism, and the *Intichiuma*').

uterine system. He rejected the view that there was a universal horror of sexual contact with consanguines.

Durkheim looked for the causes of exogamy not directly in the clan system, but rather in totemism itself. This was to make exogamy the consequence of religious beliefs, or, more precisely, a special instance of a general religious institution, fundamental to all primitive religions, namely taboo.

He argued that women are typically subject to ritual segregation at puberty, menstruation and childbirth. This was because their blood was regarded as especially dangerous. These taboos on women were connected with the taboo on shedding the blood of a clansman and with the taboos on killing or eating the totem. The key to the whole intellectual complex was the belief that the clansmen shared a common substance with the totem. 'Thus the totemic being is immanent in the clan; it is incarnated in each individual, and it resides in the blood. It is itself the blood.'²³ The notional consanguinity of clansmen has nothing directly to do with kinship. Rather it is a religious belief, a statement of the solidarity of the congregation and its god.

Sociological determinism

It is possible to read Durkheim's argument as a kind of ideological determinism. A religious belief – totemism – generated an idea of consanguinity and a rule of exogamy. This seems to echo Fustel de Coulanges' argument in *La Cité Antique* (1864), in which he argued that a succession of forms of family organization followed from changes in religious belief. Fustel had been a teacher of Durkheim's, and although Durkheim initially criticized this ideological determinism, his later position may appear to be fairly similar. I believe, however, that this is an oversimplification.²⁴ Durkheim's fundamental premise was that the structural type of a society determined the nature and function of the social units. Institutions, rituals and beliefs were determined by the same structural matrix.

The argument was elaborated in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915a). The basic thesis was that the family was not

23 Durkheim (1898), 'La prohibition de l'inceste', p. 39.

24 For the contrary view see Lukes (1973), *Emile Durkheim*, pp. 58–63.

really 'about' consanguinity, nor was religion really 'about' gods.²⁵ The simplest societies were composed of undifferentiated and repetitive clans. But each clan was nevertheless particular, and so it needed a badge of identity, an emblem. The emblem was the origin of the totem. The religious features of totemism – the rituals, the prohibitions, the beliefs – followed from the identification of the social unit, the clan, with an emblem, the totem. When the group came together at certain seasons it did so under the common banner of its emblem, the totem. The sentiments aroused by collective action were then projected on to the emblem itself. The emblem became a sacred object, and so the focus of ritual. The effect was

to raise man above himself and to make him lead a life superior to that which he would lead, if he followed only his own individual whims: beliefs express this life in representations; rites organize it and regulate its working.²⁶

And the subordination of individual 'whims' to the interests of the group was what Durkheim meant by morality.²⁷

The line of causality in Durkheim's argument is therefore strictly sociological. The structure of the total society – its form – generates particular types of segment. These develop a symbolic expression in the course of their social activity. This symbolic identity produces ritualized behaviour, which sustains the individual's sentiment of solidarity with his group. These beliefs and rituals, finally, maintain

25 In the first chapter of *Elementary Forms* Durkheim wrote:

Primitive civilizations offer privileged cases . . . because they are simple cases. That is why, in all fields of human activity, the observations of ethnologists have frequently been veritable revelations, which have renewed the study of human institutions. For example, before the middle of the nineteenth century, everybody was convinced that the father was the essential element of the family; no one dreamed that there could be a family organization of which the paternal authority was not the keystone. But the discovery of Bachofen came and upset this old conception. Up to very recent times it was regarded as evident that the moral and legal relations of kindred were only another aspect of the psychological relations which result from a common descent; Bachofen and his successors, McLennan, Morgan and many others still laboured under this misunderstanding. But since we have become acquainted with the nature of the primitive clan, we know that, on the contrary, relationships cannot be explained by consanguinity. To return to religions, the study of only the most familiar ones has led men to believe for a long time that the idea of god was characteristic of everything that is religious. Now the religion which we are going to study presently is, in a large part, foreign to all idea of divinity. (Durkheim (1915a), pp. 6–7)

26 Durkheim (1915a), *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, p. 414.

27 For an excellent discussion of Durkheim's theory of morality see Lukes (1973), *Emile Durkheim*, Chapter 21.

the moral basis of the society – the subordination of individual wishes to group requirements. Religion and the family are commonly the immediate sources of morality, as the conservatives had always argued, but they are themselves the product of a broader structure; and either – or both – could be replaced by alternative institutional forms. These sociological truths are exemplified in the primitive totemic stage of social organization.

Durkheim's was a Cartesian argument. Like Descartes he was looking for the first step in the dialectic,²⁸ and he assumed that this could be found at the beginning of human evolution. This first step – Durkheim's *cogito* – was not an institution but a structure. An abstract form of organization – segmental or differentiated – determined the type of family structure or religion.

The fate of totemism

The theory of totemism may be traced to McLennan's essay of 1869, although it was only when Robertson Smith linked totemism to the religion of the ancient Semites, a decade later, that the theory attracted broad attention. The debate on totemism then occupied an entire generation, but it was clearly fizzling out by the time that the journal *Anthropos* published a disillusioned symposium on the subject in the early years of the First World War.

This debate was initiated by Goldenweiser, who in 1912 wrote to the editor of *Anthropos*:

The appearance of Durkheim's brilliant but unconvincing treatise on religion brings home the fact that one of the phases of socio-religious thought, namely the problem of totemism, remains as replete with vagueness and mutual misunderstanding as ever.²⁹

Despite the war, *Anthropos* published a symposium on the subject, in which specialists from a number of countries expressed their measured disillusionment with the old models.³⁰

Many of the leading scholars of the new generation contributed – Thurnwald, Graebner and Schmidt in Central Europe; Rivers and

28 See Durkheim (1915a), *The Elementary Forms*, pp. 3–6.

29 *Anthropos*, 1915, vol. 9, p. 288.

30 The symposium was published in the following numbers of *Anthropos*: 1914, vol. 9, pp. 287–325, 622–52; 1915–16, vols 10–11, pp. 234–65, 586–610, 948–70; 1917–18, vols 12–13, pp. 338–50, 1,094–113; and 1919–20, vols 14–15, pp. 496–545. Further contributions were published occasionally thereafter.

Radcliffe-Brown in Britain; and Boas, Goldenweiser and Swanton in the United States. Virtually all insisted on separating the social and religious models of totemism, though there was less agreement as to which model then offered the better prospects for research. Rivers, for example, wished to restrict attention to totemism as a form of social structure, while his student Radcliffe-Brown suggested that the term should be used to connote only a magico-religious system. This general scepticism was fed by a more general disenchantment with broad evolutionist models. Of the major contributors to the *Anthropos* symposium, only Radcliffe-Brown would probably have called himself an evolutionist, and he certainly had no sympathy with the unilinear models of the classic British anthropology. If Durkheim's formulation remained influential for rather longer in France, it was badly dented by Van Gennep's powerful polemic, *L'Etat actuel du problème totémique*, which appeared in 1920.

But although totemism was abandoned by the anthropologists between 1910 and 1920, it is arguably the most pervasive and enduring anthropological contribution to the European conception of primitive society. Because of its significance for Durkheimian sociology it remains a disturbing presence in the literature of mainstream sociological thinking about religion. It became a central myth of Freud's psychoanalysis. *The Golden Bough* generated a whole theory of drama and ritual, permeating the study of the classics to this day, and inspiring T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

The reason is evident. With totemism, anthropology achieved for the first and only time an agreed myth of the origin of human society, which accounted for the family and for religion, and represented both as contingent, irrational, but temporary constraints on the potentialities of civilized man. Totemism therefore served as a foundation myth of rationalism; yet at the same time it offered a symbolic idiom in which a poet could celebrate a more natural time, when man's spirit was at one with plants and birds and beasts, and mythical, poetic thought was commonplace, and sexual instincts uninhibited. It was the anthropologists' Garden of Eden. In contrast, the modern age was a waste land indeed.

The anthropologists nevertheless abandoned totemism. Soon even the established model of primitive society came under fire. There were some political considerations behind these shifts, which will be touched upon, but the most obvious structural correlate was institutional. The next generation of anthropologists became

academics. Less ambitious than their predecessors to change the world, they were less affected by it. In academe they turned inwards, upon themselves, and, of course, upon one another.

PART II

Academic anthropologists and primitive society