

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the foundations were laid for the scientific study of society. Just as Sigmund Freud was defining the unconscious as the object of inquiry for psychologists and Ferdinand de Saussure was providing an understanding of language as that which linguists study, Emile Durkheim synthesized many earlier understandings of society to provide the object of study for sociologists and later social anthropologists. In furnishing a definition of society, Durkheim and others not only laid the groundwork for the future study of this newly defined entity, but also were responding to certain tendencies in the *Zeitgeist* of the late nineteenth century. These concerns have not ceased to be of interest for social anthropologists.

Using the definition of progress by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, one can consider the social sciences as evidence of progress, as progress is “the process by which human beings attain to greater control over the physical environment through the increase of knowledge and improvement of technique by inventions and discoveries.”<sup>1</sup> The scientific study of society seeks to obtain the same level of progress with regard to the social as the natural sciences claim of the physical.

The most striking element of the understanding of society as it emerged from the formative period of the second half of the nineteenth century was that society, like the equivalent objects of study among geological or biological sciences, was a natural system. That is to say that society was considered an objective fact to be found in the empirical observation of the world. In summarizing the anthropological method undertaken by Lewis Henry Morgan, Thomas Trautmann states this empirical aspect of the social sciences clearly: “Morgan’s is a theory that emphasizes the tutelage of nature,

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<sup>1</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. “On Social Structure” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. New York: Free Press, 1952. Pg. 203.

to whose promptings the mind must be attentive for true knowledge to form, and it is distrustful of the mind's active powers as such."<sup>2</sup> For Morgan and others social relations bore "the marks of genuine discovery, of facts that existed independent of his will and whose existence he had not so much as suspected."<sup>3</sup> Kinship was not viewed as a construct of the analyst, but rather an observable phenomenon to be described and analyzed for comparison with other social systems. Methodologically this led Morgan "to get the data of his work by direct interrogation and observation rather than by ransacking libraries."<sup>4</sup> Durkheim would later echo this same sentiment, although relying much more heavily on archival research than original ethnographic observation, claiming the naturalness of society. He maintained that social facts because of "their existence prior to his own implies their existence outside of himself."<sup>5</sup> In placing the object of inquiry for social scientists on the same level as those of natural scientists, Radcliffe-Brown argues that society can reasonably and successfully be considered as a physiological organism: "social structures are just as real as are individual organisms."<sup>6</sup>

The comparison between society and individual organisms had been made long before Radcliffe-Brown, the most conspicuous advocate of such an analogy being Herbert Spencer who argued that "a social organism and an individual organism are entirely alike."<sup>7</sup> While on one hand this analogy reveals the degree to which social scientists took

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Trautmann. *Lewis Henry Morgan and the Invention of Kinship*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. Pg. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Trautmann, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Durkheim. "What is a Social Fact?" in *The Rules of Sociological Method* / trans. Sarah Solovay and John Mueller. New York: Free Press, 1966. Pg. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 190.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Spencer. "The Nature of Society" in *Theories of Society* / ed. T. Parsons, E. Shils, K.D. Naeyege and J.R. Pitts. New York: Free Press, 1961. Pg. 141.

their object of study to be a natural object, Spencer's analogy also reveals the extent to which society was seen as a system. Just as an organism consists of functionally differentiated organs, themselves composed of functionally differentiated tissues, so too was society seen as being a unified whole composed of ever more functionally specialized institutions and modes of behavior. This comparison led to the consideration of the physiology of society, namely, how each of the organs function in relation to one another. Radcliffe-Brown, himself having accepted the comparison of organism to society, correctly asserts that "it is a mistake to suppose that we can understand the institutions of society by studying them in isolation without regard to other institutions with which they coexist and with which they may be correlated."<sup>8</sup> Following on this insistence of the systematicity of society, Radcliffe-Brown claims that "no explanation of one part of the system is satisfactory unless it fits in with an analysis of the system as a whole."<sup>9</sup> This is precisely what he undertook to do with regard to the problem of the avunculate and its relation to the entire social system among the BaThonga of East Africa.<sup>10</sup> Although recognition of society as a natural system is first and foremost predicated on its status as an observable reality, "the investigation of social phenomena by methods essentially similar to those used in the physical and biological sciences,"<sup>11</sup> relies equally on the understanding of society as a unified system. The study of society then proceeds as the study of a natural system – one that is given in empirically

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<sup>8</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. "The Mother's Brother in South Africa" in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. New York: Free Press, 1952. Pg. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-31.

<sup>11</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 189.

observable social relations and one that is systematically organized so as to consist of a coherent whole composed of differentiated but essential functional elements.

Based on the model of society as an organism, the relationship of the organs to the organism, or the parts to the whole, was a concern that social scientists strove to explicitly address. Ferdinand Tönnies argues that “the whole is not merely the sum of its parts; on the contrary, the parts are dependant on and conditioned by the whole, so that the whole itself possesses intrinsic reality and substance.”<sup>12</sup> That is to say, just as one may study and recognize an organism as more than a collection of organized organs, so too is society seen as more than a collection of individuals or particular institutions in relation with one another. Individual members of a society are not independent of the social system, but rather are constituted as individuals insofar as they are elements of the social system. For the early social scientists, the social structures logically precede, even if they are not temporally prior to, the individuals who inhabit the system. Radcliffe-Brown echoes this distinction in reminding his readers that “it should be noted that to say we are studying social structures is not exactly the same thing as saying that we study social relations.”<sup>13</sup> As social anthropologists, we are concerned with the social system *qua* system. The relations between individual persons are useful data so long as they are used to reveal the social structure itself. Durkheim expresses a similar concern to ensure that the social structure, which he terms the social fact, “is a thing distinct from its individual manifestations.”<sup>14</sup> The particular interactions between individuals do not constitute the social system *in toto* anymore than individual persons do. As a science,

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<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies. *Community and Civil Society* / ed. Joe Harris and Margaret Hollis. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pg. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 191.

<sup>14</sup> Durkheim, 7.

anthropology “is not concerned with the particular, the unique, but only with the general, with kinds, with events which recur.”<sup>15</sup> What constitutes the social structure is a “network of actually existing relations,”<sup>16</sup> relations which are to be studied for the sake of understanding the structure of the society. Durkheim’s social fact, that which is to be the object of study for the sociologist, has the “essential characteristic that its own existence is independent of the individual forms it assumes in its diffusion.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the particular rituals, greetings, and all other person-to-person social relations – interactions between people at the phenomenological level – are part of the social structure,<sup>18</sup> but not dependant upon it. We can conclude, because society is a natural system existing as a reified entity that the social fact “is to be found in each part because it exists in the whole, rather than in the whole because it exists in the parts.”<sup>19</sup>

In order to fully understand society as a natural system, social scientists sought to explain the structures that gave rise to the observable phenomena of kinship and social relations. Just as Freud probed the ego and id of the unconscious and Saussure turned the attention of linguists toward *langue*, so too did social scientists participate in the *Zeitgeist* of the late nineteenth century in seeking “to penetrate beneath the surface of things.”<sup>20</sup> One such aspect, concerning the relation of the part to the whole, or the individual to society, had to do with the mechanism employed by society to impose upon the individual the social fact that exists in itself. Durkheim considered the education of

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<sup>15</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 192.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>17</sup> Durkheim, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 191.

<sup>19</sup> Durkheim, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Tuzin. “The Forgotten Passion: Sexuality and Anthropology in the Ages of Victoria and Bronislaw.” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*. Vol. 30. April 1994. Pg. 124.

children to be both a locus and an example of the use of coercion in reproducing the social system. The “unremitting pressure to which the child is subjected is the very pressure of the social milieu which tends to fashion him in its own image.”<sup>21</sup> Again, we are confirmed in the proposition that the parts exist because of the whole and that the society is both logically and temporally prior to the individual in this case. “A social fact is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals, and the presence of this power may be recognized in its turn either by the existence of some specific sanction or by the resistance offered against every individual effort that tends to violate it.”<sup>22</sup> Even if the individual does not immediately feel the presence of coercive force exerted by the society, the possibility and threat of such coercion is always present should an individual diverge from prescribed ways of behaving. The social fact is a systematic whole that “consists of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him.”<sup>23</sup>

Durkheim has summarized his understanding of “*a social fact as every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.*”<sup>24</sup> This definition conceptualizes society as an atemporal entity and both relies upon and bolsters the understanding of society as a natural system. Tönnies, however, conceived of human interaction as being organized according to two models: one consisting of a natural

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<sup>21</sup> Durkheim, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

system founded in kinship and the other consisting of a constructed interactional domain. Tönnies contrasts the natural occurring community of *Gemeinschaft* with the public sphere or society of *Gesellschaft* wherein contracts replace gift exchanges. That Tönnies characterizes one of these as natural and the other as constructed is interesting for our discussion of society as a natural system. In one sense, if *Gesellschaft* is not naturally occurring, then it is questionable as to whether or not the study of such constitutes a social science. In another sense, because *Gesellschaft* is constructed by humanity, it has been argued that its depths may be more deeply probed than that which was not fashioned directly by human hands. However, despite these possible complications, it seems as though Tönnies still holds out the possibility of studying either *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft* as an objective fact and that in distinguishing them he is not so much considering one as an object of a social science and the other of humanities, but is rather characterizing the organizing principles of each. “In *Gemeinschaft* they stay together in spite of everything that separates them; in *Gesellschaft* they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them.”<sup>25</sup> These different strategies for coping with life in a social situation, despite being characterized as opposing natural and constructed concepts, may be seen as two broad social structures.

What unites the two social structures of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as explicated by Tönnies is that both structure value. For Tönnies, the value given to something within the community of *Gemeinschaft* is natural, that is not worthy of critical reflection. However, in *Gesellschaft* it is Society that determines the value given something. “The

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<sup>25</sup> Tönnies, 52.

true value is what everyone regards as its value, as recognised by Society in general.”<sup>26</sup>

This is amplified by Durkheim who envisages society as an active agent in the coercion of individuals. Delimiting value is one such mechanism for coercing individuals within a society in order to secure the reproduction of such a society. Radcliffe-Brown utilizes this social understanding of exchange to compare on one hand the view that “the economic system is...the mechanism by which goods of various kinds and in various quantities are produced, transported and transferred, and utilised. [And On the other hand]...the economic system is a set of relations between persons and groups which maintains, and is maintained by, this exchange or circulation of goods and services.”<sup>27</sup>

Both Tönnies and Radcliffe-Brown are expressing an interest in the social dimension of activity that seems otherwise to be only economic in nature. Their analysis is that it is only in the community or society of exchangers that value is ascribed to a object *cum* commodity. Thus it emerges that “value is inherently the product of Society’s will.”<sup>28</sup>

Tönnies accounts for the valuation of an object based on its scarcity, or rather its exclusivity. “For a thing to have any value in *market* Society it is only necessary that it should be possessed by one party to the exclusion of others, and that it should be desired by some of the excluded.”<sup>29</sup> This is in contrast to a non-market economy, namely the domestic economy of *Gemeinschaft*, wherein communally possessed property does not exclude its use by others. Tönnies, however, fails to recognize that the commonly owned property may also be valued, in part because it is protected from being possessed exclusively by a single party. In contrast to Tönnies’ account of the social value of a

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 198.

<sup>28</sup> Tönnies, 58.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

commodity in purely agonistic terms, Radcliffe-Brown's assessment of exchange is that "when two or more persons have a *common interest* in an object, that object can be said to have *social value* for the persons thus associated."<sup>30</sup> The result is that an object may be valued for its common interest in the case that a) both desire to possess it, but neither are capable of doing so, such a communal cultic shrine, b) the agonistic relationship when one party possesses the object to the exclusion of the interest in it by the second party, or c) the object is held in common and valued by both parties, such as shared pasturage.

Such valuation of objects is interesting in that the anthropologist may gain access to the social system through the process of valuation. "A social relation exists between two or more individual organisms when there is some adjustment of their respective interests, by convergence of interest, or by limitation of conflicts that might arise from divergence of interests."<sup>31</sup> So when two parties agree to share a field, to purchase an object from one another, or even to enact laws of private property, the result is the establishment of a social relation. "The study of social values in this sense is therefore a part of the study of social structure."<sup>32</sup>

Thus far we have discussed how considering society as a natural system led to concerns for the relations of the individual to the whole society, and how through the process of imputing value to an object society coerces or constrains individuals. What remains to be explored is what function various elements of a social structure serve. Building on the metaphor of society as an organism, it is clear that each organ functions in a particular role of, for example, circulation of blood, removing contaminants from the

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<sup>30</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 199.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

blood, deriving nutrients from food, and so forth. Radcliffe-Brown argues that it is the role of the social anthropologist to “define the social function of a socially standardised mode or activity, or mode of thought, as its relation to the social structure to the existence and continuity of which it makes some contribution.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, social anthropology seeks to understand the function of every aspect of an observable behavior, speech, or thought in terms of its relations to other such elements. In so doing the function of each activity may be discerned. Such functions need not be related to material aspects of the society. For example, “ritual actions do not produce a practical result in the world—that is one reason why we call them ritual. But to make this statement is not to say that ritual has no function. Its function is not related to the world external to the society but to the internal constitution of the society.”<sup>34</sup> In order to accomplish the goal of social anthropology we must not only explicate the function of all elements in relation to one another, but we must “combine with the intensive study of single societies...the systematic comparison of many societies.”<sup>35</sup> This is to be accomplished through the comparisons of functionally equivalent aspects of a given society. What is being compared is the social structure, not the particular instantiations of the structure.

Such comparison of distinct elements of a social system has remained a concern for contemporary social anthropologists. Mary Douglas has continued to study the role of kinship systems. She has determined that similar situations, namely “any situation in

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>34</sup> George C. Homans. “Anxiety and Ritual: The Theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown” in *Reader in Comparative Religion* / ed. William Lessa and Evon Vogt. New York: Harper and Row, 1979. Pg. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, 194.

which competing demands for men are higher than demands for material resources,”<sup>36</sup> such as poor agrarian systems, where a competitive advantage is to be found in “cross-cutting ties...in a descent system which overrides exclusive, local loyalties,”<sup>37</sup> matrilineal systems predominate. What Douglas has provided is an analysis of one institution of a social system in light of the entire social system, such that different organizing structures, similar in form to those of Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, are seen as logically consistent within the framework of social, ecological, and economic constraints. This work has implications for the future growth of Africa and elsewhere, as well as raising concerns for the correspondence between the diminishing number of matrilineal societies and failing economic systems.

In providing a sociological method for the identification and study of the social fact, Durkheim and others not only laid the groundwork for the future study of society as a natural system, but in responding to certain tendencies in the *Zeitgeist* of the late nineteenth century captured the need to understand more than the apparent phenomena in a systematic way. This brought about a concern for the relation of the individual to society, the processes of exchange and creation of value, and the determination of the comparative functional analysis of societies. These concerns have not ceased to be of interest for social anthropologists and will continue to guide the discipline even as the static aspects that result from conceiving of society as an enclosed natural system are transcended.

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Douglas. “Is Matriliney Doomed in Africa?” in *Man in Africa* / ed. Mary Douglas and Phyllis Kaberry. London: Tavistock, 1969. Pg. 130.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.