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Kinship and the “Great Divide”

Jack Goody

I APPRECIATE this opportunity to express my recent views on the study of kinship, *la parenté*. I am pleased because it gives me the chance of rectifying some of my own past errors. I want to bring my thoughts on this subject more systematically in line with my more recent writings in *The Theft of History* (2008) and *Renaissances. The One or the Many?* (2010).

The basic problem for anthropologists, as for sociologists, historians and other scholars, is to have accepted, without adequate analysis, the division which has marked not only anthropology but also sociology, the division between « traditional » and « modern » societies, where modern of course equals western. This binary division has posed a problem for anthropology in many ways, drawing a rather heavy-line between modern (so-called capitalist) and earlier (primitive) society. In English, as far as the domestic culture was concerned, the latter became the domain of kinship, the other of the family. I am not sure what the equivalent was in French but possibly *la parenté* and *la famille*. The spheres which should have been interlocking were driven apart.

The distinction is politically based. This is to say, it originates in the divide that westerners have placed between we and they, the gulf between barbarian (or traditional or the elementary forms) and modernity. « Modernity » is seen as growing with the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution but this development only crystallized our view of the other and of their essential primitiveness, not only in Africa and the Pacific but also more surprisingly in China and India. Many important scholars accepted this division. The sinologist Maurice Granet attempted to

reconstruct an earlier Chinese kinship in terms of cross-cousin marriage, as did Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss for « Primitive Classification » and this categorisation was used by Claude Lévi-Strauss to compare Australian systems. At the same time Louis Dumont made comparisons between South Indian (Dravidian) kinship and again that of Australia (Karia). The Great Divide came between those systems and western Europe who were considered to have developed the small conjugal, monogamous, family. Some like the sociologist Talcott Parsons saw this family as being « compatible » with capitalism in that it encouraged a mobile workforce that was accumulating for its own welfare. Others like Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group of historical demography saw the « small family » and the European Marriage Pattern as going back to the period before the Renaissance and as Europe being already adapted for economic advance. In another context that was the argument of many others, of the historian David Landes and the anthropologist Alan Macfarlane for example who saw Europe as being ready for capitalism, as a result of either its Judaeo-Christian or its Germanic-Roman heritage. But not the Rest. In my view it was the wrong line in the wrong place.

One of the major problems both for social anthropology and for social demography, is that the two traditions have continued in more or less complete intellectual isolation, and attempts to synthesize kinship or *la parenté* with the sociological or demographic family seem to have made little contribution to any such meeting of minds, except perhaps in the topics of incest and exogamy (for which see Godelier 2004 and Barry 2008). However in this endeavour the greatest failure is the limitation of the variables one is considering and the exclusion of an examination of the economy. How can one exclude this in comparing recent Asia and aboriginal Australia?

This omission I tried to rectify in a wide-ranging comparison based not only on intensive studies but on the use of Murdock's contested *Ethnographic Atlas* which employed the method used by Edward B. Tylor, author of *Primitive Culture* (1871), to examine the distribution of exogamy and endogamy. Following the observation of a Dutch merchant in West Africa, I pursued the problem of bridewealth there (connected with the former and with economically relatively egalitarian societies) and the dowry in Eurasia (connected with the latter and with distinct economic class). I tried to tie this question of marriage transactions in with the transfer of property between generations and sexes at death on which I have commented, and that with the economy.

By giving weight to marriage transactions in this way, you might think this represented a switch to the thinking of Lévi-Strauss, a preference for

affinity (*alliance*) over filiation. That would be the wrong way to look at the problem because both principles were much involved in domestic organisation. Regarding filiation, there is a focus in Eurasia not so much on the sibling group of men (well discussed in the African context) but on the cross-sibling group of girls as well as boys. Since dowry is associated with class societies, it is important to maintain (and sometimes to promote) the status of women (who transmit class) as well as of men (who do so too). So part of the family wealth (what I have called the conjugal fund) is attached to daughters, so they can make the « right » marriage in a stratified system and can maintain themselves after the union. This is not to say that a daughter's portion of the family wealth is necessarily equal to the son's (who retains the family estate as far as land is concerned) but it is often substantial. Nor is it to affirm that the husband never appropriates his wife's dowry – he can usually make use of it. But essentially she is receiving « her » portion of the family wealth ; the dowry is therefore not simply the mirror of bridewealth, which is an affinal resource essentially for men. Dowry however is attached to women. This much is clear from European history – from the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine, for example. The marriage transaction, dowry, was part of the process of transmission within the family ; as such it was related to inheritance, which included women. This aspect is especially apparent in the Biblical story of the daughters of Zelophehad who, if they married outside the tribe, could not inherit property i.e. take it outside. Dowry and bisexual transmission were linked to endogamy, to marriage in. Examples of enclosed marriage are that of the father's brother's daughter in Arab countries, the close one permitted in early Israel and Persia, and the extreme case of the brother-sister unions of Egypt, all of which were, partially at least, attempts to contain marriage among kin and to ensure that property, including qualities, did not pass outside the family, as is the case with the daughters of Zelophehad.

In this form of marriage transaction, Europe and Asia were one ; there was none of the Asiatic exceptionalism that nineteenth-century European writers, living with the results of the Industrial Revolution, had posited. Marriage was largely monogamous. Nor of course were there systematic differences in the case of the descent systems, which with various modifications were found throughout the continent although they certainly tended to disappear (as did all extended systems) with industrialization. But as David Aberle (1961) has clearly shown for matrilineal systems, you tended to find them with all sorts of economy. However the dowry was found only with class societies that in this sense occurred with the Bronze Age and the Urban Revolution.

There is a related problem. If you allow women to inherit, you are already excluding more distant men. Princess Elizabeth inherited the throne of England (plus estate) rather than a more distant male cousin. This exclusion obviously threatens the solidarity of the masculine clan or line and places the emphasis on the nuclear family, the offspring of a conjugal pair. It produces a twist to the kinship system that you do not find in Africa for example, namely the problem of the heiress. This is a woman without brothers who inherits the family property, including the landed estate, which she uses to attract a man to come and live with her in what I call « filiacentric union », a union in which the power relations are changed and the woman « wears the trousers » (which is what Princess Elizabeth did with the throne).

Now these various forms of kinship are not confined to one part of the Eurasian continent, to Europe or to Asia ; they are found in all the major post-Bronze-Age societies of Eurasia, as one would expect. But in emphasising the comparability of these societies, we go completely against the view, crystallized by Marx but present in the ideas of most nineteenth and twentieth century Europeans, that the European and Asian families were quite different in « kinship » terms, that the former was linked to the advent of capitalism while the latter was marked by « backwardness » which did not permit this development to take place.

A central voice in this discussion was that of the Reverend Malthus at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For him Asia was fundamentally different in demographic and kinship terms from Europe. The latter he claimed showed restraint in having later marriage and therefore in postponing sex and childbirth, whereas Asia had early marriage which led to increased childbirth and indeed meant abandoning the control of family size. This was the common view of Europeans and Europeanists who related the differences, as Malthus had done, to the advent of our « modernity » (our « capitalism ») and to the backwardness of the east (from this point of view longstanding). The large clan of China according to Max Weber was seen as inhibiting economic advance. That is, from the common heritage of the Near Eastern Bronze Age, which affected both east and west in virtually similar ways, what Childe called the Urban Revolution, producing the culture of cities, or civilisation in his usage, there resulted a supposed bifurcation in which one area, the east, was marked by the stasis of an « agricultural civilisation », whereas the other was marked by dynamic growth, leading to capitalism ; in Marxist versions, there was an Asiatic mode of production and a bureaucratic state (Asiatic exceptionalism) on the one hand, while Europe moved from a phase of Antiquity (with slavery), to feudalism and then to capitalism.

But the opposition was wrong, at least at the Malthusian and demographic level of reproduction. As James Lee and Wang Feng (1999) have shown, although the Chinese married earlier, their fertility in marriage was less than in the European case ; they expressed « restraint » of a so-called Protestant kind within marriage rather than before, being supported by a post-partum sex taboo. So they were not increasing at a greater rate. That collapsed the Malthus argument and also that of most later demographic historians, who had accepted the idea that the east procreated without considering the consequences. That notion has been shown by these authors to be quite mistaken.

That is not to say there was no difference between Europe and Asia. Marriage took place earlier in the latter, but at this level there is nothing to link one region with the advent of capitalism rather than the other. Nor does the widespread refinement of the thesis which has been the core of so much recent research centring upon the so-called European marriage pattern. That comprised not only late marriage for men and women but a substantial number never marrying, as well as the linked institution of external service of the young and unmarried in other households. This complex was said to run from Moscow to Trieste, known as the Hajnal line, an area which included northwest Europe, in particular Holland and Britain, but excluded much of Italy where the historical Renaissance, and the rebirth of Europe, had begun. Demographic and kinship factors did not seem to be relevant for the « birth » of capitalism.

That is to say, one did not find the usual kinship variables leading up to a « capitalist family ». Kinship, as understood by anthropologists, was in fact insulated from the pattern of development, except in restricted spheres. One of these was the shift from bridewealth to dowry, as the result of the greater socio-economic differentiation of post-Bronze Age society. The second is the move to slim down all kinship systems to produce a « small family ». The second feature is complex. It is clear that in the east, kinship systems have remained more extensive. That has not inhibited but sometimes encouraged the growth of exchange, as can be seen from Faure's discussion of the clan business in China (Faure 2006) and of Rudner's analysis of money lending among the Chettiars in South India (Rudner 1994). In any case there are no grounds for thinking that development along capitalist lines has been inhibited. Weber was wrong. One reason for the misunderstanding is that we need to pay more attention than we have to « the domestic group ». The domestic group that reproduces human life lies at the heart of all clanship and other kinship institutions throughout the human world and many similar considerations apply everywhere. Extensive systems, whether of unilineal

clanship or bilateral groups, have at the core a domestic group, a living group (a group lives together or nearby), and the difference between a small or a large family is a matter of stripping away the more extensive ties, and this group, with some difference, is found in China and in Europe. I have lived for some time in families in India and China and in my view the similarities with the west are striking, nor does there seem to be anything in their structure to prevent the development of a capitalist system.

The binary division between modern and traditional obscures points of contact, just as Malthus obscured the question of the similarity in procreativity between Europe and Asia. This problem became particularly problematic, because in the evolutionary schemes of Marx and others, Europe with its later achievements was given a completely different trajectory from the rest of the world, and specifically from Asia. Historically this is wrong because both the east and the west of the Eurasian continent benefitted from the shift to Bronze Age (metal) cultures, first recorded in the Ancient Near East. It is there that we find the Urban Revolution, which in the countryside produced the plough and with it a significant measure of economic and social differentiation (class) which you don't get with the hoe, and which of course the dowry system maintains over the generations. And more importantly for growth in various domains, its invention of writing (pace Derrida who thinks writing universal).

This differentiated regime developed compatible kinship systems which I have discussed at some length in a volume I edited, *Bridewealth and Dowry* (with Stanley J. Tambiah) and in another (translated into French as *Famille et mariage en Eurasie* by Presses universitaires de France) called *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive*. There I insisted upon the similarities of Eurasian systems (despite differences in descent and in sometimes plural marriage). This recognition led me in time to emphasise the similarities not only in kinship but in the economy and in the general level of development in the two areas. This was logical since, as I have remarked, both wings of the Eurasian continent went through the same Bronze Age revolution. Both developed differentiated, trading, societies, based on « intensive » agriculture (with the plough), on the elaboration of technologies (metallurgy etc.) and a written civilisation, with all that it entailed in terms of more rapid and permanent accumulation of knowledge and cultural exchange.

The same starting point meant that the different areas present roughly parallel scenes. There were certain periods where one clearly dominated. As did China in the 18th century which was the workshop of the world and its greatest exporter. Western markets had to bring in opium from

India and even water (in the form of ice) from Boston ponds unless they were to export bullion (and a few other products). With the Industrial Revolution in the west and the development of mechanised production, using iron machinery driven by non-human energy, the west took over the lead. It was then that China was seen as close to « other cultures », to the primitive, as one of those that never made it to capitalism whereas the supremacy of the west asserted itself in making its way to that goal through Antiquity, Feudalism and the Renaissance. But this road to capitalism was certainly not exclusive. In recent years we have seen first Japan, then the Four Asian Tigers, more recently the sleeping giants of China and India, as making their mark in the developing world and setting aside that fundamental division between we and they, the east and the west. Many anthropologists have spent a great deal of time in showing why this could never happen, especially in terms of domestic life. But it has happened and it should have made us rethink many theories, of kinship and more generally.

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Jack Goody, *Kinship and the "Great Divide"*. — The article questions the binary opposition between « traditional » and « modern » societies, or of East and West, in which the latter is « capitalist » and civilized, and the former « primitive ». This has marked both anthropology and sociology. The article focuses on the question of demography and the family. It queries attempts to establish a fundamental difference between the family structures of Europe and Asia, with the former being deemed more suitable for the development of « capitalism ». Challenging Malthus' view of China, among others, it highlights similarities, rather than differences, in terms of the dowry, inheritance, and the class system in Eurasia. These are common features shared by post-Bronze Age, urban, and stratified societies.

Jack Goody, *Parenté et "Grand partage"*. — Cet article revient sur l'opposition binaire qui a marqué de son empreinte la pensée tant anthropologique que sociologique, entre Orient et Occident, c'est-à-dire entre sociétés dites « traditionnelles » et sociétés dites « modernes », où les premières sont considérées comme « primitives » et les secondes comme « capitalistes » et donc « civilisées ». En s'intéressant plus particulièrement aux thématiques de la parenté et de la famille, il s'agit de remettre en question les tentatives visant à établir une différence fondamentale entre les modèles familiaux d'Europe et d'Asie, pour lesquelles le système européen aurait été le plus apte à favoriser le développement du capitalisme. Récusant cet argument que l'on doit, entre autres, aux présupposés de Malthus à propos de la Chine, nous mettrons plutôt ici en évidence les similitudes existant sur tout l'espace eurasiatique en termes de parenté : notamment la dot, l'héritage ou le système de classes, partagés par toutes les grandes sociétés urbaines et stratifiées d'Europe et d'Asie issues de l'âge du bronze, apportant ainsi la preuve que, dans ce creuset eurasiatique, s'est donc forgée une relative unité civilisationnelle.