

STEREOTYPES IN LITERATURE AND SCIENCE

Every society has a number of images of itself and of other societies. These images correspond to the anthropologist's conception of a 'model', the device by which order is made of chaos, discontinuity out of continuity, so that the 'myriad impressions' with which we are 'bombarded', the 'flux of sensations', can be selected, discriminated and therefore made intelligible.¹ This model is a heuristic device and its basis, if we are to accept Lévi-Strauss' conception of mind, lies in the very categories of the human consciousness which provides the possibility for a fundamental taxonomy for classifying the universe. Thus the model involves a process of selection from experience rather than reproduction of it,¹ so in the very nature of a cross-cultural 'image' lie the seeds of its distortion of 'reality'.

This image, then, is to be seen as part of the total system of classification of a people. And it is thus important to understand the criteria by which the classification is made in order to understand fully how it operates on the ground. Mary Douglas, in her analysis of Judaic classification,² shows how the criteria are not merely related to economic, 'functional' aspects of life but are to be explained in terms of the total cosmology; the pig is forbidden because it is an anomaly in the system, not because pork is harmful in hot climates. Lévi-Strauss³ adds some more examples to those cited by Durkheim and Mauss⁴ in explaining the same principle, and adds that they are 'evidence of thought which is experienced in all the exercises of speculation and resembles that of the naturalists and alchemists of antiquity and the middle ages.' And he provides an example which leads us directly into our present concern, with that aspect of the classification system by which members of other human groups are pigeon-holed; 'The Omaha Indians', he writes 'consider one of the main differences between themselves and the whites to be that "Indians never pick flowers", that is, never picked them for pleasure'.⁵

The reason for this criterion being applied is that 'plants have sacred uses known (only) to the secret owners' and thus the use of them defines those within the culture, who have access to particular plants, and those without who have no such restrictions. Among the Lugbara an important criterion is distance - those more than a certain distance from the home culture are conceived of as upside down; thus white people in their own lands walk on their heads.⁶ And Evans-Pritchard provides a diagram in Neur Religion which shows the Nuer at the centre of a series of concentric circles by which the farther one moves out the more people are regarded as strangers.⁷ Distances and indigenous superiority, however, are not the only criteria, or even indispensable ones; in Melanesia the myth of the two brothers explains that the white brother is superior to the black according to the economic-religious criterion of access to power and goods.⁸ The missionary, who seemed at first to be providing a ritual key to access to European goods and power, is thus identified with the 'good' white brother of the myth who is traditionally expected to help his black brother; while those Europeans who merely took without giving are related to the traditional white brother who refused to close the gap with the poorer black. The myth provides a ready-made framework into which the actions of various European arrivals can be placed, and therefore understood according to traditional values.

The validation that a myth can give to the framework of thought in which the members of another group or culture can be 'placed' is a key to our understanding of the nature of inter-group relations. The framework may be given force by contemporary political and economic conditions but it must derive validation and authority from the wider system of values of a society.

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The sources of the image of 'primitive' man in 19th century England (and still today to some extent) are customarily found in psychology, in politics and economic exploitation. The notion that primitive man was inferior, less intelligent, and less capable of managing his own affairs through an inherent

childishness, predilection to anarchy etc. is assumed to derive from the exigencies of exploitation, from a need to justify the domination of the black man by the white. These political and economic considerations obviously played a large part in the dissemination and acceptance of the image, but they do not account for the origin and nature of the image itself; it is the object of this article to go beyond these well-worked themes to posit two further elements in the formation of the image of the 'savage'; (a) Science, which gave the image authority and provided the framework of the model. (b) Literature, which gave the image popular currency, added its own authority and moulded it in terms of the literary tradition, and which provides us today with an empirical source for generalisations about 'popular images' and 'the popular mind' since they were given concrete expression through such literature.

Recalling what has been said about the nature of classification systems, and the fact that an image of another society must be seen as part of such a total system, it is inevitable that we must look to the source of validation for the system and to its medium of expression, in order to fully understand how the system operates, and in particular that part of the system which we are interested in, the image of other people. During the period in European history that we are concerned with the breakdown of the authority of the Bible led to a shift in values and in sources of authority for those values.⁹ And in the re-integration, the new synthesis¹⁰ Science served to some extent to fill the gap, to provide the authority and validation for current values. In treating of the relation between cultures at this time we must thus look for the source of authority for many English ideas about other cultures to the science of the day, and in particular to anthropology which claimed to be dealing directly with this problem. And in this case anthropology not only had the authority, it also had a ready-made model which the public could use as conveniently as the Melanesians used the myth of the two brothers.

And when we look at the situation on the ground and realise the close connection of science and literature, scientists and writers, in Victorian England and see the extent to which popular novels, the million plus 'best seller' reflect and continue the debates going on at the British Academy and the Anthropological Society of London, we cannot but accept that there are empirical grounds too for tracing much of the image of the 'primitive' back to popular literature and science.

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Blumenbach¹¹ in 1781 traced the history of the use of 'race' as an element in the taxonomy of mankind only a few generations previous to his own work. He himself contributed to the use of the term and introduced, in his five-fold division, the word 'Caucasian' to cover the most beautiful' race, the white one. Bendyshe prophetically declares in his introduction that, having been introduced by Blumenbach to the sciences, the races will remain there.¹² And subsequent classifications¹³ continued Blumenbach's confusion of 'external' and 'internal' characteristics, so that along with hair, colour, and skull shape such value-loaded aspects of human nature as attractiveness, temperament and ability were taken into account, and assumed to be transmitted biologically from one generation to another in a given race. To understand the scientists' conception of other societies in the last two hundred years we must thus discern the criteria used; in discussing the attitude of Victorian society to the negro there is no point trying to prove whether the negro is less, more or as intelligent as the white man but rather whether the criterion of intelligence makes any contribution to our understanding of both negroes and whites. The acceptance of the framework provided by the scientists meant that both sides started from a false premise and it is this framework which the anthropologist today must reconsider in any discussion of race. The quality of much of the mass media today in its representation of other cultures makes such obvious points worth repeating.

The 19th century taxonomy owed much to the medieval 'Great Chain of Being' (which Lévi-Strauss compared to other systems of classification, 'advanced and primitive', above) whereby the whole natural world was divided according to a hierarchical chain of categories with, inevitably, Man at the top¹⁴ The growing flow of information on other cultures during the 19th century led to a debate among scientists and anthropologists as to where the many different types of mankind could fit in this great chain, the hierarchical quality of which

was supported by the very nature of Victorian class-conscious society.¹⁵ The unit adopted for pigeon-holing men in this hierarchy was that of race which, as we have seen, leant itself to ethnocentric value-judgements. And with the dilemma of how the supposed equality of man could be reconciled with what seemed obvious evidence of the inferiority of some men, the hierarchy was subsumed beneath an evolutionary framework that was reinforced by the discoveries of biology and of Darwin. It could thus be scientifically asserted that, while all men were ultimately equal, some were below others on the evolutionary tree so had to be looked after by their superior brethren until they had progressed further.

The taxonomy of race, the acceptance of both 'internal' and 'external' as criteria of classification and features of heredity and the hierarchical, evolutionary framework in which the unit was race, provided scientists, politicians, travellers and priests with a model in which their own whims and vested interests could receive the validation of science. The politician could claim that those in an earlier stage of development needed guidance from above, and while some used the scheme for deliberate exploitation, others genuinely believed in 'the white man's burden'; the anthropologists could classify races according to how friendly he found them to be, how religious, intelligent, industrious, clean, moral, honest etc.; repressed members of Victorian society could 'project' their sublimated desires, restricted by a strict code of morals, onto the members of other cultures;¹⁶ and idealists and romantics could see in the nearness of primitive man to humanity's primeval origins scientific proof of the 'noble savage' theme. The model was everything to everyman; and to look for the explanation of the phenomenon of Victorian racism only in the particular political and economic forces of the day is to miss the basis of the phenomenon, which lies in a science that provided both the authority for the model and the framework of the model itself.

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The man in the street, however, did not read the treatises of Blumenbach or de Gobineau, though he may well have heard, or read in his newspapers, what was made of them by Knox and later Hunt. The model, though, percolated through and along with it the techniques for its application and the authority for such usage. And the medium for the dissemination of scientific views was the mass media; this may include sermons from the pulpit, such newsworthy events as the ape versus angel controversy at Oxford, the repercussions of the Jamaica uprising, the Great Exhibition and the travels of Livingstone. But the particular feature we are concerned with here is popular fiction, which we can use from our 20th century vantage point as an index for what the 'man in the street' thought at that time.

A spate of novels about Britain's overseas territories and the activities of travellers and colonists arose in the 1880's to replace the introverted domestic novel with tales of dramatic open-air events in exotic lands. And this literature, provided by such writers as Kipling, Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Bertram Mitford, Edgar Wallace and Conan Doyle, many of whom had spent some time in the countries they dramatised provided the public with their 'knowledge' of the peoples of these exotic lands.¹⁷ But the literature itself, for all its individual variations from author to author, had inherited a traditional framework of its own, and was subject to certain conventions and techniques which further served to delimit the ethnography according to English concepts and values.

The noble savage tradition took a hard blow when travellers began to bring back tales of savagery but it never died entirely and the literature of the period revolves around the debate between 'primitivism' and 'progress', which Lois Whitney has traced back to the 18th century.¹⁸ Given the framework of the discussion and the criterion of 'progress' romantic writers could transfer their traditional themes into contemporary jargon. In some cases a reconciliation is attempted by presenting the white man as a noble savage, as in the Tarzan stories;¹⁹ in many the framework of the journey to a lost land enables the gap between advances, and 'primitive' to be represented in vivid, imaginative symbols, huge mountain ranges, sun-blistered deserts and gaping chasms, far more memorable than the scientific treatises that were making the same point; the old chivalric tradition lived on to present the exotic land as a dream world, a faery land in which the travellers are shining knights and the in-

habitants strange, grotesque, inhuman figures whose disturbing 'foreignness' is further emphasised by the Gothic style in which many of these novels were written. The very nature of such fiction, the creation of flat, one-dimensional figures whose character can be inferred from their physical appearance, fits all too neatly the scientific confusion of internal and external characteristics. And the noble savage tradition, in which shepherds, 'natives', and children were all attributed similar qualities, likewise fits the scientific theory that primitive men, being earlier stages in the evolutionary development of European man, could be seen as children where the European races were adult.

Thus the traditional techniques of the medium which disseminated the scientific knowledge of the age to a wider public contributed to the framework of thought in which other cultures were considered; science was strained through the sieve of fiction. Any future travellers would see exotic lands through the spectacles provided by science and literature and bring home further reports of the 'savagery' and 'primitiveness' of other cultures to add to the body of 'proof' validating a framework that was thus self-sufficient.

The extent to which political and economic and religious motivations served to further reinforce the image, and to fill out its content, must thus be considered in the light of these two important elements which provided such a considerable part of the model then, and to a disturbingly large extent, continue to do so today. While the anthropological ideas have been subject to the rigours of academic scholarship and have radically changed since the 19th century, the literature which first presented such views to a wider public continues to be read and taught in schools today and has thus fossilized many outdated academic ideas in a vivid, memorable way that provides the 'proof' as well as the framework for many current prejudices.

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References

1. V. Woolf, The Common Reader, 1928; her criticism of the 'naturalistic' school of writing was that we can only know experience through selection, we cannot hope to reproduce it.
2. M. Douglas, Purity and Danger, Ch. 3, 1966.
3. Lévi-Strauss, C., The Savage Mind, London 1966, p. 42.
4. Durkheim, E. and Mauss, M., Primitive Classification, trans. Needham 1963.
5. Lévi-Strauss, op. cit, p. 43.
6. Middleton, Lugbara Religion, 1956.
7. Evans-Pritchard, E., Nuer Religion, 1956.
8. Burridge, K., New Heaven, New Earth, 1969.
9. The Bible itself was not necessarily 'disproved' by Darwinism; Kingsley amongst others, publicly showed how they could be reconciled; but the public believed the Bible had lost its authority and this is what mattered. But cf.
10. These words are appropriate since there are elements in the 19th century breakdown of values of the 'cargo cult' phenomenon which Burridge claims involves 're-integration'.
11. Bendyshe, The Anthropological Treatises of Blumenbach, 1865.
12. Ibid. Introduction.
13. e.g. de Gobineau, Ammon, Lapouge, Cuvier, Lamarck, Prichard (though he distinguishes between 'internal' and 'external').
14. Lovejoy, O., The Great Chain of Being, 1936.
15. Thus class, while not to be confused with scientific racism, contributed to the acceptance of the hierarchical categorisation of race.
16. cf. Curtis, L. P. Anglo-Saxons and Celts, 1968, p. 64, cf. also Allport, G., The Nature of Prejudice, 1954.
17. cf. Cohen, M., Rider Haggard, His Life and Works, 1960. To many public school boys Africa was the Africa of 'King Solomon's Mines' - these boys were later to become the District Commissioners who helped to rule that Africa.
18. Whitney, L. The Idea of Progress in 18th Century Literature.
19. Burroughs, E. R. Tarzan of the Apes, English ed. 1917, etc. of also Allan Quartermain's 'noble' deeds.