

DURKHEIM IN BRITAIN: THE WORK OF RADCLIFFE-BROWN

ROBERT A. SEGAL

Rivers' Historicism

IN 1911, in his presidential address to the Anthropology Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, W. H. R. Rivers shocked his audience by announcing his rejection of evolution in favour of diffusion as the explanation for similarities among cultures. Rivers' 'conversion' was startling not merely because of his previous commitment to evolution but also because of the commitment of British anthropologists generally. Indeed, Rivers began his address by contrasting the theoretical approaches of British, French, German, and American anthropologists. Of the British commitment to evolution and, with it, of independent invention, he wrote:

The efforts of British anthropologists are devoted to tracing out the evolution of custom and institution. Where similarities are found in different parts of the world, it is assumed, almost as an axiom, that they are due to independent origin and development, and this in its turn is ascribed to the fundamental similarity of the workings of the human mind all over the world, so that, given similar conditions, similar customs and institutions will come into existence and develop on the same lines. (Rivers 1926: 121)

The French, according to Rivers, are equally sworn to evolution, but they sharply distinguish the evolution of society, which has its own laws, from the evolution of individuals. They use sociology rather than, like the British, psychology to account for similarities in cultures: 'It is held [by the French] that the psychology of the individual cannot be used as a guide to the collective actions of men in early stages of social evolution, still less the psychology of the individual whose social ideas have been moulded by the long ages of evolution which have made our own society what it is' (ibid.). The figures cited are Emile Durkheim, whose *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* appeared in 1895, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* appeared in 1910. As a leading psychologist, Rivers held firmly to an individualistic approach to society. His conversion from evolution to diffusion did not affect that approach. Rivers' inspiration for his shift came from the Germans, especially Friedrich Ratzel, who 'believed that the resemblances he found could only be explained by direct transmission from one people to another' and who dismissed the notion of independent invention as 'the anthropological equivalent of the spontaneous generation of the biologist' (ibid.: 123).

Rivers epitomizes the brand of social anthropology that his prize student, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, rejected. The British tradition culminating in Rivers was, thanks to Radcliffe-Brown, rejected altogether by a contrary one coming not from Germany but from France. Radcliffe-Brown brought Durkheim to Britain and, in doing so, transformed British anthropology in ways that continued well into the 1960s, if not still today. Radcliffe-Brown made British anthropology French.¹ Put summarily, the quest for origin was replaced by the quest for function. Historical questions were ruled out of court, and the divide between evolutionists and diffusionists was dismissed as secondary. Declares Radcliffe-Brown: 'I believe that at this time the really important conflict in anthropological studies is not that between the "evolutionists" and the "diffusionists"...but between conjectural history on the one side and the functional study of society on the other' (Radcliffe-Brown 1929a: 53). With Radcliffe-Brown, the focus shifted abruptly from a diachronic to a synchronic approach (see Radcliffe-Brown 1957: 88–9). The question to be asked was not how an aspect of culture came into being but, whatever its source, what it presently did. The assumption was that it continued to exist because it continued to function. Function meant function for society, not for the individual. The social

¹ Against this undeniably conventional view, see Langham 1981: 271–82, 293–9, who asserts that Radcliffe-Brown really gets his theory from Rivers rather than from Durkheim, and even that he gets his Durkheim from Rivers! In defence of the conventional view, see Stocking 1984a: 106–7; 1984b: 134 n. 1. The 1912–14 correspondence between Radcliffe-Brown and Rivers suggests that Radcliffe-Brown used Rivers to work out his own position, which is fundamentally a Durkheimian one: see Kuper 1988.

function of a phenomenon was its contribution to the preservation of society. Psychology was replaced by sociology, the individual by the group.

It would be silly to claim that, prior to Durkheim, British anthropologists were oblivious to sociological issues. Rivers, for example, devoted whole books to *Kinship and Social Organization* (1914) and *Social Organization* (1924), analysing the 'social function' of social units like the family and the clan. What, then, is non-Durkheimian in his approach? In the first place, Rivers seeks to provide both a historical and a sociological analysis. As he states at the outset of *Social Organization*, 'social structure' can be studied either sociologically ('statically') or historically ('dynamically'):

It may be our aim merely to describe the various forms of social structure found throughout the world, to analyse each into its constituent elements, to study the relation of these elements to one another, to inquire into the social functions of their constituent elements, and to discover how these functions are combined so that they succeed in producing an orderly and consistent organization. (Rivers 1924: 3-4)

Or 'it may be our aim to discover the processes by which human societies with their vast variety have come into being' (ibid.: 4). While in *Social Organization* Rivers gives a sociological analysis to counterbalance the contemporary focus on historical analysis, he follows his sociological analysis of each social unit with a reconstructed history of the unit. The ultimate pay-off for him is historical. But of course Durkheim himself is concerned with history as well as with sociology, and unlike some who pit history against function, he enlists the one to abet the other (see Bellah 1959). The difference may, then, be in the proportion. The ultimate pay-off for Durkheim is surely sociological, not historical.

In the second place, Rivers' sociological analysis is itself far from Durkheimian. To begin with, he is concerned with functions that are other than social. For example, the family unit has an 'economic' function, such as responsibility for a particular occupation (see Rivers 1924: 26). The 'political' function of the clan is the election of leaders to rule it (see ibid.: 27). A function of both the clan and the family 'lying between the political and economic functions' is the determination of who owns property: 'For instance,...in the island of Ambrim in the New Hebrides property belongs both to the clan and to a group partaking of the nature of a kindred, consisting of blood relatives on the father's side and the sister's children of a man' (ibid.: 24-5). The 'religious' function of the totemic clan is the determination of which animal is one's totem (see ibid.: 26). Far from serving to preserve the unit, these non-social functions *presuppose* its preservation. For Rivers, the existence and stability of the group are unproblematic. He puts the Durkheimian cart before the Durkheimian horse.

Even when Rivers does turn to 'social' functions, his approach is only superficially Durkheimian. True, the function itself is social. Marriage, for example, is

not only 'the means by which human society regulates the relations between the sexes' but also 'the means by which every individual born into a society is assigned a definite place in that society, by which his or her social relations to the rest of the society are determined' (ibid.: 37). Children thus know who are and who are not their relatives, and with whom they can and cannot one day mate. But Rivers' analysis, which continually borders on the obvious, falls far short of Durkheim's. While the ultimate social function is, as for Durkheim, the maintenance of society, for Rivers this function is achieved by simply according one a social unit. Loyalty comes automatically with assignment. For Durkheim, loyalty must be forged. In short, Rivers' sociology makes Durkheim's anything but redundant.²

The Introduction of Durkheim to Britain

Who brought Durkheim to Britain? Often the credit is given not to anthropologists or to sociologists but to classicists: to Jane Harrison and her fellow Cambridge Ritualists, F. M. Cornford, A. B. Cook, and Oxford's Gilbert Murray.³ Of the four, Cook can quickly be eliminated: he was hostile to Durkheim and to any attempt at reducing the object of worship to the group worshipping it.⁴ Murray was happy to apply Durkheim to the earliest stage of Greek religion (see Murray 1955: 6 n. 1) but was more interested in subsequent, more 'advanced' stages. He preferred Olympian, 'rational' Greece to chthonic, 'primitive' Greece and stressed what Greece had evolved *into* rather than what it had evolved *from*.⁵

Cornford's main Durkheimian book is his 1912 *From Religion to Philosophy*, in the preface to which he states that, for his 'guide' to the question why the Greeks believed in the subordination of their gods to impersonal Fate, 'we take the

² On Rivers' knowledge and appreciation of the Durkheimians, see Slobodin 1997: 160–1, 165–8.

³ See, for example, Collini, who says of the Cambridge Ritualists that 'here, indeed, was the beginning of British anthropology's long affair with Durkheimianism' (Collini 1978: 35). But the sceptical Stocking offers alternative origins and rightly asks where the Ritualists themselves learned of Durkheim: see Stocking 1984a: 108–9.

⁴ As Cook puts it, 'The *Creator Spiritus* is not lightly to be identified with the *spiritus creatorum*' (Cook 1925: 932). See also Harrison 1927: 49 n. to p. 48; Ackerman 1991a: 14–16; 1991b: 165–6.

⁵ See Thompson 1957: 265; Humphreys 1978: 79–80; Turner 1981: 131–2; West 1984: 135–6; Fowler 1991: 83–5; Wilson 1987: 158–60. Murray's unfinished autobiography (Murray 1960) ends long before he meets Harrison. In the preface to his *Five* (originally *Four*) *Stages of Greek Religion*, Murray contrasts his 'debt' to Harrison for his first chapter, which is on primitive Greek religion, to his rejoinder to her scorn for Olympian religion, the subject of his second chapter: see Murray 1955: xii. On Harrison's own surprising distaste for primitive religion, see Schlesier 1990: 135.

theorem, maintained by the new French school of sociologists, that the key to religious representation lies in the social structure of the community which elaborates it. To Professor Emile Durkheim and his colleagues of the *Année Sociologique* I owe the solution offered of this fundamental problem of Olympian religion' (Cornford 1912: viii).⁶ Cornford's analysis, especially in chapter two, is fully Durkheimian in its emphasis on the social over the individual, its stress on the social origin of both categories and religion, and its equation of the earliest religion and the earliest society with totemism:

We have seen how the social group is the original type on which all other schemes of classification—at first magical, and later scientific—are modelled. At a very early stage, the whole of the visible world was parcelled out into an ordered structure, or cosmos, reflecting, or continuous with, the tribal microcosm, and so informed with types of representation which are of social origin. To this fact the order of nature owes its sacred or moral character. It is regarded as not only necessary but right or just, because it is a projection of the social constraint imposed by the group upon the individual, and in that constraint 'must' and 'ought' are identical. Such we believe to have been the process by which *Moira* came to rule supreme over the Gods, and Justice to ordain the boundaries of the elements in Anaximander's philosophy. (Ibid.: 71)

Throughout his book Cornford cites a variety of works by Durkheim. Clearly, he knew his Durkheim, even if he does take Lucien Lévy-Bruhl as an unqualified Durkheimian.

But Cornford also thanks Harrison for the 'clear advance in the study of the earlier phases, not only of Greek religion, but of religion in general,...marked by the publication of Miss Jane Harrison's *Themis*' (ibid.: ix). The 'advance' in that book is exactly the application of Durkheim. Although it was published in the same year as *From Religion to Philosophy*, *Themis* appeared earlier and was read by Cornford before publication. He himself contributed a chapter, itself non-Durkheimian. Moreover, Harrison was always the first of the Ritualists to come upon new ideas and to spread them to the others.⁷

In *Themis*, her main Durkheimian work, Harrison expresses her 'debt' to Durkheim for one of the central ideas of her book: that 'among primitive peoples,' with whom she compares pre-Homeric Greeks, 'religion reflects *collective* feeling

⁶ See David's review of Cornford's *From Religion to Philosophy* in *L'Année sociologique* (David 1913a): while appreciative of Cornford's commitment to Durkheim, David faults him for being more extreme than the master. On Cornford as a Durkheimian, see Wood 1990: 28–9.

⁷ As Ackerman, the authority on the Ritualists, puts it, 'it was she who led the others to (at least) Durkheim, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Freud' (Ackerman 1991a: 10).

and collective thinking' (Harrison 1912: ix). The subtitle of *Themis* is *A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*. Harrison credits William Robertson Smith with showing the social *function* of ancient religion, which he takes as primitive, but she credits Durkheim with showing the social *origin* of religion—all religion. Rather than originating in the worship of a god, as with Smith, religion for Harrison, as for Durkheim, originates in the worship of the group itself: 'The worshippers, or rather the social agents, are prior to the god. The ritual act...is prior to the divinity' (ibid.: 29). Only gradually does a god distinct from its 'agents' emerge, and that god is simply a projection of group experience:

The process of severance between god and worshipper...is slow. Actual worship, of prayer and praise and sacrifice, denotes that the severance is complete; ritual such as that of the [initiated] Kouretes, in which the god is 'summoned' and bidden to leap, denotes an intermediate stage when he is merely representative and felt to be of like passions though of higher potency than his summoner. Gradually the chorus loses all sense that the god is themselves, he is utterly projected, no longer chief daemon...but unique and aloof, a perfected *theos*. Strong emotion collectively experienced begets this illusion of objective reality; each worshipper is conscious of something in his emotion not himself, stronger than himself. He does not know it is the force of collective suggestion, he calls it a god. (Ibid.: 46–7)

In totemism, which for Harrison, following Durkheim, is the earliest form of religion, the totem is considered the kin of group members rather than a god above them (see ibid.: 127).

Although Harrison footnotes Durkheim only sporadically, her account of ancient Greek religion follows his theory of religion almost to a tee.⁸ Her focus on the definition of religion, her definition of the object of religion as the sacred rather than god, her concern with ritual as much as with belief, her stress on both belief and ritual as obligatory, her association of the obligatory with the social, her rooting of religion in group experience, her stress on the emotion stirred by group experience, her dismissal of the place of the individual in religion—all of these points come conspicuously from Durkheim's 'De la définition des phénomènes religieux' (1899), which she cites above all. '*Les Formes Élémentaires de la Pensée et de la Vie Religieuse*', as she titles it, was only forthcoming at the time of the publication of *Themis* (see Harrison 1912: 486 n. 3). Harrison goes beyond Durkheim in characterizing the original group ritual as an initiation ritual.⁹ Here she

⁸ As with Cornford, so with Harrison: see David's review of her *Themis* in *L'Année sociologique* (David 1913b), in which Harrison, like Cornford, is criticized for being even more Durkheimian than Durkheim.

⁹ Elsewhere Harrison criticizes Durkheim for failing to recognize the original ritual as an initiation ritual: see Harrison 1915b: 63.

follows Arnold van Gennep, whose *Les Rites de passage* appeared in 1909 (see *ibid.*: 20).

Harrison corresponded with Durkheim (see Stewart 1959: 162) and reviewed his *Elementary Forms* with typical effusiveness (see Harrison 1915b). In her 1921 *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* she proclaims Durkheim an outright 'genius' for his 'discovery' of the 'social origin' of religion, and she proclaims that discovery 'perhaps the greatest advance yet made in the scientific study of religion' (Harrison 1921: 6 and n. 1).¹⁰ Yet nowhere does she say how she came upon Durkheim. In a footnote in *Themis* she does refer 'English readers' to 'a short account of M. Durkheim's position in the last chapter of Mr Marett's *Threshold of Religion*' (Marett 1909; Harrison 1912: 486 n. 3).¹¹ That chapter reprints R. R. Marett's 1908 essay on 'A Sociological View of Comparative Religion', his first article on Durkheim. It is, however, most unlikely that Harrison took her Durkheimian inspiration from that essay. While Marett is eager to recommend Durkheim's sociological approach to fellow British scholars, he criticizes any one-sided concentration on the group as sharply as he does the one-sided focus of British anthropologists on the individual, rejecting sociological determinism for its denial of individual free will. True, he notes that the Durkheimians so far 'shew no strong inclination to do that' (Marett 1908a: 51), but he approves of them only in so far as they do not. He advocates a combination of sociology with psychology—in his terms, a combination of the 'social psychology' of the French with the 'individual psychology' of the British. He insists on allowing for the presence of free-thinking individuals in even primitive society:

At the level of primitive culture, however, where representative individuals are not easily met with, where, to our eyes at least, one man is very like an-

¹⁰ On Durkheim's impact, see also Harrison 1915a: 50–1; Stewart 1959: 85–6, 87, 91, 162; Peacock 1988: 195–8. Surprisingly, Harrison never even mentions Durkheim in her autobiography (Harrison 1925), written only four years after *Epilegomena*.

¹¹ In his autobiography Marett writes that he himself learned of the Durkheimians between 1904 and 1907, when, in his contribution to the *Festschrift* for Edward Tylor (reprinted in Marett 1909: ch. 3), he refers several times to the article on magic by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss in vol. 7 of *L'Année sociologique*: see Marett 1941: 161. (By contrast, in the 1908 collection of essays edited by Marett [1908b] on *Anthropology and the Classics*, Durkheim is nowhere mentioned.) How Marett came upon the Durkheimians, he does not disclose. He writes: 'To return to the *Année Sociologique*—when I first heard of it there was no copy to be found in the Oxford libraries, and I had to buy the set of volumes for myself. And very glad I was that I had done so' (Marett 1941: 162). Stocking suggests that perhaps Marett's Channel Islands origins gave him 'a special sensitivity to French thought' (Stocking 1984a: 109), but Marett writes that at the time 'of the theorists, more especially those hailing from the Continent, I knew little, perhaps even congratulating myself on the virgin state of my mind in this respect' (Marett 1941: 162). The earliest reference in a British publication to the Durkheimians that I have come upon is a laudatory review of Volume 6 of *L'Année sociologique*: see Hartland 1903.

other, the social method, the method of the compositive photograph, may and must have the preference.... [Yet] it will always be wise to make allowance for the possibility of alternative interpretations in regard to even the most firmly rooted custom, as well as for the possibility of interference on the part of that bugbear of Social Science, the individual who has a view of his own. (Ibid.: 58)¹²

Harrison's indebtedness to Durkheim for revealing to her the primacy of the group over the individual surely, then, does not come from Marett.¹³

In *Themis* Harrison does attribute the notion of a 'pre-totemic' society—the one, minor respect in which, knowingly or unknowingly, she breaks with Durkheim—to 'views expressed by Mr A. R. Brown [who later added 'Radcliffe'] in a course of lectures delivered in 1909 at Trinity College, Cambridge' (Harrison 1912: 125). Presumably, she attended those lectures. Certainly she repeats Radcliffe-Brown's demographic explanation of the shift from pre-totemic to totemic society: 'Probably it was due to the merely mechanical cause of pressure of population' (ibid.). She would scarcely have come up with that explanation on her own.

There survives a set of notes for Radcliffe-Brown's lectures, actually delivered in 1910, along with the printed lecture schedule. The subject of the lectures, 'Comparative Sociology', is as Durkheimian as the approach, apart from the identification of a pre-totemic stage of society. (The Durkheim followed is that of *The Division of Labour in Society*.) Moreover, in a 1912 letter to Marcel Mauss, Rad-

¹² As Marett writes in his autobiography, '[U]p to a point their insistence on the purely social element involved in the development of human institutions—language being a very good example—was needed to counteract the opposite tendency running through so much of British work, Tylor's included.... These French sociologists, then, even if they tended to bend the stick too far the other way, were, to me at least, very enlightening.... In the *Sociological Review* for January, 1908, I defined my attitude towards this school of thought as carefully as I could, but perhaps failed to indicate the full extent of my debt to their remarkable labours' (Marett 1941: 163). By 1912, he was even more of a Durkheimian, pitting religion as social against magic as anti-social: see Marett 1912: 209–10; also Marett 1920: 189; 1941: 163.

¹³ Stocking's suggestion that 'it may well have been the work of Marett' that 'led Harrison to Durkheim' (Stocking 1984a: 109) is based on the number of citations to Marett in *Themis*. But of the nine references, only the one quoted deals with Durkheim. Undeniably, Harrison praises Marett on some of the same grounds that she praises Durkheim, above all for their common conception of primitive religion as the group experience of an awesome, impersonal force. However, she does not credit Marett with introducing her to Durkheim. That Durkheim himself cites Marett for independently confirming Durkheim's conception of primitive religion reinforces Marett's autonomy: see Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 230–1. At the same time Stocking is well aware of Marett's distance from the Durkheimians in the 1908 essay: see Stocking 1995: 168–9.

cliffe-Brown declares himself 'in complete agreement with the view of sociology put forward in the *Année Sociologique*' and with characteristic arrogance takes credit for being 'the first person to expound those views in England' in lectures on 'Sociology in Cambridge in 1910', where he was a Fellow of Trinity College, and in 'my lectures at London University [i.e. London School of Economics] in 1909-10', where he was a Reader in Ethnology (Testart 1979: 4). Radcliffe-Brown's arrogance aside, it is much more likely that Harrison learned of Durkheim from him than vice versa (see Stocking 1984b: 108-9).¹⁴ Cornford, for his part, credits Brown with his own functionalist approach to primitive culture (see Cornford 1912: 75 n. 2).

The Andaman Islanders

In 1906 Radcliffe-Brown went to the Andaman Islands, located off the coast of Burma, as a student of both Rivers and A. C. Haddon. He was under the influence of Haddon even more than of Rivers when he first wrote up his notes upon his return from the field in 1908 (see Stocking 1984b: 144). Most likely, Radcliffe-Brown did not encounter Durkheim until he started lecturing in 1910. Ironically, Radcliffe-Brown probably learned of Durkheim from Rivers (see Langham 1981: 281). But once he did, he interpreted his Andamanese material accordingly. Even his account of the development of totemic society out of pre-totemic society, of which the Andamanese were his sole example, is Durkheimian: an increase in population led to a division into social groups and in turn to exogamy and then to totemism (see Stocking 1984a: 122-3; 1984b: 145). Doubtless Radcliffe-Brown became even more of a Durkheimian from the time he gave the lectures to the time his fieldwork was finally published in 1922 (see Stocking 1984b: 145-6). Radcliffe-Brown corresponded with Durkheim but never met him.¹⁵

In the Preface to the 1933 reprint of *The Andaman Islanders* Radcliffe-Brown recounts that, when he began writing the book in 1908, he followed Rivers and Haddon in being concerned with historical questions: 'either with formulating hypotheses as to the origins of institutions or with attempts to provide hypothetical reconstructions of the details of culture history'. He sought 'to make a hypothetical reconstruction of the history of the Andamans and of the Negritos in general'. But

¹⁴ Ackerman writes that Harrison 'seems to have discovered the *Année* group around 1907, when she was struggling to revise *Prolegomena*, after the anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown had made them known in Britain' (Ackerman 1991a: 11). Of the essays by Durkheim that Harrison cites in *Themis* (1912: 486 n. 3), Ackerman states that 'she does not say when she read them, but it cannot have been before 1907' (Ackerman 1991b: 291 n. 23).

¹⁵ On Radcliffe-Brown's correspondence with Durkheim, see Peristiany 1960; Firth 1956: 301; Lukes 1973: 528-9.

in the process he became convinced 'that it is only in extremely rare instances that we can ever approach demonstrable conclusions and that speculative history cannot give us results of any real importance for the understanding of human life and culture' (Radcliffe-Brown 1933: vii). In the Preface Radcliffe-Brown attributes his change of views to the influence of 'the French sociologists', with their 'different conception of the utilization of ethnological data for the understanding of human life' (*ibid.*: viii). He states that he applied their 'method' to the customs and beliefs of the Andaman Islanders in Chapters 5 and 6 of his book, where he examines the 'meaning' and 'function' of customs and beliefs.

At the outset of Chapter 5, Radcliffe-Brown states that, having presented the customs and beliefs of the Andamanese in previous chapters, he now intends to 'interpret' them. By the 'interpretation' of a custom or belief he means 'the discovery, not of its origin, but of its meaning' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 229). By 'origin' he means historical, one-time origin. He does not mean recurrent origin, which is tied to function (see Radcliffe-Brown 1923a: 137). Radcliffe-Brown dismisses the historical question not as inappropriate but as unanswerable, as merely speculative: 'In the absence of all historical records, the most that we could do would be to attempt to make a hypothetical reconstruction of the past, which, in the present state of ethnological science, would be of very doubtful utility' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 229).¹⁶ He distinguishes social anthropology from ethnology and leaves to ethnology the task of 'hypothetical reconstructions of the past' (*ibid.*: 229 n. 1)—a task he dismisses as unscientific.

For Radcliffe-Brown, the historical approach is unscientific because it is 'conjectural':

My objection to conjectural history is not that it is historical, but that it is conjectural. History shows us how certain events or changes in the past have led to certain other events or conditions, and thus reveals human life in a particular region of the world as a chain of connected happenings. But it can do this only when there is direct evidence for both the preceding and succeeding events or conditions and also some actual evidence of their interconnection. In conjectural history we have direct knowledge about a state of affairs existing at a certain time and place, without any adequate knowledge of the preceding conditions and events, about which we are therefore reduced to making conjectures. To establish any probability for such conjectures we should need to have a knowledge of laws of social development which we certainly do not

¹⁶ On Radcliffe-Brown's encouragement of historical reconstruction wherever possible, see Eggan and Warner 1956: 546.

possess and to which I do not think we shall ever attain. (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 50)¹⁷

Conjectural history would be less conjectural if laws of social development could be applied to specific cases, but the establishment of such laws would require the missing information about specific cases.

For Radcliffe-Brown, the historical approach is also unscientific because it is particularistic rather than comparative. Contrary above all to Franz Boas, for whom the historical reconstruction of multiple cases can lead to laws, Radcliffe-Brown deems historical reconstruction hopelessly non-generalizable:

The important thing to note about explanations of this type is that they do not give us general laws such as are sought by the inductive sciences. A particular element or condition of culture is explained as having had its origin in some other, and this in turn is traced back to a third, and so on as far back as we can go. In other words, the method proceeds by demonstrating actual temporal relations between particular institutions or events or states of civilization. (Radcliffe-Brown 1923a: 125; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1951: 22)

Put more simply, 'while ethnology with its strictly historical method can only tell us that certain things have happened, or have probably or possibly happened, social anthropology with its inductive generalisations can tell us how and why things happen, i.e., according to what laws' (Radcliffe-Brown 1923a: 141; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1951: 16–22).¹⁸ In contrast to Boas, who wants to use the terms 'ethnology' and 'anthropology' interchangeably to encompass both historical reconstruction and laws of social development, Radcliffe-Brown divides the tasks and therefore the terms into the separate domains of ethnology and *social* anthropology, itself 'a special branch of comparative sociology' (Radcliffe-Brown 1951: 22; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1944). Historical reconstruction is the task of 'the ethnologists, archaeologists and historical anthropologists', not of social anthropologists (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 164–5).¹⁹ Because the task of social anthropol-

¹⁷ Radcliffe-Brown even equates historical questions with causal ones and rejects causality *per se* as conjectural: 'a pure theoretical science (whether physical, biological or social) is not concerned with causal relations in this sense. The concept of cause and effect belongs properly to applied science' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 60). Yet elsewhere he makes history indispensable to social anthropology: 'I am thoroughly convinced that it is impossible to reach a complete understanding of any element of a culture...without a profound and extensive study of history. But it must be real history, not conjectural history' (Radcliffe-Brown 1929a: 200). On Radcliffe-Brown's indebtedness to conjectural historians of the Enlightenment, see Barnard 1992: 4–6, 13–14.

¹⁸ But at least once, Radcliffe-Brown acknowledges that historical reconstruction can be comparative, if still conjectural: see Radcliffe-Brown 1937.

¹⁹ On Radcliffe-Brown's choice of terms, see Urry 1993: 126–36.

ogy is 'to arrive at valid generalisations about the nature of society and social phenomena' (ibid.: 165), ineluctably particularistic history is of no help.²⁰

By contrast to the origin—the historical origin—of a custom or belief, the 'meaning' is ascertainable, for by 'meaning' Radcliffe-Brown means 'function',²¹ and by function he means not past but present function. The function is therefore observable, therefore verifiable, therefore scientific. The function may not be observable to the participant, but it is observable to the anthropologist.²²

To use Radcliffe-Brown's favourite analogy, which he adopts from Herbert Spencer but does not press so relentlessly as Spencer, society is like a living body, with each custom and belief, like each organ, contributing in a distinctive way to the maintenance of the whole: 'Every custom and belief of a primitive society plays some determinate part in the social life of the community, just as every organ of a living body plays some part in the general life of the organism' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 229).²³ Just as 'animal physiology is distinguished from the biology that deals with the origin of species, the causes of variation, and the general laws of evolution' (ibid.: 230; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1976–77: 36–7),²⁴ so the study of the function of society is to be distinguished from the reconstruction of its history. Again, social anthropology is to be kept distinct from ethnology.

Radcliffe-Brown dismisses the notion of 'survivals', pioneered by Edward Tylor and promoted by Rivers, on the grounds that phenomena continue to exist only because they continue to serve a social function.²⁵ Furthermore, any genuine sur-

²⁰ Radcliffe-Brown juxtaposes a historical approach to North American Indian kinship terminology with a 'structural' approach: see Radcliffe-Brown 1941. For damning criticisms of Radcliffe-Brown's own inductive procedures, see Lowie 1937: 224–5; Evans-Pritchard 1981: 200–2.

²¹ Certainly in the Preface to the reprint of *The Andaman Islanders* (1933: viii–ix) Radcliffe-Brown tries to distinguish between 'meaning' and 'function', but it is hardly clear even there, let alone in the text itself, what the distinction is. See also Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 9–10.

²² On the compatibility of functionalism with history, see Lesser 1935: 388–93. In reply, Radcliffe-Brown claims to agree with Lesser: see Radcliffe-Brown 1935: 400–1.

²³ Unlike Spencer or even Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown is wary of pressing the analogy too far: see Radcliffe-Brown 1935: 394–7. On the differing uses of the organic analogy by social theorists, including Spencer, Durkheim, and Radcliffe-Brown, see Levine 1995: especially 247–50.

²⁴ Oddly, Radcliffe-Brown himself breaks the analogy when he asserts that somehow the history of societies can never yield 'general laws', whereas the present existence of societies can: see Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 229 n. 1. In any case it is laws that he is seeking.

²⁵ Radcliffe-Brown substitutes a functionalist analysis of the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son for a 'survivalist' one: see Radcliffe-Brown 1924. He does deny that his functionalism goes as far as to 'require the dogmatic assertion that everything in the life of every community has a function'. Functionalism makes 'only the assumption that it

vivals—the equivalent of tails on humans—can be identified only after seeking in vain their social function: ‘arguments about survivals, which are arguments in social dynamics, necessarily depend on hypotheses in social statics’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1976–77: 45). This position is ‘in direct contradiction with Dr Rivers’ view that the dynamic problems must be solved before the statical problems’ (ibid.: 45; see also Kuper 1988: 76–7; Radcliffe-Brown 1910: 36–7). Where Rivers assumes that the history of a phenomenon is the key to determining its present status, Radcliffe-Brown argues the opposite, namely, that the determination of the present status of a phenomenon is the key to reconstructing its history (see Radcliffe-Brown 1923a: 139–40).

To use Radcliffe-Brown’s other favourite analogy or image, which also comes from Spencer,²⁶ society is a ‘system’: ‘It should now, I hope, be evident that the ceremonial customs [or beliefs] of the Andaman Islands form a closely connected system, and that we cannot understand their meaning if we only consider each one by itself, but must study the whole system to arrive at an interpretation’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 324; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 17–18). Consequently, cross-cultural comparisons, which Radcliffe-Brown advocates, must be ‘not of one isolated custom [or belief] with a similar custom [or belief] of another, but of the whole system of institutions, customs and beliefs of one society with that of another’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 230). ‘[W]hat we need to compare is [*sic*] not institutions but social systems or types’ (ibid.; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 53–4). Later, Radcliffe-Brown uses the term ‘social structure’ as well as ‘social system’ (see especially Radcliffe-Brown 1952: Ch. 9; 1958: Part 2, Ch. 4).

Radcliffe-Brown offers a rudimentary version of social psychology to explain how customs function socially. Society requires the presence in its members of the right feelings, or ‘sentiments’, toward objects of importance to it: ‘A society depends for its existence on the presence in the minds of its members of a certain system of sentiments by which the conduct of the individual is regulated in con-

may have one, and that we are justified in seeking to discover it’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1935: 399). Still, he is far less interested in dysfunction than Durkheim or, later, Merton: see ibid.: 397–8.

²⁶ Evans-Pritchard suggests (1965: 74) that Radcliffe-Brown’s theory, not merely his analogies, derives at least as much from Spencer as from Durkheim. Stocking suggests (1987: 298–9) that Radcliffe-Brown’s theory derives from Spencer *through* Durkheim. The anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who saw society as a self-regulating system that needed no government, has sometimes been proposed (see Perry 1975; Fortes 1949: viii; Srinivas’s Introduction to Radcliffe-Brown 1958: xviii–xix; Barnard 1992: 16 n. 6). Russell and Whitehead have also been suggested (see Singer 1984). Radcliffe-Brown himself invokes Montesquieu, Comte, and Spencer in addition to Durkheim, who was himself, of course, influenced by all three (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 5–14). For an attempt to sort out Radcliffe-Brown’s disparate intellectual debts, see Barnard 1992. See also Stanner 1968: 286–7.

formity with the needs of the society' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 233–4). Sentiments express the 'social value', or effect on society, of those objects. The sentiments can be negative as well as positive, depending on the social value. Disease has a negative social value, a bow and arrow a positive one (see *ibid.*: 264). Customs stir sentiments and thereby preserve them: 'The ceremonial (i.e. collective) expression of any sentiment serves both to maintain it at the requisite degree of intensity in the mind of the individual and to transmit it from one generation to another' (*ibid.*: 234). The function of customs is therefore 'to maintain and to transmit from one generation to another the emotional dispositions on which the society (as it is constituted) depends for its existence' (*ibid.*). Later, Radcliffe-Brown employs the concept of social 'sanctions', perhaps to make his approach seem less psychological and more sociological, but he still ties sanctions to sentiments: 'For the application of any sanction is a direct affirmation of social sentiments by the community and thereby constitutes an important, possibly essential, mechanism for maintaining these sentiments' (Radcliffe-Brown 1934: 533).

Radcliffe-Brown argues that the emotions elicited by customs are implanted rather than innate. Minimally, he is maintaining that without the customs the emotions would not be expressed, at least publicly. So he seems to be saying of wedding and funeral rituals:

Thus the weeping rite expresses feelings of solidarity, the exchange of presents expresses good-will. But the ceremonies are not spontaneous expressions of feeling; they are all customary actions to which the sentiment of obligation attaches, which it is the duty of persons to perform on certain definite occasions. It is the duty of everyone in a community to give presents at a wedding; it is the duty of relatives to weep together when they meet. (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 245–6)²⁷

Maximally, and more likely, however, Radcliffe-Brown is maintaining that without the customs the emotions would not even be felt. Thus he calls a peace-making ceremony 'a method by which feelings of enmity are exchanged for feelings of friendship' (*ibid.*: 246). Even marriage rituals serve 'to arouse in the minds of the marrying pair a sense of their obligations as married folk, and to bring about in the minds of the witnesses a change of feelings towards the young people such as should properly accompany their change of social status' (*ibid.*). He stresses the inculcation of feelings even in funeral rituals: 'The customs of burial and mourning are therefore to be seen [as] not simply the result of natural feelings of fear and

²⁷ Radcliffe-Brown seems to be saying this too of rituals that express the special relationship between a sister's son and his mother's brother: see Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 28–9. Put summarily: 'In primitive societies any things that have important effects on the social life necessarily become the objects of ritual observances (negative or positive), the function of such ritual being to express, and so to fix and perpetuate, the recognition of the social value of the objects to which it refers' (Radcliffe-Brown 1923a: 135).

sorrow but ritual actions performed under a sense of obligation and strictly regulated by tradition. They are means by which the society acts upon its members, compelling them to feel emotions appropriate to the occasion' (ibid.: 297). Similarly, in his 1939 Frazer Lecture on 'Taboo', he argues that rituals arouse anxiety rather than, as for Bronislaw Malinowski, alleviate it (see Radcliffe-Brown 1939).²⁸ A taboo against eating certain foods at set times during the planting season would function to emphasize the importance to society of the seeds planted.

On the one hand customs inculcate the right sentiments toward the phenomena on which society depends. On the other hand customs inculcate the sentiment of dependence toward society itself: 'In such a primitive society as that of the Andamans one of the most powerful means of maintaining the cohesion and tradition without which social life is impossible, is the recognition by the individual that for his security and well-being he depends entirely upon the society' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 257; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 157). The two kinds of dependence go hand in hand. Members depend on society to provide them the things on which they depend. Thus 'when painting or ornament is used to give protection, it is...the protective power of the society itself that is appealed to, and what is expressed is the dependence of the individual on the society' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 319).

In Chapter 6 of *The Andaman Islanders* Radcliffe-Brown turns to beliefs, by which he means myths and legends. While devoting a full chapter to beliefs, he considers them far less important than customs. The emphasis on beliefs over customs he labels 'English' (ibid.: 327)²⁹—a view indeed classically held by Tylor, whom he cites. As part of his downplaying of beliefs, Radcliffe-Brown denies that the function of myths and legends is explanatory, as they would have been for Tylor. After all, individuals rather than society itself would be served by an explanation. Instead, the function of myths and legends, like that of customs, is to bind members to society. Radcliffe-Brown is indifferent to the explanatory content of myths and legends.

²⁸ For an attempt to reconcile Radcliffe-Brown's view with Malinowski's, see Homans 1941.

²⁹ Radcliffe-Brown makes the point more strongly elsewhere: 'In European countries, and more particularly since the Reformation, religion has come to be considered as primarily a matter of belief.... Among many [anthropologists] there is a tendency to treat belief as primary; rites are considered as the results of beliefs.... To my mind this is the product of false psychology. For example, it is sometimes held that funeral and mourning rites are the result of a belief in a soul surviving death. If we must talk in terms of cause and effect, I would rather hold the view that the belief in a surviving soul is not the cause but the effect of the rites.... My suggestion is that in attempting to understand a religion it is on the rites rather than on the beliefs that we should first concentrate our attention' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 155; see also ibid.: 177).

To take an example, Radcliffe-Brown maintains that a legend which ascribes the origin of darkness in the world to the rash killing of a cicada serves to instil the proper, if negative, social value toward night, when social life, including 'hunting or making canoes or weapons' (ibid.: 334), must cease:

In the beginning [according to the legend] there was no night, no darkness. Social life was continuous and was not subject to periods of diminished intensity. Then one of the ancestors (apparently in a fit of temper owing to his lack of success in fishing) crushed a cicada, and the cry of the insect brought darkness upon the world. The darkness, with its inhibition of activity, is clearly regarded as an evil, i.e., as a manifestation of force hostile to the society, and this accords with the definition of the social value of night.... (Ibid.: 333)

The story utilizes 'the connection between the song of the cicada and the alternation of night and day' (ibid.: 332) to make a social point.

As with customs, so with stories: the emotions, or sentiments, stirred are not innate but implanted. Radcliffe-Brown denies that even fear of the dark is natural, lest the function of the story be superfluous and his whole theory thereby be undone:

The Andaman Islander, like many other savages, is afraid of the dark. It might perhaps be thought that this fear is immediate and instinctive, a result of the physiology of the human nervous system, but that, I think, would be a false assumption. Many infants would seem not to be at first afraid of darkness, but to learn to fear it, as they learn to fear many other things. It is not possible here to enter into a discussion of the matter, but I would hold that in the Andaman Islanders and probably in other savages, the fear of darkness, of night, is a secondary or induced feeling, not by any means instinctive, and is in large part due to the social sentiments, to the fact that at night the social life ceases. (Ibid.)

Radcliffe-Brown asserts that the story serves to inculcate the right attitude not only toward night but also toward anger, the social value of which is equally negative:

We shall find that it is a principle of the Andaman legends that evil results from evil actions. Night, which by reason of its negative social value, is regarded as an evil, is shown to be the result of the misbehaviour of one of the ancestors in giving way to anti-social feelings of anger or annoyance. It is a case of like producing like. When an individual gives way to such feelings as anger he becomes a source of danger to the society.... (Ibid.: 337-8)

In contrast to customs, which take the natural world as impersonal, myths and legends personify it. Phenomena with a negative social value arise as punishment for unsocial behaviour toward either present-day Andamanese or their ancestors. When, during the third quarter of the month, the moon 'rises in the evening with a

ruddy hue' and thus provides less light, the Andamanese attribute the darkening to the anger of the moon god in response to the use of artificial light at night:

The moon gives the light by which fishing and turtle hunting at night are possible. This light has a positive social value, and its withdrawal is an evil. They therefore regard the moon as jealous, so jealous that if anyone makes use of an artificial light, as of a fire or torch or burning resin, the moon immediately is consumed with anger and withdraws the light that has been of so much use and has not been sufficiently appreciated. This belief is a means by which the value of the moonlight is recognized. (Ibid.: 341)

Not only the positive social value of moonlight but also the negative social value of anger is being underscored, and the telling of the story arouses the appropriate sentiments.³⁰

Furthermore, myths and legends parallel and even connect the natural world to the social one. The natural world is inhabited by human-like gods whose actions have the same kind of impact on humans as the actions of fellow humans have. The story of the moon god therefore not only warns humans against angering the moon but simultaneously finds fault with the moon for the consequences of its anger:

When a man does something that hurts or damages another it is generally (in Adamanese life) because he is angry. So to say that the moon is angry is equivalent to saying that he is damaging or hurting someone, as he is indeed damaging the society by withdrawing the light by which for the past week or so they have been able to capture fish and turtle. (Ibid.: 340-1)

The natural world is incorporated into the social one.

In his 1945 lecture on 'Religion and Society', delivered almost four decades after he first worked out the theory that appeared in *The Andaman Islanders*, Radcliffe-Brown emphasizes that his views have not changed. Religion still means rituals more than beliefs. The function rather than the origin or content of religion is still what counts. The function is still social. The social function is still achieved by the instilment of the proper sentiments. The prime sentiment instilled is still that of dependence. And dependence still means both the dependence of society on natural and social phenomena and, even more, the dependence of members on society:

Thirty-seven years ago (1908), in a fellowship thesis on the Andaman Islanders (which did not appear in print till 1922), I formulated briefly a general theory on the social function of rites and ceremonies. It is the same theory that

³⁰ For a rather technical presentation of Radcliffe-Brown's concept of social value, see Stanner 1956: 120-1, and especially 1985.

underlies the remarks I shall offer on this occasion. Stated in the simplest possible terms[,] the theory is that an orderly social life amongst human beings depends upon the presence in the minds of the members of a society of certain sentiments, which control the behaviour of the individual in his relation to others. Rites can be seen to be the regulated symbolic expressions of certain sentiments. Rites can therefore be shown to have a specific social function when, and to the extent that, they have for their effect to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of the society depends. I ventured to suggest as a general formula that religion is everywhere an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on a power outside ourselves, a power which we may speak of as a spiritual or moral power. (Radcliffe-Brown 1945: 35–6)³¹

Radcliffe-Brown as a Durkheimian

As pedestrian as Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of customs and beliefs seems to be, it is, or was, radical, and radical because it was Durkheimian. In contrast to, say, Tylor's view, religion, like any other aspect of culture, is for Radcliffe-Brown a group rather than an individual activity—the bedrock Durkheimian point. Religion not only arises socially but also functions socially.³² Rather than a means of linking humans to the physical world, as for Tylor, religion is a means of linking humans to one another. What is worshipped is, if not society itself, as for Durkheim, at least what is of value to society. True, contrary to Durkheim, the line between the sacred and the profane is thereby almost effaced: what is sacred is what is of everyday value to society, such as sunlight. Radcliffe-Brown even hesitates to draw a sharp distinction 'between those beliefs and customs that properly deserve to be called religious, and others which do not deserve the adjective'. The Andamanese do not 'separate a definite entity which we can call religion from things that may more appropriately be regarded as art, morality, play, or social ceremonial' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 405).

³¹ Radcliffe-Brown insisted that his theory had not changed during his career: see Stocking 1976. See also Urry 1993: 120.

³² Occasionally, Radcliffe-Brown does allow for an individual function. Dancing, for example, 'affords an opportunity for the individual to exhibit before others his skill and agility and so to gratify his personal vanity' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 251). But that same gratification also and primarily serves socially to fill the dancer 'with geniality and goodwill towards his companions' (ibid.). Radcliffe-Brown insists on restricting function to social function and vigorously objects to Malinowski's appropriation of the term for individual function: see Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 1, 9–10; 1946; 1949. To distinguish his brand of functionalism from Malinowski's, he comes to call his own brand 'structural-functionalism'. On the differences between Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, see Stocking 1984b: 156–84.

Radcliffe-Brown's rejection of an individual function for myths and legends is part of his separation of social anthropology, or sociology, from psychology—that is, from individual psychology:

The position maintained by the sociologist is (1) that in social institutions and in the phenomena of culture generally the sociologist has a field of study which is entirely distinct from that of the psychologist, and that generalisations made in this field must be sociological and not psychological generalisations; (2) that therefore any explanation of a particular sociological phenomenon in terms of psychology, i.e. of processes of individual mental activity, is invalid. (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 64)

In *A Natural Science of Society* (1957), the formalization of his sociological creed, Radcliffe-Brown most rigidly distinguishes sociology from psychology. That distinction echoes the *locus classicus*, Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method*:

The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness. Moreover, we see quite readily that all the foregoing applies to the determination of the function as well as the cause of social phenomena. The function of a social fact cannot but be social, i.e., it consists of the production of socially useful effects. (Durkheim 1895/t. 1964 [1938]: 110)

Radcliffe-Brown explicitly follows 'Durkheim and others' in his restriction of 'function' to social function (see Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 10).³³

Viewed sociologically rather than psychologically, individuals merely play a social role. Radcliffe-Brown thus distinguishes between a psychological analysis of a murder trial and the sociological, or social anthropological, one:³⁴ 'A man commits a murder; the police arrest him; he is brought before a judge and jury and tried; and is hanged by the hangman' (Radcliffe-Brown 1923a: 133). A psychological approach would seek to determine the 'thoughts, feelings, and actions' of the various participants. But psychology, by which Radcliffe-Brown means individual rather than social psychology, 'would not provide us with any explanation of the whole procedure in which the individuals play their respective parts' (*ibid.*). By contrast, a sociological approach would 'study the situation as a whole, considering it as an action carried out by the society, the State, through its specially appointed representatives, as a collective reaction on the part of the society to the particular circumstances resulting from the murder' (*ibid.*). At that point 'the indi-

³³ On the separation of anthropology from psychology in British anthropology generally, see Kuper 1990.

³⁴ On Radcliffe-Brown's preference for the term 'social anthropology' to 'sociology', see Radcliffe-Brown 1923a: 127 n. On his choice of terms, see Urry 1993: 125.

viduals as particular persons, with their particular thoughts and feelings, become of no interest or importance for our study' (ibid.). Where other 'functionalists', notably Malinowski, seek the individual as well as the social function of religion and other cultural phenomena, Radcliffe-Brown restricts himself to the social function.

Whether or not for Durkheim, for Radcliffe-Brown, psychology and history go hand in hand. What Radcliffe-Brown calls 'the older social anthropology', such as Tylor's, sought the origin of society and so was historical, and it used psychology to find the origin. Unlike history, it sought *laws* of origin rather than the origin of specific societies, but like history it relied on conjecture: 'Social anthropology frequently sought the origins of social institutions in purely psychological factors, i.e., it sought to conjecture the motives in individual minds that would lead them to invent or accept particular customs and beliefs. Its explanations were frequently, or even usually, historical in one sense, but psychological in another, almost never sociological' (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 49). Radcliffe-Brown rejects psychological explanations of society not only because they are psychological rather than sociological but also because they are conjectural rather than factual.³⁵

Radcliffe-Brown is not making individuals irrelevant. On the contrary, he is making them indispensable, but indispensable to achieving social ends. As one commentator aptly puts it, culture for Radcliffe-Brown 'is conceived of as acting *through* individuals but *for* society' (Tax 1955: 480; original emphasis). In response to the charge that he only belatedly came to recognize the role of the individual, Radcliffe-Brown states that 'I have always taught (1) that the function of a social institution can only be seen in its effect in individuals; (2) that the only data of social anthropology are observations of acts of behaviour (including speech!) of *individuals* or products of such acts; and (3) that culture is something that exists only in an *individual*' (cited in Stocking 1976: 6). Radcliffe-Brown even defines 'social facts' as 'modes of thinking feeling and acting that are imposed upon the

³⁵ Put another way, Radcliffe-Brown, following Durkheim, subordinates culture to social structure, where Malinowski, especially after the 1930s, subordinates social structure to culture. For Radcliffe-Brown, the function of culture is socialization: 'I am assuming that the function of culture as a whole is to unite individual human beings into more or less stable social structures, i.e. stable systems of groups determining and regulating the relation of those individuals to one another, and providing such external adaptation to the physical environment, and such internal adaptation between the component individuals or groups, as to make possible an ordered social life' (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 62). For Radcliffe-Brown, there cannot be a 'science of culture' because culture is simply part of the 'social system' (Radcliffe-Brown 1957: 106). On the place of culture in the 'science of society', see *ibid.*: 90-109. Where Radcliffe-Brown's emphasis on social structure came to epitomize British social anthropology, Malinowski's emphasis on culture came to typify American social anthropology, though the American emphasis on the autonomy of culture really derived from Boas: see Eggan 1955a: 490. Murdock went as far as to charge British social anthropology, led by Radcliffe-Brown, with ignoring culture altogether: see Murdock 1951: 471. See, in reply, Firth 1951: 482-4.

individual by the society to which he belongs' (Radcliffe-Brown 1976-77: 47). In his insistence that society operates through individuals, Radcliffe-Brown is consummately Durkheimian, and he even characterizes his definition of social facts as Durkheimian (see *ibid.*). Writes Durkheim of society: 'Since it has a nature which is peculiar to itself and different from our own individual nature, it pursues ends which are likewise special to it; but, as it cannot attain them except through our intermediacy, it imperiously demands our aid' (Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 237).

For Radcliffe-Brown, the individual does not merely serve society but is the product of society—another wholly Durkheimian point. Radcliffe-Brown focuses on the instilling in individuals of sentiments that would not be expressed or probably even exist without society: sentiments toward phenomena with social value. Simultaneously, he stresses the instilling of the sentiment of dependence on society itself: society 'not only protects the individual from danger; it is the direct source of his well-being' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 322). That customs stir sentiments of dependence on society itself is another classically Durkheimian point:

In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers. In fact, a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend... Now society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence. (Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 236-7)

Durkheim carries the sense of beholdenness even further than Radcliffe-Brown. Members of society are beholden to it not only for their well-being but for everything that makes them human: their morality, language, tools, values, thoughts, categories of thought, and concept of objectivity (see *ibid.*: 242-3, 22-32, 169-70, 488-90, 480-7).

For Radcliffe-Brown, society is for members no mere abstraction but an actual power or force. Yet the power that it exercises is less physical than moral. Society is experienced not as an oppressive force but as a beneficent one, to which everything is owed:

[T]his power or force, the interaction of whose different manifestations constitutes the process of social life, is not imaginary, is not even something the existence of which is surmised as the result of intellectual processes, but is real, an object of actual experience. It is, in a few words, the moral power of the society acting upon the individual directly or indirectly and felt by him in innumerable ways throughout the whole course of his life. (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 325)

Once again, Radcliffe-Brown follows Durkheim, for whom

the empire which it [society] holds over consciences is due much less to the physical supremacy of which it has the privilege than to the moral authority with which it is invested. If we yield to its orders, it is not merely because it is strong enough to triumph over our resistance; it is primarily because it is the object of a venerable respect. (Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 237)

For Radcliffe-Brown, the moral obligation that members feel to society is what leads them to sacrifice their own ends for its ends: 'One of the most important ways in which the individual experiences the moral force of the society of which he is a member is through the feeling of moral obligation, which gives him the experience of a power compelling him to subordinate his egoistic desires to the demands of social custom' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 325). Durkheim—here, too, Radcliffe-Brown's source—makes the point even more strongly: 'at every instant we are obliged to submit ourselves to rules of conduct and of thought that we have neither made nor desired, and which are sometimes even contrary to our most fundamental inclinations and instincts' (Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 237).

For Radcliffe-Brown, the commitment to society that customs and beliefs provide is not merely helpful but mandatory. Without the customs and beliefs, the sentiments evoked would not exist, and without the sentiments, society would not exist: 'I have tried to show that the ceremonial customs are the means by which the society acts upon its individual members and keeps alive in their minds a certain system of sentiments. Without the ceremonial those sentiments would not exist, and without them the social organisation in its actual form could not exist' (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 324). Yet again, Radcliffe-Brown is repeating Durkheim. For both, the society that prays together stays together. For both, social order is not natural. It must be forged, and forged by forging social sentiments and in turn behaviour. No point is more Durkheimian, or further from Rivers, who takes order for granted.

Radcliffe-Brown's indebtedness to Durkheim is by no means uncritical. Even in the 1913 article on 'Three Tribes of Western Australia' that Radcliffe-Brown sent to Durkheim, he rejects Durkheim's claim that 'the prohibition of the marriage of first cousins...is due to the change from maternal to paternal descent of the totem' (Radcliffe-Brown 1913: 193; see also Peristiany 1960). Radcliffe-Brown presents his fullest criticism of Durkheim's analysis of totemism in his 1929 essay on 'The Sociological Theory of Totemism' (Radcliffe-Brown 1929b).³⁶ Durkheim, we are told, is wrong to maintain that totems are chosen for their depictability on emblems:

In Australia no designs are made of the sex totems or of the totems of the moieties or sections, and even for clan totemism there are many tribes that do

³⁶ See Kuper 1988: especially 60–1; Radcliffe-Brown 1914: 628; 1957: 78. See also Testart 1979: 3–4; Langham 1981: 259–60, 268–71, 276; Stocking 1984b: 148.

not make any representation of their totems. Totemic designs, which for Durkheim are so important or indeed so essential a part of totemism, are characteristic of central and northern Australia but not of the continent as a whole. (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 125)

Moreover, the reason that Durkheim proposes for the choice of something so important as totemism is for Radcliffe-Brown trivial. Animals and plants are in fact chosen as totems because of their importance to the group.

At the same time not all animals and plants deemed sacred are totems. Totemism, far from coextensive with primitive religion, is simply a part of it, and is not even the original part. Religion is the establishment of 'the ritual attitude' toward important animals and plants. It is only 'when the society becomes differentiated into segmentary groups such as clans' that

a process of ritual specialisation takes place by which each segment acquires a special and particular relation to some one or more of the *sacra* of the community. The totem of the clan or group is still sacred in some sense to the whole community, but is now specially sacred, and in some special way, to the segment of which it is the totem. (Ibid.: 126-7)

Radcliffe-Brown makes other criticisms as well, but even in the wake of all of them he states that his theory 'incorporates what I think is the most valuable part of Durkheim's analysis, in the recognition that the function of the ritual relation of the group to its totem is to express and so to maintain in existence the solidarity of the group' (ibid.: 128).³⁷ It would be unfair to deny Radcliffe-Brown any theoretical contributions of his own (see especially Radcliffe-Brown 1918, 1923b, 1930-31, 1931, 1941, 1950), but they tend to be confined to the more technical area of kinship.³⁸ In his overall theory of society, including his formal statement of 'Systematic Social Science' (see Radcliffe-Brown 1957: 151-6), Radcliffe-Brown remains an explicit Durkheimian.

³⁷ Similarly, in 'Religion and Society', Radcliffe-Brown states that while 'the account I have just given of Australian totemism differs considerably from that given by Durkheim,...far from contradicting, it confirms Durkheim's fundamental general theory as to the social function of the totemic religion of Australia and its rites' (Radcliffe-Brown 1945: 40). See also Kuper 1988: 62.

³⁸ On Radcliffe-Brown's contributions, see above all Fortes 1955; 1969: Ch. 4. See also Lowie 1937: 225-6; Kuper 1973: 77-83; Barnard 2000: 73-5.

Radcliffe-Brown as less than a Durkheimian

As a theoretician, Radcliffe-Brown is conventionally celebrated for having introduced Durkheim to Britain. To cite but three examples, Raymond Firth writes: 'Like Malinowski, from whom he increasingly differed, he founded much of his theory upon Durkheim. But unlike Malinowski, he preserved a great deal of the Durkheimian apparatus both of concepts and of terminology' (Firth 1956: 301). According to Meyer Fortes, 'As is well known, his greatest affinity is with Durkheim and his followers. Some of Radcliffe-Brown's most fruitful hypotheses have arisen from testing Durkheimian theories in the field' (Fortes 1949: viii). A. R. Elkin states that 'Academically he was an excellent exponent of Durkheimian principles, which he has so absorbed that they seemed to be his own' (Elkin 1956: 246). Robert Lowie (1937) even puts the discussion of Radcliffe-Brown in his chapter on 'French Sociology'.³⁹ The irony is that, for all Radcliffe-Brown's indisputable beholdenness to Durkheim, he adopts only a part of Durkheim, and by no means the chief part. Social functionalism is incontestably present in Durkheim, but so is much else that Radcliffe-Brown, together with his American counterparts Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, either misses or ignores (see Pickering 1984: Ch. 16).

First, Durkheim is as interested in the origins of religion as in its function—a point that Radcliffe-Brown notes but actually rebukes Durkheim for:

I have chosen the topic of totemism because some of the most important steps of the passage from the old to the new methods are to be seen in Durkheim's treatment of this subject in his 'Elementary Forms of the Religious Life'. Unfortunately, Durkheim retained some of the ideas and some of the terminology of the older social anthropology. He speaks of his study as aiming to determine the 'origin' of totemism, and although he seeks to give a new meaning to the word 'origin', yet his use of it misleads most of his readers, and I think it really misled Durkheim himself and caused him to cast what is really a theory of the nature and function of totemism into a form which renders it open to criticism.... (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 63)

In fact, Durkheim emphatically distinguishes between the recurrent and the historical origin of religion, and it is not the historical but only the recurrent origin of religion that he seeks:

The study which we are undertaking is therefore a way of taking up again, *but under new conditions*, the old problem of the origin of religion. To be sure, if by origin we are to understand the very first beginning, the question has nothing scientific about it, and should be resolutely discarded.... But the problem

³⁹ For a distinction between the varieties of Durkheimian ideas adopted by Radcliffe-Brown, see Kuper's introduction to Radcliffe-Brown 1977: 2–3.

which we want to raise is quite another one. What we want to do is to find a means of discerning the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend. (Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 20)

On the one hand Durkheim rejects as uncompromisingly as Radcliffe-Brown the historical question of when and where religion began. On the other hand he takes up the non-historical question of how and why religion arises whenever and wherever it does. He is as concerned with the issue of recurrent origin as with the issue of function. Society—the amassing of members of society—causes religion. As he states at the end of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, '[W]e have seen that this [religious] reality,...which is the universal and eternal objective cause of these sensations *sui generis* out of which religious experience is made, is society' (ibid.: 465). By contrast, Radcliffe-Brown starts with religion already present and seeks only the function it serves. While Radcliffe-Brown recognizes the connection between recurrent origin and function, he limits himself to only the function of religion. He even castigates Durkheim for not doing the same.

Secondly but more importantly, the function of religion for Durkheim is as much individualistic as social. Religion does not merely socialize individuals but also elevates them: 'But a god is not merely an authority upon whom we depend; it is a force upon which our strength relies. The man who has obeyed his god and who for this reason believes the god is with him approaches the world with confidence and with the feeling of an increased energy' (ibid.: 240). The beneficiary here is surely the individual. Even when Durkheim describes the harmony among members of society that religion instils, the beneficiary is the individual and not, or not just, society:

The man who has done his duty finds, in the manifestations of every sort expressing the sympathy, esteem or affection which his fellows have for him, a feeling of comfort, of which he does not ordinarily take account, but which sustains him, none the less. The sentiments which society has for him raise the sentiments which he has for himself. Because he is in moral harmony with his comrades, he has more confidence, courage and boldness in action, just like the believer who thinks that he feels the regard of his god turned graciously towards him. (Ibid.: 242)

Radcliffe-Brown clearly recognizes what society does for individuals, who for him no less than for Durkheim are dependent on it. But for Radcliffe-Brown the beneficiary of that dependence is society alone. Since religion serves to instil the feeling of dependence, it thereby serves society, not the individual. As he put the point almost two decades after *The Andaman Islanders*, 'religion is the cement which holds society together' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 9).

Thirdly and most importantly, the function of religion for Durkheim is not merely emotional but also cognitive. Where for Radcliffe-Brown religion incul-

cates feelings, for Durkheim it also inculcates ideas. Religion provides the first cosmology: 'For a long time it has been known that the first systems of representations with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin' (Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 21). While the scientific cosmology comes to replace the religious one, it emerges out of the religious one: 'philosophy and the sciences were born of religion...because religion began by taking the place of the sciences and philosophy' (ibid.). Religion also provides a unity beyond the disparateness of sensory phenomena that science inherits: 'The essential thing was not to leave the mind enslaved to visible appearances, but to teach it to dominate them and to connect what the senses separated; for from the moment when men have an idea that there are internal connections between things, science and philosophy become possible. Religion opened up the way for them' (ibid.: 270). Put another way, Durkheim is interested in the content, not merely the function, of religion.

To be sure, Radcliffe-Brown does not ignore the world beyond society. On the contrary, as noted, the external world 'comes to be incorporated in the social order as an essential part of it' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 131). Not only is the value of natural phenomena their social value, but natural phenomena are expected to behave morally, as if they were obedient members of a cosmic society: 'The suggestion I put forward, therefore, is that totemism is part of a larger whole, and that one important way in which we can characterize this whole is that it provides a representation of the universe as a moral or social order' (ibid.). But even the external world is of interest only because of its social role: providing phenomena of value to society and providing a model of a working society. The beneficiary remains society. Of the content of the religious cosmology, Radcliffe-Brown says nothing. His indifference is part of his indifference to religious belief. Where for Durkheim religion consists at least as much of belief as of ritual (see Pickering 1984: Ch. 20), for Radcliffe-Brown religion is at heart ritual rather than belief (see, e.g., Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 155; see also Ruel 1998: 105-7).

Religion for Durkheim provides not only ideas but also the categories by which humans think:

it has been less frequently noticed that religion has not confined itself to enriching the human intellect, formed beforehand, with a certain number of ideas [i.e., a cosmology]; it has contributed to forming the intellect itself. Men owe to it not only a good part of the substance of their knowledge, but also the form in which this knowledge has been elaborated. (Durkheim 1912/t. 1965 [1915]: 21)

Because the specific form that categories take are distinctive to each society, without them humans would be unable to think. But humans would equally be unable to socialize: 'If men did not agree upon these essential ideas at every moment, if they did not have the same conception of time, space, cause, number, etc., all con-

tact between their minds would be impossible, and with that, all life together' (ibid.: 30). Yet even here Durkheim goes beyond the payoff for society to the payoff for the individual: 'A man who did not think with concepts would not be a man, for he would not be a social being' (ibid.: 487). Socialization itself becomes an individual need as pressing as any other. There is nothing so deep in Radcliffe-Brown.

Finally, Durkheim considers issues that transcend Radcliffe-Brown's orbit altogether: religion as true (see ibid.: 14–15, 256–7)⁴⁰ and religion as eternal (see ibid.: 474–5). Where Radcliffe-Brown confines himself to the social function of 'primitive' religion, Durkheim contemplates the origin, content, and truth as well as function of religion—of all religion. The Durkheim that Radcliffe-Brown brings to Britain is a truncated Durkheim.

⁴⁰ By contrast, Radcliffe-Brown professes professional neutrality on the issue: see Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 154; 1957: 117–18.

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