Recovering the primitive in the modern: The cultural turn and the origins of cultural sociology

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Abstract

This essay provides an intellectual history for the cultural turn that transformed the human sciences in the mid-20th century and led to the creation of cultural sociology in the late 20th century. It does so by conceptualizing and contextualizing the limitations of the binary primitive/modernity. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, leading thinkers – among them Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Freud – confined thinking and feeling styles like ritual, symbolism, totem, and devotional practice to a primitivism that would be transformed by the rationality and universalism of modernity. While the barbarisms of the 20th century cast doubt on such predictions, only an intellectual revolution could provide the foundations for an alternative social theory. The cultural turn in philosophy, aesthetics, and anthropology erased the division between primitive and modern; in sociology, the classical writings of Durkheim were recentered around his later, religious sociology. These intellectual currents fed into a cultural sociology that challenged the sociology *of* culture, creating radically new research programs in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In the 19th and even into the early 20th centuries, anthropology 'discovered' primitive peoples to be the irrational and primitive other in relation to whom Western people could confirm their civilized status – the rationality of their perceptions, their civil and upright

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dispositions, their autonomous and independent selves (King, 2019). In their 'errand into the wilderness', to appropriate Perry Miller's description of the Puritan mission in America (Miller, 1956), Enlightenment voyagers mapped not just different kinds of religions, social structures, cultures, feelings, and perceptions, but a fundamentally different type of *person*, 'primitive people', a category of human beings marked by irrationality, lower intelligence, less developed morality, and the inability to control passion. Primitive people actually worshipped plants and animals, constructing wooden replicas they regarded as totemic representations of sacred flora and fauna, totems central to their religious rituals. These scouts for Western civilization – scientists, adventurers, Protestant missionaries – described totemic representations as fetishes. They judged them clumsily carved and painted, and believed them fundamentally deceptive and misleading, as exercising a kind of spiritual hypnosis on primitive minds. Fetishism laid bare the ignorance and baseness of aboriginal peoples, their failure to understand the spiritual, transcendental, immaterial, invisible, and metaphysical character of the divine (Mitchell, 1986). Fetishism created not only sacred totems but taboos, moral and emotional no-go places and practices, plants and animals marked by dark powers that, when released via sensual contact, projected destructive force.

When Sigmund Freud discovered the unconscious, he acted from within this enlightened and civilizing role, becoming an anthropologist of the mind. Psychoanalysis demonstrated that the primitive was not just something long ago and far away, but something right here, buried inside each modern human self. It, too, was filled with passion and irrationality. It, too, generated fantasy and projection and wish-fulfilling illusion. It, too, contained taboos.

Freud's good news was that modernity made it possible for such primitiveness to be overcome. If people grew in a healthful and normal manner, they would develop the capacity for reality-testing. Shedding primary for secondary process, they would learn to satisfy their needs for love, recognition, and attachment in more reasonable and less destructive ways. If such a developmental path were not available, individuals became neurotic, clinging to the primitive impulses of childhood, engaging in fetishism and irrationality even as adults. This is where psychoanalysis came in. Freud's truth technique would allow neurotics to work through the anxiety that produced unrealistic expectations. Shedding irrational and destructive attachment, they would emerge into the clarifying light and refreshing air of the modern day: 'Where id was, ego shall be' (Freud, 1949 [1923]).

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1989 [1913]) connected psychoanalytic to anthropological discovery. Yes, taboo marked the moral and religious system of the 'most backward and wretched' (p. 4) societies on earth, but taboo can also be seen as neurosis, not only back then but today. 'The projection of their own evil impulses upon demons', Freud writes, was an essential 'part of . . . the "Weltanschauung" of primitive man' (p. 86). Yet this same 'primitive mechanism', now described as 'the projection of inner perceptions to the outside', is also central to 'the formation of primitive psychic life' in the present day (p. 85). Because primitive people live in a world marked by taboo, they cannot behave in a realistic and rational manner. Hemmed in by 'prohibitions and restrictions', they divide the social and moral world between the 'sacred' and 'consecrated', on one side, and the 'dangerous, forbidden, and unclean' (p. 26), on the other.

'Chiefs, kings, and priests' are worshipped, for they are aligned with the tribe's sacred totem. Arrayed against such forces are the ones that are tabooed, 'the bearers of that mysterious and dangerous magic power which communicates itself by contact, like an electric charge, and brings death and destruction to anyone' (p. 56).

Freud (1989 [1913]) assures his modern and civilized readers that such primitive thinking is behind them – the simplistic divisions between worshipped heroes and feared devils, the strict binary between what is sacred and what taboo. Neurotics are the exception that prove the rule, 'an atavistic remnant . . . of an archaic constitution' (p. 88). 'The psychic impulses of primitive man possessed a higher degree of ambivalence', Freud assures his modern readers, 'than is found at present among civilized human beings'. With 'the decline of this ambivalence', Freud confidently asserts, the 'taboo, as the compromised symptom of the ambivalent conflict [has] slowly disappeared' (p. 88).

If there is one thing humankind has learned in the 100 years since the publication of Freud's paradigmatic text, it is that the primitive is not so confined.[1] Modern moralities are built upon deeply structured binaries, simplistic distinctions between what is evil and what is good (Alexander, 2003). Moderns believe that some things and ideas and people are polluted and dirty, and that contamination must be avoided at all costs. What is tabooed as evil must be segregated from the morally pure parts of society. Jews and non-white peoples are pushed into ghettos, and when they are released, when the segregation of tabooed peoples begins breaking down, the new proximity to pollution strikes fear in many social groups (Anderson, 2012). Backlash movements form with the aim of pushing the still stigmatized groups back behind walls (Alexander, 2019), sometimes even of eliminating them for good – all in the name of preserving the pure and the good from being sullied by the tabooed.

Before exploring further the primitive dimension of modernity, and the more culturally oriented kind of sociological theory necessary to understand it, we need to comprehend how widely Freud's psycho-anthropological understanding of the primitive was shared by the social theories of his day.

Marx deployed the term 'fetish' in a derisive manner, ridiculing the significance of the attachments modern consumers displayed toward capitalist commodities (Marx, 1961 [1867]). Missionaries hated fetishes because they kept primitive worshippers from seeing the transcendental spirit; Marx hated fetishized commodities because they prevented consumers from seeing the exploitative labor relations of capitalist production. Commodity fetishism encouraged irrational and primitive thinking, facilitating such anti-modern qualities as 'magic' and 'mysticism' and 'aura'. Capitalism held back the rational promise of modernity. Only if fetishized consciousness were dissipated would people finally become rational and truly modern, a liberation that depended on the revolutionary transformation of capitalism. Socialism would allow the sunshine of reason to pierce the cloudy mist of fetishism. Be gone obscurantism, mystery, and magic! No more dictators, no more false prophets, no more conflict over crazy stuff.

Durkheim and Weber sharply disagreed with Marx on many if not most things, but they largely shared his conviction that modernity was a synecdoche for rational. The middle-period Durkheim – the 1890s monographs *The Division of Labor in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and *Suicide* – ascribed to the tenet of an irreversible transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, from religious and irrational

communalism to science, individualism, and functional interdependence. Of course, even in these classical works, Durkheim recognized that modernity contained such 'abnormal forms' (Durkheim, 1933 [1893: Book 3]) as egoism, anomie, and class inequality, but he believed these problems were not essential characteristics of modernity. If anything of the primitive would survive in a healthy modern society, it would be simply the 'cult of the individual' (Durkheim, 1973 [1898]), Kant's *ur*-modern categorical imperative in sociological form.

Weber devoted his life's work to demonstrating that modernity had displaced tradition, in religion, ethics, social structure, art, and modes of political legitimation. History was a one-way ticket to the world of disenchantment, literally de-magicalization. Modernity is the product of rationalization, a process that locks people into an iron cage from which there is no escape. In his later work, Weber did recognize that even in modernity there are 'flights from reality' – aestheticism, asceticism, eroticism, and fundamentalism (Weber, 1946a [1916]) – but such irresponsible and anti-rational refusals to face reality would or at least should be subordinated to the demands of the day (Weber, 1946b [1919]).

These two *fin-de-siècle* theorists, along with their erstwhile radical predecessor, set the table for social science theorizing in the 20th century. The sociological theorist who bestrode the middle of that century, Talcott Parsons, was determined to get beyond the confines of narrowly instrumental rationality. Yet, like the classical founders, Parsons predicated his thinking on an evolutionary narrative that moved from the primitive and archaic to ego-rationality, political pluralism, and value universalism (Parsons, 1966). While Parsons acknowledged 'fundamentalist' resistance to modernity, he conceptualized it as a form of deviance, expressing confidence that modern democracies would gradually flush it out. Jürgen Habermas theorized from within the anti-functionalist critical tradition, but his understanding of modernity closely resembled Parsons' own. Structuring every speech action, Habermas (1985) argued, is the universal-pragmatic imperative to be truthful and cooperative. Primitive thinking and simplistic moral binaries like the sacred and profane, he insisted in his interpretation of Durkheim, had been 'liquified' by modernity. Along the other track of contemporary critical theory, Michel Foucault (1995) held that the modern episteme was structured by expert, quasi-scientific knowledge and wielded by professional-cum-state power, forming a hegemonic power-knowledge that disciplined and punished. Anthony Giddens (1990) also believed late modernity to be mediated by expert knowledge, though he believed it produced reflexivity rather than discipline and domination.

This theoretical vision of modernity as without totem and taboo, as, for better or for worse, rationalized and rule-governed, was belied by events on the ground. The first half of the short 20th century overflowed with blood lust, war, and mass murder, Führers and demons, genocide, femicide, racism, and ethnic domination. Rather than falsifying general theories, the first reaction to dissonant empirical facts is to treat them as anomalies and extrude them into residual categories. Thus, modern social theory conceptualized 20th-century troubles as horrific outbreaks of the irrational, as residual primitivism inside modernity. Freud wrote about continuing 'illusions' (Freud, 1989 [1927]) and 'artificial groups' (Freud, 1989 [1921], Weber (1946c) about the frayed but lingering lineaments of charisma. Erich Fromm (1941), the psychoanalyst of early

critical theory, argued that the capitalist form of modernity made people want to escape from freedom (Alexander, 2021). Parsons (1947) explained that Nazism had come to Germany because the country had not been modern. Habermas (1985) suggested that rationality was blocked because, under capitalist modernity, economics was allowed to colonize the lifeworld.

Even if they are not dispositive, the piling up of anomalous empirical facts does provide fertile opportunity for contending theories to be persuasive in their claims to better explain reality. By the last decades of the 20th century, a fundamentally different kind of social theorizing finally began gaining traction. It denied the binary traditional/modern, insisting that modern consciousness can be understood only if the epistemological and ontological tools which had been developed to understand primitive society continue to apply for modern times.

Levi-Strauss (1966) believed that the structuralism he had invented – the model of culture as a relational, self-referential, and binary cultural code – applied only to *cold* societies, primitive worlds within which existing ways of life went unquestioned. His theoretical mapping of 'the savage mind', he insisted, was not relevant to the *hot* societies of modernity, which pursued scientific and economic progress, where myth had been replaced by rationality. Roland Barthes demonstrated to the contrary, describing how mythologies permeated everything *about* modernity (Barthes, 1957). Drawing on the semiotics of Saussure and Levi-Strauss, without the latter's historicizing nostalgia, Barthes explained that modern actors see things no more transparently than their traditional forebears; what they encounter in the modern world are signifieds, material stuff encased within powerful, if invisible, systems of signifiers (Barthes, 1977). If what moderns perceive and encounter are meaningful signs rather than things in themselves, then social action is guided less by reality-testing and means-ends calculation than by interpretation, by the deciphering of cultural codes, narratives, and symbols, and the patterned affect and emotion they contain.[2]

The idea that social reality is not what it sensibly seems, so evocatively articulated by Barthes' pioneering social semiotics, was the product not only of structural linguistics and anthropology, but of foundational shifts in aesthetics and philosophy. Modernism in the plastic and literary arts had long ago challenged the realism of representation. Substituting precarious, continuously reimagined meaning and sensation for rooted-in-the-nature-of-reality feeling and fact, avant-gardes created impressionism, fauvism, surrealism, cubism, and eventually pure abstraction, whether expressionist or minimalist. In literature, stream of consciousness and the downgrading of third-party narration undermined the dispassionate distancing upon which modernist self-consciousness had so confidently been based. Such de-centered aesthetic understandings were philosophically articulated by what Richard Rorty (1962) called the linguistic turn. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1953) had demonstrated that things are necessarily encased inside words, such that understanding depends not on the transparent perception of the thing in itself but on knowing the linguistic code, the relevant language game.

Building upon these aesthetic, semiotic, and philosophical revolutions, Clifford Geertz (1973) pioneered the cultural turn in the social sciences. He took for granted that anthropological theories of primitive societies were deeply relevant to understanding

modern ones.[3] Religion is not something uniquely metaphysical; every lifeworld is a cultural system with its own metaphysics and rituals. Symbolic logic, not faulty logic, defines secular ideology and common sense alike. Far from being confined to religious rituals, dramatic performance permeates society, crystallizing the meaning of social forces (cf. Turner, 1982). Edward Shils (1965) challenged Weber with a theory of charisma demonstrating how mystery and aura overlay every modern social status. Mary Douglas (1966) actually brought taboo back in. Taboo is neither primitive nor hygienic, she explained, but rather a moral and affective category intrinsic to social thinking, inherent in social classification itself. There is purity and there is danger and never the twain shall meet.

This intellectual revolution could transform sociology only after one of the discipline's classical founders was reinterpreted. Durkheim's last book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, came to be understood not merely as an anthropology of primitive life but also, and more significantly, as an argument about the continuity between primitive and modern culture (Alexander, 1982, 1986; Smith, 2020). Once this new classical foundation had been constructed, a sharp contrast could be drawn between an older sociology *of* culture and a newer cultural *sociology* (Alexander, 1996). The new cultural sociology theorized modernity in a late-Durkheimian manner, as symbol and collective representation, totem, ritual, solidarity, collective effervescence, and the continuing division of social life into the sacred and profane (Collins, 2004; Lamont, 2000; Smith, 2005; Zelizer, 1985). Rather than modelling sociology upon natural science, central concepts were imported from the humanities (Alexander, 2009). Narrative became central, social groups conceptualized not only in terms of conflicting interests but agonistic plots (Polletta, 2006; Sewell, 1980). Social actions were reframed as cultural performances (Alexander et al., 2006; Broch, 2020; Mast, 2012) and material things as icons of totemic power (Alexander, 2010; Alexander et al., 2012). Naturalistic approaches to social suffering were challenged by approaches that emphasized the cultural construction of social trauma (Eyerman et al., 2011). Rather than deliberation in public, modern democracy was theorized as a civil sphere, a world of solidarity anchored by binary discourses circulating among communicative and regulative institutions and dynamized by symbolic performances (Alexander, 2006).

Yet, even as the idea of 'cultural sociology' became hegemonic, significant theoretical movements inside the discipline powerfully resisted the cultural turn that had inspired it. In European sociology, Pierre Bourdieu and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies elaborated more subtle and sophisticated sociologies *of* culture, selectively incorporating elements from semiotics and cultural anthropology into elaborate models of capitalist hegemony and cultural domination. In American sociology, it was pragmatism rather than Marxism that inspired the pushback. Ann Swidler (1986) insisted that culture be viewed not as a semiotic but as a 'toolkit'; neo-institutionalists argued that organizations evoked myths and engaged in rituals as means of legitimation (Meyer and Rowan, 1977); and social movement sociologists conceptualized cultural 'framing' as a vehicle for strategic advantage (Snow et al., 1986).

It is as true for intellectual movements as for the wider society in which they enfold: intellectual revolutions that advance and sophisticate social theorizing will always be resisted. Such 'frontlash' movements are radical, threatening to unsettle long-established

forms of thinking and intellectual common sense. The antithesis between the primitive and the modern had deeply informed Western social thinking for centuries. If the cultural turn undermined the intellectual foundations of this deeply mistaken and often nefarious belief, it did not eliminate the power of this binary to frame a narrative for 'moderns' that allows them to sustain a meaningful life (Alexander, 1995). This, of course, is a cultural-sociological way of explaining why dichotomous and reductive forms of social thinking remain vigorous, even in an age when confidence in 'modernity' as the antidote to 'primitive' thinking has largely disappeared. This is not an argument against the scientific achievements of contemporary societies, much less their ability to sometimes guarantee human rights and to generate civil repair. It is rather an argument for a new theory to understand them.

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Notes

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1. As his life extended into decades that marked the undeniable breakdown of European modernity, Freud became less sanguine that civilization would produce an alternative to the primitive impulses of neurosis.
2. Drawing from Kant and Hegel, Dilthey (1976) created an anti-positivist, interpretation-centered philosophy for the human sciences, beginning a German hermeneutic tradition with ramifications complementing the French semiotic one (Reed, 2011). While Husserl's and Heidegger's challenges to Dilthey had the effect of framing hermeneutics more as a philosophical phenomenology than a cultural social science, the 'structural hermeneutics' of the strong program in cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith, 2003, 2018) follows Ricoeur (1971) in arguing for the complementarity of the two perspectives.
3. Earlier, Boasian anthropology had conceptualized such a non-dichotomous understanding as 'cultural relativism' (King, 2019). For example, in responding to *Totem and Taboo*, Margaret Mead admonished Freud: 'The conscious mind of the individual is molded and shaped by the *traditions* of his own society', she insisted, not only by the psyche's unconscious desires and needs. 'The attitudes which are permitted free uncensored play in an individual personality will vary from one civilization to another' (Mead, 1930, emphasis added).

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