

Changing the subject – about cousin marriage, among other things*

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The original sin of anthropology was to divide the world into civilized and savage. The social systems of all those other peoples supposedly rested upon a foundation of blood relationships. Anthropologists therefore became at once the experts on the primitive and on kinship. In the 1970s Western kinship systems began to undergo radical change. Simultaneously, the old orthodoxies about kinship crumbled in anthropology. Young ethnographers generally lost interest in the topic. Kinship systems have nevertheless not gone away, out there in the world. But to understand them we must first abandon the opposition between the modern and the traditional, the West and the Rest.

I
The first Huxley lecture I attended was in 1965. Claude Lévi-Strauss was the speaker, and his subject was ‘The future of kinship studies’ (Lévi-Strauss 1965). As a young lecturer in London I attended several more Huxleys, most memorably Daryll Forde’s appeal to social anthropologists, in 1970, to pay more attention to evolutionary theory, and G.P. Murdock’s address in 1971, when he told his audience that after a lifetime in anthropology he had come to the conclusion that theory was transient but ethnography was permanent (Forde 1970; Murdock 1971). These were notable figures, and large topics, and my sense of awe was confirmed when I looked through the list of past lecturers, from the very first, Lord Avebury, in 1900, whose talk was very fittingly entitled ‘Huxley, the man and his work.’ I was, of course, flattered to be added to such a distinguished list of speakers. I was also rather intimidated. What on earth could I have to say that might be worthy of the occasion?

But then something else struck me. Sir Edward Tylor was supposed to give the lecture in 1907, but he was too ill. Sidney Harland’s lecture in 1923 was cancelled for the same reason. In 1926 Sir William Ridgeway died before he could deliver his lecture, and so did James Hornell in 1949, Sir Peter Buck in 1952, Professor Ralph Linton in 1954, and Professor Wood-Jones in 1955. Well, at least I managed to turn up. And looking through the titles of the ninety-eight lectures actually delivered since 1900 I realized that something might be said about the development of our subject, paying particular attention to two topics that recur in the titles of Huxley lectures, and which were the subject of

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the first two lectures I attended: human evolution, and the study of kinship. I will begin, as Huxley would have thought only right, with Darwin.

II

In a letter to his sister Caroline written in March 1833, Charles Darwin described the visit he had made with HMS *Beagle* to Tierra del Fuego a few weeks earlier:

We here saw the native Fuegian; an untamed savage is I really think one of the most extraordinary spectacles in the world. – the difference between a domesticated & wild animal is far more strikingly marked in man. – in the naked barbarian, with his body coated with paint, whose very gestures, whether they may be peaceable or hostile are unintelligible, with difficulty we see a fellow-creature.¹

He recorded more detailed observations in his diary. The homes of the wild Fuegians were rudimentary; they slept ‘on the wet ground, coiled up like animals’; their food was miserable and scarce; they were at war with their neighbours over means of subsistence. ‘Captain FitzRoy could never ascertain that the Fuegians have any distinct belief in a future life’. Their skills, ‘like the instinct of animals’, were not ‘improved by experience’ (Barlow 1933: 212–13). ‘Although essentially the same creature, how little must the mind of one of these beings resemble that of an educated man’. And yet they sustained a viable way of life.

There can be no reason for supposing the race of Fuegians are decreasing, we may therefore be sure that he enjoys a sufficient share of happiness (whatever its kind may be) to render life worth having. Nature, by making habit omnipotent, has fitted the Fuegian to the climate and productions of his country (Keynes 1988: 222–4).

Before his encounter with ‘untamed’ Fuegians on that ‘wild and broken shore’, Darwin had become acquainted with another kind.² The captain of the *Beagle*, Robert FitzRoy, had visited Tierra del Fuego on a previous voyage, in 1830. There he kidnapped three young men and a girl of about 12, and took them back with him to England. FitzRoy decided that they were to be educated ‘in English, and the plainer truths of Christianity, as the first objective; and the use of common tools, a slight acquaintance with husbandry, gardening and mechanism, as the second’ (FitzRoy 1839: 12). These were the elements of civilization: language, religion, and technology. One of the party (FitzRoy’s favourite) died from a smallpox vaccination. The rest were duly instructed in civilization by the rector of Walthamstow and three years later they were returned home on the *Beagle*. FitzRoy intended them to serve as intermediaries for a missionary, who was also on board.

In the course of the interminable voyage, Darwin was struck by the intelligence of York Minster, the older of the two men, and of the girl, Fuegia Basket. He noted that they picked up some Spanish during the ship’s stopovers. His particular friend, Jemmy Button, the favourite of the sailors, was perhaps less clever, but he was very kind-hearted. When Darwin was sea-sick, Jemmy would ‘come to me and say in a plaintive voice, “Poor, poor fellow!”’, although he was clearly amused at the thought that the sea could trouble a grown man (Darwin 1839: 260).

The *Beagle* dropped the Fuegians off near their old campsite. Their re-entry was not easy. Jemmy, in particular, struggled. He had apparently forgotten the Yamana language. Darwin noted, ‘It was laughable, but almost pitiable, to hear him speak to his wild brother in English, and then ask him in Spanish (“no sabe?”) whether he did not

understand him' (1839: 220). And he scribbled in the margin of the diary entry: 'Man violently crying along side'. Then he wrote down his reflections:

It was quite melancholy leaving our Fuegians amongst their barbarous countrymen; there was one comfort; they appeared to have no personal fears. – But, in contradiction of what has often been stated, 3 years has been sufficient to change savages, into, as far as habits go, complete & voluntary Europaeans. – York, who was a full grown man & with a strong violent mind, will I am certain in every respect live as far as his means go, like an Englishman.

Nevertheless, Darwin was concerned. 'I am afraid whatever other ends their excursion to England produces, it will not be conducive to their happiness. – They have far too much sense not to see the vast superiority of civilized over uncivilized habits; & yet I am afraid to the latter they must return' (Keynes 1988: 141-2).

Six weeks later the *Beagle* returned to Tierra del Fuego. Jemmy soon appeared – 'but how altered!' FitzRoy noted.

I could hardly restrain my feelings, and I was not, by any means, the only one so touched by his squalid miserable appearance. He was naked, like his companions, except a bit of skin about his loins; his hair was long and matted, just like theirs; he was wretchedly thin, and his eyes were affected by smoke. We hurried him below, clothed him immediately, and in half an hour he was sitting with me at dinner in my cabin, using his knife and fork properly, and in every way behaving as correctly as if he had never left us. He spoke as much English as ever, and, to our astonishment, his companions, his wife, his brothers and their wives, mixed broken English words in their talking with him (1839: 324).

Yet Jemmy assured the captain that he was 'hearty, sir, never better'. He was contented, he said, and had no desire to alter his present way of life. Darwin accepted this. 'I hope & have little doubt [Jemmy] will be as happy as if he had never left his country', he wrote in his diary, 'which is much more than I formerly thought' (Keynes 1988: 221). For his part, FitzRoy was confident that civilization had left its imprint. He described the farewell signal fire that Jemmy lit as the *Beagle* sailed away, and commented that Jemmy's family 'were become considerably more humanized than any savages we had seen in Tierra del Fuego'. One day a shipwrecked seaman might be saved by Jemmy's children, 'prompted, as they can hardly fail to be, by the traditions they will have heard of men of other lands; and by an idea, however faint of their duty to God as well as their neighbour' (FitzRoy 1839: 327).

Jemmy Button and his friends had in effect been the subjects of an experiment, moving from savagery to civilization within three years, and, apparently, back again in a matter of weeks. Watching in surprise as the experiment played itself out, Darwin was moved to ask why the Fuegians had not become more civilized on their own initiative. He ventured a sociological explanation. The Fuegians bartered freely and shared everything – 'even a piece of cloth given to one is torn into shreds and distributed; and no one individual becomes richer than another' (Darwin 1839: 261). He recognized that this insistence on exchange was rooted in an assumption of equality. And it was precisely this insistence on equality, he thought, that held the Fuegians back.

III

When Darwin speculated on the association of equality and backwardness – and by implication on the necessary connection between civilization and hierarchy – he was making a characteristic move. The primitive is the mirror image of whatever is thought

to be quintessentially civilized. Savages are good to think with. Edward Said (1978) identified a discourse of Orientalism, which fashioned a stereotype of a feminized, sexually tempting, perhaps defiling Other, that legitimated domination. Said's thesis is maddeningly over-generalized and imprecise, but it has proved to be endlessly suggestive, since it is obviously true that colonialism required a stereotyping of its subjects. However, I am concerned here with something else, with the way in which the idea of the primitive is used to reflect upon ourselves.

Edward Tylor remarked in the first textbook of anthropology, his *Primitive culture*, published in 1871, that '[t]he educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life' (1871: 26). It is impossible to say whether or not Tylor was being ironic, but in any case the anthropologists were certainly claiming to be the experts on savagery and so, by implication, on civilization itself. I need hardly say that there are no primitive societies. There are no primitive peoples. The civilized condition is defined as the opposite of an imaginary primitive state, and so it is equally imaginary. To compare civilized and primitive is to compare two imaginary conditions (see Kuper 2005).

Darwin kept an avuncular eye on the debates of the anthropologists, often referring back to his experience of the Fuegians. The ostensible subject of anthropology was the primitive, but its central question was how civilization had triumphed over savagery, how science and morality had emerged from the dark ages of superstition and promiscuity. Darwin had studied theology at Cambridge, and he originally planned to become a clergyman, but by the 1860s he had little interest in religion. On the other hand, he was fascinated by what the anthropologists had to say about the regulation of sexual behaviour. Reproduction was, of course, the core issue in evolutionary theory. But Darwin also had very personal reasons for wanting to understand who should, and who should not, marry.

IV

On board the *Beagle*, and more urgently on his return to England after five years voyaging, Darwin had pondered marriage – although not to anyone in particular. In July 1838 he took a sheet of paper, wrote 'This is the Question', and divided the page into two columns. 'Marry', he wrote at the head of one, 'Not Marry' at the head of the other. He then laid out a balance sheet of arguments for and against marriage: 'Constant companion, (& friend in old age) who will feel interested in one, – object to be beloved & played with. – better than a dog anyhow. – Home, & someone to take care of house – Charms of music & female chit-chat. – These things good for one's health. – *but terrible loss of time*'. Companionship was the clincher. 'One cannot live this solitary life, with groggy old age, friendless & cold, & childless staring one in one's face, already beginning to wrinkle. – Never mind, trust to chance – keep a sharp look out – There is many a happy slave –'. And he concluded: 'Marry – Marry – Marry. Q.E.D.' (Burkhardt & Smith 1986: 444-5).

That question was settled then. Now another very important question had to be faced. Whom should he marry? Lodging with his bachelor brother Erasmus in London, Charles had some timid, decorous flirtations. His father was petrified by a rumour that he was interested in the feminist Harriet Martineau. However, he quickly decided to marry a daughter of his favourite uncle, his mother's brother, Jos Wedgwood. Only one

of Jos's daughters was unmarried and about the right age. This was the youngest Wedgwood daughter, Emma, who was a year older than Charles.

Emma was not only his first cousin, she was also his sister-in-law. Her oldest brother had married Charles's sister, Caroline, in 1837. Other romances had been rumoured between the young Wedgwoods and Darwins. Charles's elder brother Erasmus had shown an interest in Emma herself, and perhaps also in her two older sisters. And three of Emma's brothers had been very attentive to Darwin's sister Susan (Browne 1995: 392).

When Darwin wrote to Charles Lyell to announce his engagement, he emphasized the family links.

The lady is my cousin, Miss Emma Wedgwood, the sister of Hensleigh Wedgwood [Darwin's special friend at Cambridge, well known to Lyell], and [Emma is also the sister] of the elder brother who married my sister, so we are connected by manifold ties, besides on my part by the most sincere love and hearty gratitude to her for accepting such a one as myself (Litchfield 1915: 1).

The engagement did not come as a surprise to either family. Emma's father – Charles's uncle – wept with joy when Charles asked his permission for the marriage. Charles's father was equally delighted. He was as happy, he wrote to Uncle Jos, as when young Jos married Caroline. It was a match, Emma remarked, 'that every soul has been making for us, so we could not have helped it if we had not liked it ourselves' (Browne 1995: 392). In fact the Wedgwoods had a long-standing preference for marriages between first cousins, and in this they were typical of the rising educated upper-middle class in England.

These elite kin marriages did not, of course, bind an entire society, but they contributed to the formation of a new social stratum in England, which Noel Annan (1955) called the intellectual aristocracy. Annan's study of endogamy in this new class was suggestive and anecdotal rather than systematic, but he was on to something. The 'clans' that emerged within this nineteenth-century English intellectual aristocracy, each with a characteristic occupational speciality, and specific political and religious tendencies, tended to be localized and, to a remarkable extent, endogamous. Sustained alliances between a few families in the same ecological niche gave the members of these clans a powerful competitive advantage.

V

Yet while the English upper classes were freely marrying cousins, and prospering as a result, at least in social terms, medical research was beginning to suggest that close-kin marriage had bad consequences for the health of the children. Charles Darwin was obsessively concerned with his own ill-health. Whenever one of his children fell ill, he was inclined to see the same symptoms in himself, and to worry that it was the consequences of heredity, or perhaps the price of his marriage with a cousin (Browne 2002: 277, 279).

His researches insistently raised questions about breeding and fertility. Between 1868 and 1876 he published two extensive monographs on cross-fertilization in animals and plants (Darwin 1868; 1876), and claimed that 'the existence of a great law of nature is almost proved; namely, that the crossing of animals and plants which are not closely related to each other is highly beneficial or even necessary, and that interbreeding prolonged during many generations is highly injurious' (Darwin 1868: 144).³ Darwin thought this was probably true of human beings. It was obviously very important to find out.

His neighbour and ally, the anthropologist John Lubbock, was a member of Parliament. In the summer of 1870 Darwin asked him to propose that the census include a question on cousin marriage. He even drafted an argument for Lubbock to put to the House.

In England and many parts of Europe the marriages of cousins are objected to from their supposed injurious consequences; but this belief rests on no direct evidence. It is therefore manifestly desirable that the belief should either be proved false, or should be confirmed, so that in this latter case the marriages of cousins might be discouraged (F. Darwin 1887: 129).

Darwin's son George reported that Lubbock's proposition was rejected, 'amidst the scornful laughter of the House, on the ground that the idle curiosity of philosophers was not to be satisfied' (G.H. Darwin 1875*a*: 153). Darwin now asked his son George to compare the incidence of close-kin marriage in the general population with that among the parents of patients in mental asylums. If it turned out that marriages between close relatives produced a disproportionate number of 'diseased' children, this would 'settle the question as to the injuriousness of such marriages' (G.H. Darwin 1875*a*: 153).

The first step was to find out how common it was in England for first cousins to marry. Apparently nobody knew the answer. George Darwin was given estimates that ranged from 10 per cent to one in a thousand. 'Every observer', he concluded, 'is biased by the frequency or rarity of such marriages amongst his immediate surroundings' (G.H. Darwin 1875*a*: 178). Clearly he had to discover the facts for himself. Familiar with the new statistical techniques being developed by his cousin Francis Galton, George decided to attempt a scientific survey. It was to be one of the very first statistical studies of a social problem. After an ingenious and complex investigation, he concluded that 4.5 per cent of marriages in the aristocracy were with first cousins; 3.5 per cent in the landed gentry and the upper-middle classes; 2.25 per cent in the rural population; and among all classes in London, 1.15 per cent. Summing up, George told his father 'that cousin marriages are at least 3 times as frequent in our rank as in the lower!'⁴

The next step was to gather statistics from mental asylums. His father wrote on his behalf to the heads of the leading institutions. Several provided detailed responses. These showed no significant difference between the incidence of cousin marriage in the general population and among the parents of patients in mental asylums.

Other studies suggested that the offspring of cousin marriages were also more likely to suffer from blindness, deafness, and infertility, but George Darwin found the evidence unpersuasive. In fact, first-cousin marriages were, if anything, more fertile than others. He suggested that a man was more likely to marry a cousin if he had many to choose from. First-cousin marriage would accordingly be more common among people who came from large – and therefore fertile – families. Only one small piece of evidence gave George pause. He noted that among men who had rowed for Oxford or Cambridge, men who were obviously the fittest of the fit, sons of first-cousin parents appeared slightly less frequently than might have been expected (2.4 per cent as opposed to 3–3.5 per cent among their peers) (G.H. Darwin 1875*b*).

Charles Darwin endorsed his son's conclusions, which were reassuring not only to himself but to the many English people whose family trees featured marriages between cousins. Englishmen could also rest more easily when they considered that Queen Victoria was married to a first cousin, and that several of her descendants had also married cousins. (Landowners in the House of Lords did not require this reassurance: they knew that the inbreeding of good stock was sound policy.)

VI

The question of cousin marriage shaded into a broader debate about incest. There was no crime of incest in England in the nineteenth century. A number of people thought that there should be a law, but the English were uncertain about what did, and what should, constitute incest. Incest was defined as sexual intercourse between people who were forbidden by the church to marry, but the doctrines of the church, mired in centuries of case law and theological argument, were often opaque to ordinary people. It was not always clear why a particular marriage was allowed or forbidden. The rules with respect to relatives in law were particularly baffling. Every year from 1841, for more than sixty years, bills were introduced in Parliament to permit marriage with the deceased wife's sister, but whenever they passed through the House of Commons they were vetoed by the House of Lords. When Parliament rejected Lubbock's call for an inquiry into cousin marriage, one member remarked that the House was already busy every year debating marriage with the deceased wife's sister, and he objected that 'if there were to be legislation about the marriage of first cousins also, the whole time of the House would be taken up in deciding who was to be allowed to marry anyone else'.⁵

In the 1880s, the conception of incest changed radically. The National Vigilance Association and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, both founded in the 1880s, were concerned at first with the control of child labour. Soon they addressed child prostitution. Then they began to publicize the danger of sexual relations between fathers and daughters, or brothers and sisters. Incest came to be conceived of as an offence with a victim, a young girl, and with a characteristic location, imagined as a crowded room in a slum tenement. But the law could not be changed until a new and secular definition of incest was agreed. At last, in 1907, marriage with the deceased wife's sister was legalized. Then in 1908 Parliament passed a law to make incest a crime in England. The statute only criminalized sexual relationships between members of the immediate family. And in the following year James George Frazer pointed out that 'among many savages the sexual prohibitions are far more numerous, the horror excited by breaches of them far deeper, and the punishment inflicted on the offenders far sterner than with us' (Frazer 1909: 47). In short, Parliament had done the civilized thing.

VII

As the experts on primitive society, Victorian anthropologists were necessarily experts on kinship and marriage, because they took it for granted that the first societies were essentially kinship groups. Henry Maine set out a general law: 'The history of political ideas begins, in fact, with the assumption that kinship in blood is the sole possible ground of community in political functions' (1861: 124). As Maine saw it, the original primitive society must have been simply the family writ large. He had in mind something like the household of the patriarch Abraham, including several wives, sons and their wives and children, and servants and hangers-on. Other anthropologists imagined a promiscuous horde of kin, without families, without marriage, without even a taboo on incest. McLennan speculated that the most successful bands were made up of marauding warriors. They killed their daughters in order to be able to move more freely. And they captured women from other bands to be their wives (McLennan 1865). But if they practised infanticide and rapine, at least they avoided incest. Edward Burnett Tylor, a Quaker, revolted against this violent scenario. The whole purpose of exogamy was to prevent war by setting up diplomatic alliances between groups (Tylor 1889).

Henry Maine (who was married to his father's brother's daughter) thought that the prohibition of incest was a public health measure. People who had the brains to make fire and to domesticate animals would eventually have recognized that 'children of unsound constitutions were born of nearly related parents' (Maine 1883: 228). The fastidious James George Frazer wondered whether finer feelings had not simply prevailed (1918: 245-6).

Darwin dismissed these speculations. 'The licentiousness of many savages is no doubt astonishing', he conceded. Yet even the lowest savages were not genuinely promiscuous (Darwin 1874: 896). Among the apes, adult males tended to be jealous. Primitive men had probably been equally reluctant to share their females. And incest was abhorred even among 'savages such as those of Australia and South America' with 'no fine moral feelings to confuse, and who are not likely to reflect on distant evils to their progeny'. Darwin thought that primitive men simply found foreign women alluring, 'in the same manner as ... male deerhounds are inclined towards strange females, while the females prefer dogs with whom they have associated' (Darwin 1868: 104-5). But whatever the original reason for the incest taboo, Darwin was sure that outbreeding groups would be more successful than their rivals. He concluded that avoidance of incest had spread by natural selection (Darwin 1868: 124).

There was, however, a difficulty with the argument from natural selection. E.B. Tylor pointed out that primitive peoples did not ban all marriages between close relatives. Quite often some first cousins were forbidden, while others were actually preferred as marriage partners. The marriageable cousins were the children of a brother and a sister: 'cross-cousins', Tylor called them. The original society was imagined as a single undifferentiated band, in which promiscuity reigned. Then the band split into two. Men in one section had to marry women in the other. The children of two brothers belonged to the same section. So did the children of two sisters. However, the children of a brother and a sister – cross-cousins – belonged to different sections. Therefore they could marry one another. Tylor noted that this arrangement broke down as soon as the society became more complex, and included more than two sections. However, he suggested that people would have got into the habit of marrying their cross-cousins. The custom would outlive the dual form of exogamy (Tylor 1889).

James George Frazer demonstrated in his usual encyclopaedic fashion that marriage with the mother's brother's daughter was particularly widely distributed. It was found in south India, and elsewhere in Asia, among the Chin and Kachin of Burma and the Gilyaks of Siberia. There were also traces of the custom in America, Africa, Indonesia, New Guinea, and Australia (Frazer 1918: ii, chap. 4). But Frazer had his own ideas about how cousin marriage had come about. In Australia – and Australia represented for the Victorians the degree zero of social evolution – an Aboriginal man had to barter a sister or a daughter in exchange for a wife, for he had nothing else to offer. If two men were satisfied with the exchange of their sisters, then their sons might exchange sisters in turn. Their wives would be their double cross-cousins – mother's brother's daughters who were at the same time father's sister's daughters. And so the first form of marriage, sister exchange, led to cross-cousin marriage (Frazer 1918: 198).

VIII

There was nothing much to choose between the scenarios dreamed up by Tylor and by Frazer, but if either one of them was correct, then the institution of the incest taboo almost immediately led to marriage between cross-cousins. And cross-cousin marriage

was still common in primitive societies. Did this mean that cousin marriage was primitive, its persistence in Victorian society a throw-back? The Catholic Church prohibited marriage between cousins, up to third cousins. Protestants, however, allowed first-cousin marriage. Which rule was more civilized?

This was a ticklish question for the Victorians. The American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan became the leading theorist on kin marriage. He wrote with relish about various imaginary types of group marriage, but he did not deal with marriage between cousins, despite the fact that several of his correspondents sent him reports of cousin marriage in Australia, North America, and southern India.⁶ His most recent biographer, Thomas Trautmann, suggests that Morgan failed to discuss these instances of cousin marriage for a very personal reason. He was married to his mother's brother's daughter. Consequently he was reluctant to label the practice as primitive (Trautmann 1987: 243-5).

If only Morgan had been an Englishman! The Queen herself was married to her mother's brother's son. Darwin, the greatest naturalist of the age, was married to his mother's brother's daughter. The Darwinians had officially pronounced that cousin marriage was safe. However, opinion turned against cousin marriage in the United States from the 1860s. Before the Civil War there had been no laws against first-cousin marriage in any state in the Union. By the end of the nineteenth century, cousin marriages were prohibited in four states. Others soon followed (Ottenheimer 1996: 37, 52-7).

A pioneering critic of cousin marriage was Morgan's friend and mentor, the Rev. McIlvaine (to whom Morgan dedicated his masterpiece, *Ancient society*). In 1866, in a speech to the Pundit Club, a society of intellectuals in Rochester, New York, McIlvaine announced that the practice of cousin marriage had been responsible for the 'degradation and inferiority' of the Tamil and the American Indian peoples. This was because 'the blood, instead of dispersing itself more and more widely, is constantly returning upon itself' (Trautmann 1987: 244). Morgan must have been mortified. No wonder he preferred not to think about cousin marriage.

In Britain the reaction against cousin marriage only came much later. In the 1870s, when George Darwin made his study, approximately one marriage in twenty-five was between first cousins in the upper-middle class. The incidence was much higher in some intellectual clans, like the Darwin-Wedgwoods. By the 1920s, however, cousin marriage was being routinely condemned by the eugenicists, including another son of Charles Darwin, Leonard – who was himself married to a first cousin once removed – and by the 1930s, in England, only one marriage in 6,000 was with a first cousin.⁷

IX

Yet while cousin marriage became uncommon in England, the anthropologists were increasingly obsessed with it. Cross-cousin marriage became a defining feature of primitive society. Immediately before the First World War, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown set out to demonstrate that among the Australian Aborigines a person had to marry a cross-cousin. There were two Australian systems: in one, a man married a first cross-cousin, in the other, he married a second cross-cousin. Each type of marriage generated an appropriate classification of relatives into two sets, roughly speaking 'in-laws' and others.⁸ Radcliffe-Brown speculated that the Australian system fitted into 'a single general type of kinship organization (the Dravidian-Australian type) found over a large

area of South India and Ceylon ... and perhaps over the whole of Australia, and in certain parts of Melanesia ... possibly dating back to the first peopling of Australia and Melanesia' (Radcliffe-Brown 1927: 345).

A generation later, one of the greatest anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss, published a hugely ambitious study, *The elementary structures of kinship* (1968 [1949]), which argued in effect that all the pre-modern societies of the world were organized on the basis of cross-cousin marriage. Or rather, as Marcel Mauss had said, their fundamental rule was reciprocity, their fundamental institution exchange. The most significant exchange was the exchange of women in marriage. This was, in fact, the basis of society itself. And the 'elementary' form taken by the exchange of women was the marriage of cross-cousins.

There are many things to say about Lévi-Strauss's theory – many, many things have been said, of course – but I want to draw attention to two features in particular. First, like the Victorians, and notwithstanding his repeated denials and qualifications, Lévi-Strauss's model assumes that social structures progress from a primitive to a civilized form. His 'elementary' structures are all associated with primitive societies, in which reciprocity rules. There are two types of reciprocity. The simplest form, restricted exchange, is associated with Australia, which, as ever, represents the closest approach to pure savagery. Generalized exchange is more advanced than restricted exchange, and it is found particularly in Asia, as Frazer had pointed out. (And Asia was obviously a step up from Australia.) All the elementary systems were contrasted to complex systems – such as our own system – which replaced the economy of gift exchange with a market economy. As Marshall Sahlins put it, 'money is to the West what kinship is to the Rest' (1976: 216). Civilized and primitive are polar opposites.

Second, Lévi-Strauss is really only interested in formal, ideal, and (he believed) static structures. This was a characteristic feature of structuralism. In the preface to the 1964 reprint of *Political systems of Highland Burma*, Edmund Leach wrote, rather proudly, that his analysis 'depends upon the changing evaluation of verbal categories and is, in the final analysis, illusory' (1964: xii). Ultra-orthodox alliance theorists were even more idealist than the master. Much to the irritation of Lévi-Strauss, Rodney Needham argued that *The elementary structures of kinship* was really only about categories and rules – or if it was not, it should have been. Needham and Louis Dumont ended up by declaring that alliance systems did not necessarily regulate marriages at all. They simply established a particular classification of relatives. As Needham put it, a system of prescriptive alliance is 'defined by the terminology, and the terminology is constituted by the regularity of a constant relation that articulates lines and categories' (1971: 32).

To be sure, there are examples of more realistic accounts of cousin marriage in the classical anthropological literature, beginning with Bronislaw Malinowski's notes on cross-cousin marriage in the Trobriand Islands. Most Trobriand adults chose their own marriage partners. Chiefs, however, often arranged infant betrothals for their sons. The Trobrianders were matrilineal. The chief was succeeded by his sister's son. His own son had no place in the new dispensation – unless he was married into the new chief's family. Therefore as an infant he was betrothed to his father's sister's daughter, making him the brother-in-law of the next chief (Malinowski 1929: 80-8).

Isaac Schapera, a student of Malinowski, used a statistical survey to analyse the pattern of kin marriage among the Tswana of Botswana. The Tswana favoured marriage with any cousin, but above all with a mother's brother's daughter. That was the ideology, and there were various proverbs and sayings to back it up. And indeed

marriage with a mother's brother's daughter was fairly common among ordinary Tswana. Nobles, however, preferred marriage with a father's brother's daughter. In both cases, the reason was very similar. Men tried to reinforce relationships with powerful kin. For a commoner, these were often mothers' brothers. For a noble, the best-placed relatives would be fathers' brothers.⁹

Marriage with a father's brother's daughter was also favoured in the Arab world, but Lévi-Strauss's theory could not explain it, because he assumed that marriage alliances must join different groups, while a man belonged to the same lineage as his father's brother's daughter (Lévi-Strauss 1959: 13-14). Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in his chapter on Berber marriage in the *Outline of a theory of practice* that this was a false problem (1977 [1972]: 30-71). Lineages do not operate as corporate entities in the marriage market. Analysis should begin rather with individuals operating strategically, playing, more or less skilfully, the hands that they are dealt. Status comes into it, in the Berber case, and gender. Men might want their children to make dynastic marriages. Women have other priorities, and statistically, Bourdieu suggests, women usually win out. In any case, the formal rules do not determine how the game is played. People act selfishly on the whole, but they can usually find some socially acceptable justification for their actions. The marriage itself might be defined in various ways, the genealogies offering different options, kinship terms themselves open to manipulation.

X

And there the argument petered out in anthropology. Debates on kinship and marriage had dominated the anthropology journals for a century. They ran into the sand at a very particular moment – Peter Laslett, the pioneer of family history in Britain, described it as ‘the time of the Grand Climacteric in the family life of Western societies’, when ‘consensual unions began to be widespread, abortions to be exceedingly common, contraception to be universal and numbers of births to fall’ (1989: 843). Conservatives deplored these developments, but they were welcomed by others, for instance by Edmund Leach. Echoing the title, if not the argument, of Freud's *Civilization and its discontents*, he told the audience for his Reith Lectures that ‘far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents’ (Leach 1967: 44).

David Schneider now made the even more audacious suggestion that, far from being the defining feature of primitive society, kinship was uniquely civilized. Americans happened to believe that certain relationships are biologically given, and that they are peculiarly important. This was their ideology. It was shared by many Europeans. However, there is no reason to think that any other peoples have developed the same set of ideas (Schneider 1968; 1984; cf. Kuper 1999: 132-58). By implication, there was nothing natural about kinship. Perhaps the new reproductive technologies would render biology redundant and anachronistic, and erode what was left of the mythology of kinship in the West.

Anthropologists abandoned the study of kinship systems because they imagined that kinship was coming to an end, and that it had, perhaps, always been only an ideological illusion. For much the same reasons, the field was now claimed by social historians. If kinship was vanishing, if gender relationships were in the process of transformation, if procreation was being handed over from nature to culture, then there was a need for historical reconstruction and commentary.

XI

Beginning in the 1970s, there has been a remarkable outpouring of publications on family history. Michael Anderson (1980) quickly distinguished two main trends: a 'sentiments approach' and the 'household economics approach'. They continue to characterize much of the writing in this field. In broad and crude terms, the sentiments approach is a way of thinking about cultural changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the nuclear family is supposed to have become more emotionally loaded and more isolated. The household economics approach, emphasizing material factors, deals with the simultaneous transformation of the household. With the industrial revolution, most households were units of consumption but not of production. However, large-scale family businesses now emerged, some evolving into enduring corporations. And cousin marriage was quite often associated with family businesses.

The family business was, of course, the classic vehicle of Victorian entrepreneurship, binding together several generations of cousins in complex, sometimes fraught, combinations. The Rothschilds provide a remarkable instance. The five brothers who established the five branches of the great Rothschild bank were faced with the problem of continuity. Their solution was to institute a system of intermarriage. Between 1824 and 1877, marriages were contracted by thirty-six patrilineal descendants of the founder of the House of Rothschild. Thirty of these men and women married cousins, of whom twenty-eight were first or second cousins related through the male line only. In other words, 78 per cent of the marriages were with a father's brother's daughter or a father's brother's son's daughter. These marriages were arranged in order to sustain the partnership between the five branches of the family, and they ceased abruptly when the rise of Prussia and the institution of joint-stock companies changed the banking environment (Kuper 2001).

But the Rothschilds were a special case. The Wedgwood pottery was a more typical example of the large Victorian family business, and a closer look at Wedgwood marriages suggests that the materialist view of cousin marriage – that it 'keeps the wealth in the family' – is too simple.

The Wedgwood patriarch, Josiah Wedgwood, had married a cousin in 1764. His wife's father was a particularly successful potter. He did not want his daughter to marry Josiah, who was struggling to establish himself. Josiah was made to wait for years until – as his uncle put it – he could match his cousin's dowry of £4,000 'guinea for guinea' (Wedgwood & Wedgwood 1980: 8).

Having started off at the age of 14 as an apprentice to his brother Thomas, Josiah Wedgwood went on to become the most successful of all the potters in Staffordshire. He innovated, experimented with new processes and materials, organized his production along modern lines, and introduced fresh designs. His factory at Etruria made Wedgwood pottery world-famous. And it was very much a family business. However, Josiah's children did not marry cousins. His eldest sons, John and 'Jos', married two sisters, who were daughters of a wealthy country gentleman named Allen. There was no particular financial advantage to either side in these marriages. While an alliance with the country gentry was a step up socially for the Wedgwoods, Josiah was not greatly interested in conventional social prestige. He was much happier when his favourite daughter, Susannah, married Robert Darwin, the son of his close friend, Erasmus Darwin, a doctor, a natural philosopher, and a poet, but not a particularly wealthy man, and no businessman (Fig. 1).

Robert Darwin was a particular friend of his brother-in-law Jos Wedgwood, the coming man among the younger Wedgwoods. They had an understanding that Jos's eldest son, yet another Josiah Wedgwood, known as Joe, should marry Robert Darwin's

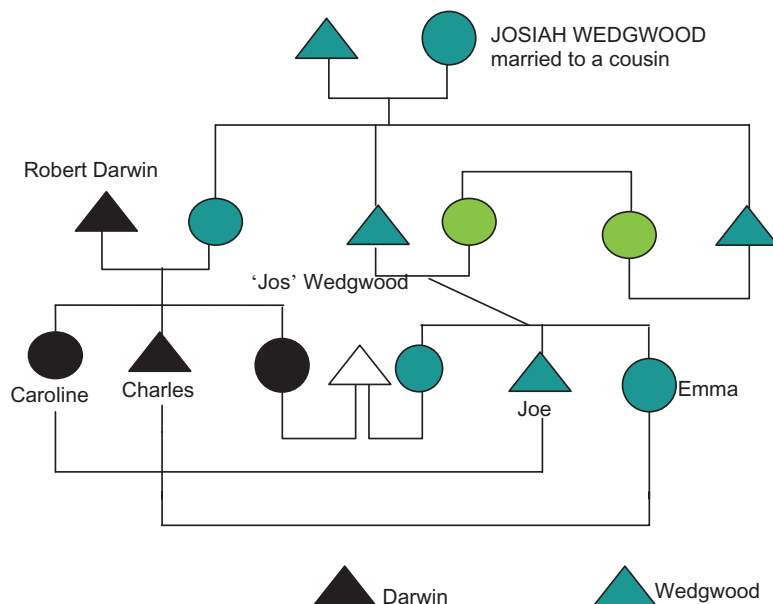


Figure 1.

daughter, Caroline. Joe was in no hurry to get married, but he went along with his father's wishes eventually. His marriage to Caroline Darwin was celebrated in 1837. He was 42 years old, Caroline was 37. Obviously they were not slaves to passion. Nor were they simply being pushed around by their fathers. But their marriage did make excellent financial sense. Dr Robert Darwin was not only a prosperous physician, like his father Erasmus; he also operated as a private banker, and he had lent a lot of money to Jos. The two men were involved in joint speculations in canals and later in railways. And Robert Darwin advised Jos on most of his financial arrangements, including those within the family. Since Joe was in line to take over the Etruria pottery works, his marriage to Caroline Darwin helped to ensure that important debts and obligations would be kept within the family.

Jos was equally delighted when, two years later, his daughter Emma reinforced the alliance with the Robert Darwins by marrying Charles Darwin. Charles had always been a favourite with his uncle. When the engagement was announced Jos wrote delightedly to Robert Darwin: 'I could have parted with Emma to no one for whom I would so soon and so entirely feel as a father, and I am happy in believing that Charles entertains the kindest feelings for his uncle-father'. And now he and his friend would be quits. 'You lately gave up a daughter – it is my turn now' (Litchfield 1915: 3).

Nevertheless the business interests of the two fathers were marginal to this marriage. Charles had no intention of taking on Robert Darwin's banking activities. Emma was not involved in the pottery business. And the fact that she married her cousin made no difference to her marriage settlement. Jos made similar provision for all his married children, some of whom married cousins while others did not.

Two of Jos's other children, Henry and Hensleigh, also married first cousins (Fig. 2). Both these cousin marriages were poor financial risks, and they were resisted by prudent fathers. John Wedgwood had been Jos's partner in the pottery but he was a

great-grandparents, found cousin marriage perfectly respectable. Yet just at this moment, the debates of the 1870s acquired a fresh relevance. Medical researchers remarked a high incidence of disorders in babies born to recent immigrants to Britain from Pakistan. Was this connected to a preference for cousin marriage?

The general view among geneticists today is that the risk of birth defects or infant mortality is roughly doubled for the children of first cousins. That is not a high level of risk. The geneticists Alan H. Bittles and E. Makov concluded that 'the risks to the offspring of inbred unions generally are within the limits of acceptability. For first cousin progeny, it also must be admitted that they appear to be in remarkably close agreement with the levels calculated by [George] Darwin in 1875' (1988: 164). A study of the effects of cousin marriage in families of Pakistani origin in Norway confirmed that the risks were rather low (Stoltenberg, Magnus, Lie, Daltviet & Irgens 1998). However, some studies are less reassuring. The authors of a recent prospective survey of Pakistani families in Birmingham suggests that if they 'ceased to marry relatives, their childhood mortality and morbidity would decrease by 60%' (Bunday & Alam 1993: 216).

George Darwin would have been interested to discover that the medical evidence is still by no means conclusive, but we might well suspect that this debate is not only about health risks. At any rate, it helps to sustain another, broader argument about immigration. Father's brother's daughter marriage is taken to be a defining feature of Islamic culture, and it is blamed not only for overloading the health service but also for resistance to integration and cultural stagnation. It is also associated with patriarchy, the suppression of women, and forced marriages.

Realistic ethnography is the best antidote to this sort of rhetoric. In Pakistan, and in the Pakistani diaspora, a preference is commonly expressed for marriage within the extended family or *biradari*. Close relatives do often marry in most regions of Pakistan, although for a variety of rather down-to-earth reasons, not because the ideology tells them to do so (Donnan 1988).

Perhaps unexpectedly, the rate of cousin marriage among Pakistani immigrants to Britain is higher than the rate in rural Pakistan. And the rate of cousin marriage is particularly high among younger British Pakistanis. Around a third of the marriages of the immigrant generation were with first cousins, but well over half the marriages of the British-born generation are with first cousins. This is a consequence of British immigration regulations (Ballard 1990; Charsley 2005; Shaw 2001). It is very difficult to enter Britain unless one is married to a British citizen. In most cousin marriages, one partner immigrates to Britain from Pakistan. Alison Shaw found that 90 per cent of the first-cousin marriages in her sample of British Pakistanis in Oxford involved one spouse who came directly from Pakistan (2001: 327). There are often debts to family members back home, who helped to finance the migration, and Roger Ballard points out that if a British-based family refuses a marriage offer from relatives in Pakistan, 'they are likely to be charged with having become so anglicized that they have forgotten their most fundamental duties towards their kin' (1987: 27). But sentiments matter too, and again particularly in the calculations of the women. As Shaw and Charsley comment:

[A] father arranging his son or daughter's marriage to his brother's child may describe this as part of the reciprocity of kinship, for he had earlier remitted money to assist his brother in business, while a mother may emphasize that the match will strengthen the emotional link, weakened by two decades of living apart, with a beloved sister, her husband's brother's wife (2006: 418-19).

I feel a special kinship with these people. My background is Baltic Jewish, and my ancestors emigrated from Lithuania to South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. My father's parents were first cousins. My great-grandfather had come to South Africa together with five of his brothers and a sister. His son married the daughter of one of those brothers. My mother's parents were also first cousins. I believe that when my grandfather had established himself he went back home to find a wife, and was then, presumably, pointed in the direction of his cousin.

Once upon a time, British emigrants behaved in the same way. Twenty per cent of marriages among Protestant Northern Irish immigrants to the Midwest were with first cousins in the first half of the nineteenth century (Reid 1988). Highland Scots migrants to New Zealand were also strikingly endogamous. What Maureen Molloy calls 'kin group endogamy' reached 70 per cent in some areas, and she remarks that 'it is quite common to find three siblings marrying two sibling cousins and a third cousin or cousin's cousin' (1986: 232).

Scots abroad, Berber villagers, Pakistani and East European Jewish migrants, Tswana aristocrats, and Victorian elites marry cousins for different reasons, but there are clearly common threads in the marriage strategies in all these cases. However, the analysis of marriage choices is not enough. Marriage preferences have structural consequences. It is probably not a good idea to look for these at the level of a total society, since marriages are very often limited by class or minority status, and political boundaries are unlikely to coincide with barriers to intermarriage. The structural implications of cousin marriage become evident on a smaller scale, at the level of a social network. Systematic intermarriage may guarantee the trust on which complex financial relationships depend, or it may foster patronage. No doubt there are other pay-offs. Often a sense of another sort of affinity, an affinity of values, of social situation, underpins intermarriage. In any case, families that can count on sustained alliances of this sort enjoy a powerful competitive advantage.

XIII

Three final reflections may be in order. First of all, we must include ourselves in our comparisons, and on equal terms. Darwin sometimes recoiled from this responsibility. In 1862, he wrote to a sympathizer, Charles Kingsley:

That is a grand & almost awful question on the genealogy of man ... It is not so awful & difficult to me ... partly from familiarity & partly, I think, from having seen a good many Barbarians. I declare the thought, when I first saw in T. del Fuego a naked painted, shivering hideous savage, that my ancestors must have been somewhat similar beings, was at that time as revolting to me, nay more revolting than my present belief that an incomparably more remote ancestor was a hairy beast. Monkeys have downright good hearts, at least sometimes (Burkhardt, Harvey & Porter 1997: 71).

And yet the anonymous savage – 'naked, painted, shivering' – was sometimes eclipsed in his thinking by his friend Jemmy Button, whom he had seen pass so readily back and forth between the state of the civilized and the savage. In *The descent of man* Darwin wrote, 'I was incessantly struck, whilst living with the Fuegians on board the "Beagle", with the many little traits of character, showing how similar their minds were to ours' (1871: 232).

Second, we should pay more attention to banal encounters, to the taken-for-granted habits of everyday existence, in which we find ourselves most alike. It was when Darwin

appealed to his personal experience that he discovered similarities rather than differences. This was, of course, Malinowski's mantra, on which the ethnographic tradition of social anthropology rests. Malinowski never delivered a Huxley lecture, but I will give him the last word in mine. In a note for a never completed textbook he remarked that when he came into anthropology the emphasis had been on the differences between peoples. 'I recognised their study as important, but underlying sameness I thought of greater importance & rather neglected. I still believe that the fundamental is more important than the freakish' (cited in Young 2004: 76).

This suggests, thirdly, that when making comparisons we should pay more attention to practices than to conceptions and symbols. Malinowski (1913) pointed out that despite their theory of spiritual paternity the Australians actually live in family households, and that fathers are important figures in these households. It is only if we concentrate so much on symbols that we lose sight of social action that we can possibly doubt, even for an instant, that families crop up all over the place, that everywhere relatives are distinguished from non-relatives, and are treated very differently, and that marriage choices are regarded in very many societies as the most important decisions in life, almost certainly too important to be left to any individuals to make for themselves.

It would be a disaster if anthropologists found that they had nothing to say about matters that are so essential to most of the people we live among, to say nothing about our recent ancestors, and, perhaps, even ourselves.

NOTES

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¹ Darwin Correspondence Project, Cambridge University Library, Letter 203 – Darwin, C.R. to Darwin, C.S., 30 Mar.-12 Apr 1833.

² Nick Hazelwood (2000) provides a good account of the encounter between Darwin and the Fuegians. For a suggestive analysis of the imagery that Darwin used in his descriptions of the Fuegians, see Beer (1996).

³ In the revised edition, published in 1875, Darwin dropped the qualification 'highly' before 'injurious' (C. Darwin 1875: 126).

⁴ Darwin Correspondence Project, G.H. Darwin to C.F. Darwin, 6 Feb. 1874.

⁵ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* 33/34 (1870), 1009.

⁶ Morgan's informant on the Tamil, the Rev. Ezekiel Scudder, pointed out to him that the same term was used for uncle and for husband's father, and suggested that this was appropriate because a person 'is expected to marry an uncle's daughter or son, and thus the two relationships are combined in one' (Trautmann 1987: 242-3).

⁷ Medical Research Council, *Report* (London, 1935/6) 139-40; (1936/7) 157-8; (1938/9) 81. By the middle of the twentieth century such unions accounted for only 0.004 per cent of the marriages of a middle-class London sample (Firth, Hubert & Forge 1970: 191-3).

⁸ Radcliffe-Brown developed the analysis in a series of papers, culminating in *The social organization of the Australian tribes* (1931).

⁹ Schapera published a number of papers on the topic. These are reviewed and discussed in Kuper (1987).

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Changement de sujet : du mariage entre cousins, et d'autres questions

Résumé

Le péché originel de l'anthropologie fut de diviser le monde en « civilisé » et « sauvage », en partant du principe que les systèmes sociaux des autres reposaient sur des fondations constituées par les liens du sang. Les anthropologues devinrent ainsi à la fois les experts des primitifs et de la parenté. Dans les années 1970, les systèmes de parenté occidentaux ont amorcé des changements radicaux. Dans le même temps, les vieilles orthodoxies anthropologiques relatives à la parenté ont commencé à s'effriter, et les jeunes ethnographes se sont pour la plupart désintéressés du sujet. Les systèmes de parenté n'ont pas disparu pour autant dans le monde mais il faut, pour les comprendre, renoncer d'abord à l'opposition entre modernité et tradition, entre l'Occident et le reste du monde.

Adam Kuper's most recent book is *The reinvention of primitive society* (Routledge, 2005). He is currently completing a study of cousin marriage in nineteenth-century England.

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