INTRODUCTION

The papers reprinted here are occasional papers in the fullest sense of the term; each of them was written for a particular occasion. They do, however, have some measure of unity as being written from a particular theoretical point of view.

What is meant by a theory is a scheme of interpretation which is applied, or is thought to be applicable, to the understanding of phenomena of a certain class. A theory consists of a set of analytical concepts, which should be clearly defined in their reference to concrete reality, and which should be logically connected. I propose, therefore, by way of introduction to these miscellaneous papers, to give definitions of certain concepts of which I make use for purposes of analysis of social phenomena. It must be remembered that there is very little agreement amongst anthropologists in the concepts and terms they use, so that this Introduction and the papers that follow are to be taken as an exposition of one particular theory, not of a commonly accepted theory.

History and Theory

The difference between the historical study of social institutions and the theoretical study can be easily seen by comparing economic history and theoretical economics, or by comparing the history of law with theoretical jurisprudence. In anthropology, however, there has been and still is a great deal of confusion which is maintained by discussions in which terms such as ‘history’ and ‘science’ or ‘theory’ are used by disputants in very different meanings. These confusions could be to a considerable extent avoided by using the recognised terms of logic and methodology and distinguishing between idiogetic and nomothetic enquiries.

In an idiogetic enquiry the purpose is to establish as acceptable certain particular or factual propositions or statements. A nomothetic enquiry, on the contrary, has for its purpose to arrive at acceptable general propositions. We define the nature of an enquiry by the kind of conclusions that are aimed at.
History, as usually understood, is the study of records and monuments for the purpose of providing knowledge about conditions and events of the past, including those investigations that are concerned with the quite recent past. It is clear that history consists primarily of idiographic enquiries. In the last century there was a dispute, the famous *Methodenstreit*, as to whether historians should admit theoretical considerations in their work or deal in generalisations. A great many historians have taken the view that nomothetic enquiries should not be included in historical studies, which should be confined to telling us what happened and how it happened. Theoretical or nomothetic enquiries should be left to sociology. But there are some writers who think that a historian may, or even should, include theoretical interpretations in his account of the past. Controversy on this subject, and on the relation between history and sociology, still continues after sixty years. Certainly there are writings by historians which are to be valued not solely as idiographic accounts of the facts of the past but as containing theoretical (nomothetic) interpretations of those facts. The tradition in French historical studies of Fustel de Coulanges and his followers, such as Gustave Glotz, illustrates this kind of combination. Some modern writers refer to it as sociological history or historical sociology.

In anthropology, meaning by that the study of what are called the primitive or backward peoples, the term ethnography applies to what is specifically a mode of idiographic enquiry, the aim of which is to give acceptable accounts of such peoples and their social life. Ethnography differs from history in that the ethnographer derives his knowledge, or some major part of it, from direct observation of or contact with the people about whom he writes, and not, like the historian, from written records. Prehistoric archaeology, which is another branch of anthropology, is clearly an idiographic study, aimed at giving us factual knowledge about the prehistoric past.

The theoretical study of social institutions in general is usually referred to as sociology, but as this name can be loosely used for many different kinds of writings about society we can speak more specifically of theoretical or comparative sociology. When Frazer gave his Inaugural Lecture as the first Professor of Social Anthropology in 1908 he defined social anthropology as that branch of sociology that deals with primitive societies.

**INTRODUCTION**

Certain confusions amongst anthropologists result from the failure to distinguish between *historical explanation* of institutions and *theoretical understanding*. If we ask why it is that a certain institution exists in a particular society the appropriate answer is a historical statement as to its origin. To explain why the United States has a political constitution with a President, two Houses of Congress, a Cabinet, a Supreme Court, we refer to the history of North America. This is historical explanation in the proper sense of the term. The existence of an institution is explained by reference to a complex sequence of events forming a causal chain of which it is a result.

The acceptability of a historical explanation depends on the fullness and reliability of the historical record. In the primitive societies that are studied by social anthropology there are no historical records. We have no knowledge of the development of social institutions among the Australian aborigines for example. Anthropologists, thinking of their study as a kind of historical study, fall back on conjecture and imagination, and invent 'pseudo-historical' or 'pseudo-causal' explanations. We have had, for example, innumerable and sometimes conflicting pseudo-historical accounts of the origin and development of the totemic institutions of the Australian aborigines. In the papers of this volume mention is made of certain pseudo-historical speculations. The view taken here is that such speculations are not merely useless but are worse than useless. This does not in any way imply the rejection of historical explanation but quite the contrary.

Comparative sociology, of which social anthropology is a branch, is here conceived as a theoretical or nomothetic study of which the aim is to provide acceptable generalisations. The theoretical understanding of a particular institution is its interpretation in the light of such generalisations.

**Social Process**

A first question that must be asked if we are to formulate a systematic theory of comparative sociology is: What is the concrete, observable, phenomenal reality with which the theory is to be concerned? Some anthropologists would say that the reality consists of 'societies' conceived as being in some sense or other discrete real entities. Others, however, describe the reality that has to be studied as consisting of 'cultures', each of
which is again conceived as some kind of discrete entity. Still others seem to think of the subject as concerned with both kinds of entities, ‘societies’ and ‘cultures’, so that the relation of these then presents a problem.

My own view is that the concrete reality with which the social anthropologist is concerned in observation, description, comparison and classification, is not any sort of entity but a process, the process of social life. The unit of investigation is the social life of some particular region of the earth during a certain period of time. The process itself consists of an immense multitude of actions and interactions of human beings, acting as individuals or in combinations or groups. Amidst the diversity of the particular events there are discoverable regularities, so that it is possible to give statements or descriptions of certain general features of the social life of a selected region. A statement of such significant general features of the process of social life constitutes a description of what may be called a form of social life. My conception of social anthropology is as the comparative theoretical study of forms of social life amongst primitive peoples.

A form of social life amongst a certain collection of human beings may remain approximately the same over a certain period. But over a sufficient length of time the form of social life itself undergoes change or modification. Therefore, while we can regard the events of social life as constituting a process, there is over and above this the process of change in the form of social life. In a synchronic description we give an account of a form of social life as it exists at a certain time, abstracting as far as possible from changes that may be taking place in its features. A diachronic account, on the other hand, is an account of such changes over a period. In comparative sociology we have to deal theoretically with the continuity of, and with changes in, forms of social life.

**Culture**

Anthropologists use the word ‘culture’ in a number of different senses. It seems to me that some of them use it as equivalent to what I call a form of social life. In its ordinary use in English ‘culture’, which is much the same idea as cultivation, refers to a process, and we can define it as the process by which a person acquires, from contact with other persons or from such things as books or works of art, knowledge, skill, ideas, beliefs, tastes, sentiments. In a particular society we can discover certain processes of cultural tradition, using the word tradition in its literal meaning of handing on or handing down. The understanding and use of a language is passed on by a process of cultural tradition in this sense. An Englishman learns by such a process to understand and use the English language, but in some sections of the society he may also learn Latin, or Greek, or French, or Welsh. In complex modern societies there are a great number of separate cultural traditions. By one a person may learn to be a doctor or surgeon, by another he may learn to be an engineer or an architect. In the simplest forms of social life the number of separate cultural traditions may be reduced to two, one for men and the other for women.

If we treat the social reality that we are investigating as being not an entity but a process, then culture and cultural tradition are names for certain recognisable aspects of that process, but not, of course, the whole process. The terms are convenient ways of referring to certain aspects of human social life. It is by reason of the existence of culture and cultural traditions that human social life differs very markedly from the social life of other animal species. The transmission of learnt ways of thinking, feeling and acting constitutes the cultural process, which is a specific feature of human social life. It is, of course, part of that process of interaction amongst persons which is here defined as the social process thought of as the social reality. Continuity and change in the forms of social life being the subjects of investigation of comparative sociology, the continuity of cultural traditions and changes in those traditions are amongst the things that have to be taken into account.

**Social System**

It was Montesquieu who, in the middle of the eighteenth century, laid the foundations of comparative sociology, and in doing so formulated and used a conception that has been and can be referred to by the use of the term social system. His theory, which constitutes what Comte later called ‘the first law of social statics’, was that in a particular form of social life there are relations of interconnection and interdependence, or what Comte called relations of solidarity, amongst the various features. The idea of a natural or phenomenal system is that of a set of relations
amongst events, just as a logical system, such as the geometry of Euclid, is a set of relations amongst propositions, or an ethical system a set of relations amongst ethical judgments. When one speaks of the 'banking system' of Great Britain this refers to the fact that there is a considerable number of actions, interactions and transactions, such for example as payments by means of a signed cheque drawn on a bank, which are so connected that they constitute in their totality a process of which we can make an analytical description which will show how they are interconnected and thus form a system. We are dealing, of course, with a process, a complex part of the total social process of social life in Great Britain.

In these essays I have referred to 'kinship systems'. The idea is that in a given society we can isolate conceptually, if not in reality, a certain set of actions and interactions amongst persons which are determined by the relationships by kinship or marriage, and that in a particular society these are interconnected in such a way that we can give a general analytical description of them as constituting a system. The theoretical significance of this idea of systems is that our first step in an attempt to understand a regular feature of a form of social life, such as the use of cheques, or the custom by which a man has to avoid social contact with his wife's mother, is to discover its place in the system of which it is part.

The theory of Montesquieu, however, is what we may call a theory of a total social system, according to which all the features of social life are united into a coherent whole. As a student of jurisprudence Montesquieu was primarily concerned with laws, and he sought to show that the laws of a society are connected with the political constitution, the economic life, the religion, the climate, the size of the population, the manners and customs, and what he called the general spirit (esprit général)—what later writers have called the 'ethos' of the society. A theoretical law, such as this 'fundamental law of social statics', is not the same thing as an empirical law, but is a guide to investigation. It gives us reason to think that we can advance our understanding of human societies if we investigate systematically the interconnections amongst features of social life.

Statics and Dynamics

Comte pointed out that in sociology, as in other kinds of science, there are two sets of problems, which he called problems of statics and problems of dynamics. In statics we attempt to discover and define conditions of existence or of co-existence; in dynamics we try to discover conditions of change. The conditions of existence of molecules or of organisms are matters of statics, and similarly the conditions of existence of societies, social systems, or forms of social life are matters for social statics. Whereas the problems of social dynamics deal with the conditions of change of forms of social life.

The basis of science is systematic classification. It is the first task of social statics to make some attempt to compare forms of social life in order to arrive at classifications. But forms of social life cannot be classified into species and genera in the way we classify forms of organic life; the classification has to be not specific but typological, and this is a more complicated kind of investigation. It can only be reached by means of the establishing of typologies for features of social life or the complexes of features that are given in partial social systems. Not only is the task complex but it has been neglected in view of the idea that the method of anthropology should be a historical method.

But though the typological studies are one important part of social statics, there is another task, that of formulating generalisations about the conditions of existence of social systems, or of forms of social life. The so-called first law of social statics is a generalisation affirming that for any form of social life to persist or continue the various features must exhibit some kind and measure of coherence or consistence, but this only defines the problem of social statics, which is to investigate the nature of this coherence.

The study of social dynamics is concerned with establishing generalisations about how social systems change. It is a corollary of the hypothesis of the systematic connection of features of social life that changes in some features are likely to produce changes in other features.

Social Evolution

The theory of social evolution was formulated by Herbert Spencer as part of his formulation of the general theory of evolution. According to that theory the development of life on
the earth constitutes a single process to which Spencer applied the term 'evolution'. The theory of organic and super-organic (social) evolution can be reduced to two essential propositions: (1) That both in the development of forms of organic life and in the development of forms of human social life there has been a process of diversification by which many different forms of organic life or of social life have been developed out of a very much smaller number of original forms. (2) That there has been a general trend of development by which more complex forms of structure and organisation (organic or social) have arisen from simpler forms. The acceptance of the theory of evolution only requires the acceptance of these propositions as giving us a scheme of interpretation to apply to the study of organic and social life. But it must be remembered that some anthropologists reject the hypothesis of evolution. We can give provisional acceptance to Spencer's fundamental theory, while rejecting the various pseudo-historical speculations which he added to it, and that acceptance gives us certain concepts which may be useful as analytical tools.

**Adaptation**

This is a key concept of the theory of evolution. It is, or can be, applied both to the study of the forms of organic life and to the forms of social life amongst human beings. A living organism exists and continues in existence only if it is both internally and externally adapted. The internal adaptation depends on the adjustment of the various organs and their activities, so that the various physiological processes constitute a continuing functioning system by which the life of the organism is maintained. The external adaptation is that of the organism to the environment within which it lives. The distinction of external and internal adaptation is merely a way of distinguishing two aspects of the *adaptational system* which is the same for organisms of a single species.

When we come to the social life of animals another feature of adaptation makes its appearance. The existence of a colony of bees depends on a combination of the activities of the individual worker bees in the collection of honey and pollen, the manufacture of wax, the building of the cells, the tending of eggs and larvae and the feeding of the latter, the protection of the store of honey from robbers, the ventilation of the hive by fanning with their wings, the maintenance of temperature in the winter by clustering together. Spencer uses the term 'co-operation' to refer to this feature of social life. Social life and social adaptation therefore involve the adjustment of the behaviour of individual organisms to the requirements of the process by which the social life continues.

When we examine a form of social life amongst human beings as an adaptational system it is useful to distinguish three aspects of the total system. There is the way in which the social life is adjusted to the physical environment, and we can, if we wish, speak of this as the ecological adaptation. Secondly, there are the institutional arrangements by which an orderly social life is maintained, so that what Spencer calls co-operation is provided for and conflict is restrained or regulated. This we might call, if we wished, the institutional aspect of social adaptation. Thirdly, there is the social process by which an individual acquires habits and mental characteristics that fit him for a place in the social life and enable him to participate in its activities. This, if we wish, could be called cultural adaptation, in accordance with the earlier definition of cultural tradition as process. What must be emphasised is that these modes of adaptation are only different aspects from which the total adaptational system can be looked at for convenience of analysis and comparison.

The theory of social evolution therefore makes it a part of our scheme of interpretation of social systems to examine any given system as an adaptational system. The stability of the system, and therefore its continuance over a certain period, depends on the effectiveness of the adaptation.

**Social Structure**

The theory of evolution is one of a trend of development by which more complex types of structure come into existence by derivation from less complex ones. An address on Social Structure is included in this volume, but it was delivered in war time and was printed in abbreviated form, so that it is not as clear as it might be. When we use the term structure we are referring to some sort of ordered arrangement of parts or components. A musical composition has a structure, and so does a sentence. A building has a structure, so does a molecule or an animal. The components or units of social structure are persons, and a person is a human
being considered not as an organism but as occupying position in a social structure.

One of the fundamental theoretical problems of sociology is that of the nature of social continuity. Continuity in forms of social life depends on structural continuity, that is, some sort of continuity in the arrangements of persons in relation to one another. At the present day there is an arrangement of persons into nations, and the fact that for seventy years I have belonged to the English nation, although I have lived much of my life in other countries, is a fact of social structure. A nation, a tribe, a clan, a body such as the French Academy, or such as the Roman Church, can continue in existence as an arrangement of persons though the personnel, the units of which each is composed, changes from time to time. There is continuity of the structure, just as a human body, of which the components are molecules, preserves a continuity of structure though the actual molecules, of which the body consists, are continually changing. In the political structure of the United States there must always be a President; at one time it is Herbert Hoover, at another time Franklin Roosevelt, but the structure as an arrangement remains continuous.

The social relationships, of which the continuing network constitute social structure, are not haphazard conjunctions of individuals, but are determined by the social process, and any relationship is one in which the conduct of persons in their interactions with each other is controlled by norms, rules or patterns. So that in any relationship within a social structure a person knows that he is expected to behave according to these norms and is justified in expecting that other persons should do the same. The established norms of conduct of a particular form of social life it is usual to refer to as institutions. An institution is an established norm of conduct recognised as such by a distinguishable social group or class of which therefore it is an institution. The institutions refer to a distinguishable type or class of social relationships and interactions. Thus in a given locally defined society we find that there are accepted rules for the way a man is expected to behave towards his wife and children. The relation of institutions to social structure is therefore twofold. On the one side there is the social structure, such as the family in this instance, for the constituent relationships of which the institutions provide the norms; on the other there is the group, the local society in this instance, in which the norm is established by the general recognition of it as defining proper behaviour. Institutions, if that term is used to refer to the ordering by society of the interactions of persons in social relationships, have this double connection with structure, with a group or class of which it can be said to be an institution, and with those relationships within the structural system to which the norms apply. In a social system there may be institutions which set up norms of behaviour for a king, for judges in the fulfilment of the duties of their office, for policemen, for fathers of families, and so on, and also norms of behaviour relating to persons who come into casual contact within the social life. A brief mention may be made of the term organisation. The concept is clearly closely related to the concept of social structure, but it is desirable not to treat the two terms as synonymous. A convenient use, which does not depart from common usage in English, is to define social structure as an arrangement of persons in institutionally controlled or defined relationships, such as the relationship of king and subject, or that of husband and wife, and to use organisation as referring to an arrangement of activities. The organisation of a factory is the arrangement of the various activities of manager, foremen, workmen within the total activity of the factory. The structure of a family household of parents, children and servants is institutionally controlled. The activities of the various members of the persons of the household will probably be subject to some regular arrangement, and the organisation of the life of the household in this sense may be different in different families in the same society. The structure of a modern army consists, in the first place, of an arrangement into groups—regiments, divisions, army corps, etc., and in the second place an arrangement into ranks—generals, colonels, majors, corporals, etc. The organisation of the army consists of the arrangement of the activities of its personnel whether in time of peace or in time of war. Within an organisation each person may be said to have a role. Thus we may say that when we are dealing with a structural system we are concerned with a system of social positions, while in an organisation we deal with a system of roles.
ask what is its social function, we have a fundamental problem of comparative sociology towards which a first contribution was made by Durkheim in his *Division du Travail Social.* A very wide general problem is posed when we ask what is the social function of religion. As it has been pointed out in one of the papers in this volume, the study of this problem requires the consideration of a large number of more limited problems, such as that of the social function of ancestor worship in those societies in which it is found. But in these more limited investigations, if the theory here outlined is accepted, the procedure has to be the examination of the connection between the structural features of the social life and the corresponding social process as both involved in a continuing system.

The first paper in this collection may serve to illustrate these theoretical ideas. It deals with an institution by which a sister's son is allowed privileged familiarity in his conduct towards his mother's brother. The custom is known in tribes of North America such as the Winnebago and others, in peoples of Oceania, such as the inhabitants of Fiji and Tonga, and in some tribes of Africa. My own observations on this institution were made in Tonga and Fiji, but as the paper was addressed to a South African audience it seemed preferable to refer to a single South African example, since a wider comparative discussion would have called for a much longer essay. The usual way of dealing with this institution, both in Oceania and in Africa, was to offer a pseudo-historical explanation to the effect that it was a survival in a patrilineal society from a former condition of mother-right.

The alternative method of dealing with the institution is to look for a theoretical understanding of it as a part of a kinship system of a certain type, within which it has a discoverable function. We do not yet have a systematic general typology of kinship systems, for the construction of such is a laborious undertaking. I have indicated some partial and provisional results of such an attempt to determine types in a recent publication in the form of an Introduction to a book on African Systems of Kinship and Marriage. Amongst the great diversity of kinship systems we can, I think, recognise a type of what we may call father-right, and another of mother-right. In both these types the kinship structure is based on lineages with maximum emphasis on lineage relationships. In mother-right the lineage is matrilineal, a child belonging
to the lineage of the mother. Practically all the jural relations of a man are those with his matrilineal lineage and its members, and therefore he is largely dependent on his mother’s brothers, who exercise authority and control over him and to whom he looks for protection and for inheritance of property. In a system of father-right, on the other hand, a man is largely dependent on his patrilineal lineage and therefore on his father and father’s brothers, who exercise authority and control over him, while it is to them that he has to look for protection and for inheritance. Father-right is represented by the system of patria potestas of ancient Rome, and there are systems that approximate more or less closely to the type to be found in Africa and elsewhere. We may regard the BaThonga as so approximating. Mother-right is represented by the systems of the Nayar of Malabar and the Menangkabau Malays, and again there are systems elsewhere that approximate to the type.

The point of the paper on the mother’s brother may be said to be to contrast with the explanation by pseudo-history the interpretation of the institution to which it refers as having a function in a kinship system with a certain type of structure. If I were to rewrite the paper after thirty years I should certainly modify and expand it. But it has been suggested to me that the paper may have a certain minor historical interest in relation to the development of thought in anthropology and it is therefore reprinted almost as it was written with only minor alterations.

Any interest this volume may have will probably be as an exposition of a theory, in the sense in which the word ‘theory’ is here used as a scheme of interpretation thought to be applicable to the understanding of a class of phenomena. The theory can be stated by means of the three fundamental and connected concepts of ‘process’, ‘structure’ and ‘function’. It is derived from such earlier writers as Montesquieu, Comte, Spencer, Durkheim and thus belongs to a cultural tradition of two hundred years. This introduction contains a reformulation in which certain terms are used differently from the way they were used in the early papers here reprinted. For example, in the earliest papers written twenty or more years ago the word ‘culture’ is used in the accepted meaning of that time as a general term for the way of life, including the way of thought, of a particular locally defined social group.