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For M.A.L.

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Several colleagues have read the manuscript, and they are thanked warmly for their comments and criticisms: Anthony Cohen, Frederick Damon, Jeanette Edwards, Sarah Franklin, Jane Haggis, Eric Hirsch, Frances Price, Nigel Rapport, Tim Swindlehurst and Nicholas Thomas, as are the Press's readers. Jean Ashton has also taken care of it in her own inimitable way. I should add that where 'n.d.' appears in the bibliography, I am grateful for permission to cite as yet unpublished work.

David Schneider is the anthropological father of this book, since it is both with and against his ideas on kinship that it is written; his reactions have been characteristically incisive and generous. Another colleague, Joyce Evans, is the mother of this book, since it is from her Englishness that I write; her love and knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature have kept me culturally on track. She is also my mother in the literal sense, and my thanks are also filial.

Marilyn Strathern
Manchester
January 1989/June 1990

Prologue: making explicit

Visitors to England, the English are fond of telling themselves, are often struck by the space devoted to gardens and parks, so different from the civic plazas that grace continental Europe. Towns and cities are likely to be cramped, higgledy piggledy. But go into the suburbs with their lawns and flower-beds and you will sense an avenue architecture of its own kind, at once domestic (the semi-detached houses) and public (a common front of shrubs, hedges, fences). What might be regarded as typically English, however, is the product not only of the demands of a particular social class but of a particular period – from mid-Victorian town houses built as country homes to Edwardian villas at the very edges of the countryside and garden cities enclosing the idea of countryside within.

That is, of course, no revelation. On the contrary, the English also tell themselves about the particular periods they are heir to and the extent to which things have altered since. If it is no revelation, then one might wonder how the twin ideas of continuity and change coexist. How come that the one (change) seems as much in place as the other (continuity)?

For it is equally conventional to deny that the typical ever exists. When visitors to England remark, as they do, on rubbish in the streets of the metropolis or when the English abroad are treated as responsible for forest-stripping acid rain, the sense is of falling on changed times. In denying the typicality of particular characteristics, one may well deny that one can ever think of what is typical about the English. A vision of constant change displaces that of perpetual continuity; all appears transient and nothing stable. Change and continuity are thus played off against one another. Indeed, change can be visualised as a sequence of events that 'happens' to something that otherwise retains its identity, such as the English themselves, or the countryside: continuity makes change evident. It is in just such a coexistence of ideas that cultural epochs are formed. I wish to convey a sense of epoch.

The stable and the transient coexist in a manner that makes it possible to ask, with respect to almost anything, how much change has taken place. This is a very general, ordinary and otherwise unremarkable kind of question. It

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seems to lead naturally to further questions about what should be conserved and what should be reformed. It also exerts a presence in certain academic ways of thinking, where the relationship between change and continuity is often spelled out with considerable explicitness. Let me illustrate the general idea through a particular example.

Take attitudes towards the natural world. When what varies seem to be the different meanings that different historical periods have put on it, or the different effects of diverse social practices, then 'nature' itself appears an enduring, even timeless, phenomenon. In Keith Thomas's (1984) detailed account of the dramatic changes that occurred in the idea of nature in England between 1500 and 1800, the reference point throughout remains the countryside and its plants and wild and domestic animals. This means, of course, that Alan Macfarlane (1987), with an equal order of detail, can trace a traditional love of nature back to medieval England and argue the reverse thesis: far from there having been radical change, one finds consistent antecedents to contemporary attitudes. His evidence includes the longstanding English obsession with gardening, and their habit of keeping animals as pets. The observations are not trivial. Macfarlane points to an intimate connection between these characteristics of the English and the individualism of their modern kinship system, a connection that, he claims, has roots in English society for as long as records go back. The cultural preconditions for later changes were always there. It is the extent of the continuity that is impressive, in his view, rather than the extent of change.

Whether or not there have been changes on the face of the countryside, or in ideas about the environment, the concept of nature thus remains a constant fact in the debate. One can therefore dispute as to whether activities and attitudes in relation to it have altered or have stayed the same over the course of time. The result is that change and continuity become measurable entities insofar as each appears to have had more or less effect on the same object. The one may be conceived as a quantifiable (how much, to what extent) constraint on the other.

Now an academic debate such as this, about the relative *amount* of change and continuity, is consonant with that mid-twentieth-century mode of scholarly theorising known as 'social constructionism'. The theory is that what is constructed is 'after' a fact. It is proved in the way people can be seen to fabricate their world and in the models they build of it, and offers a kind of autoproof, since it knows itself as a model also. In this theory that is also a model, values can be seen as constructions after social facts, or societies can be seen as constructions after natural facts. What becomes quantifiable is the amount of human activity ('construction') that has taken place. Implicit in the theory/model is the assumption that change is a mark of activity or endeavour whereas continuity somehow is not.

But I propose we disarm the antithesis between change and continuity of its

quantifiable power. Instead of thinking what they measure, we might think how each depends on the other to demonstrate its effect. Magnifying one is to magnify both. I write with the hindsight that, over the span of an epoch, the English have brought the most radical changes on their heads by striving most vehemently to preserve a sense of continuity with the past. And have in the process revolutionised the very concept of nature to which they would probably prefer to be faithful.

The scholars' social-constructionist model of the world contains more than the idea that society is built up after, or out of, elements other than itself (natural entities such as reproductive individuals and primordial sentiments or units such as parental pairs and families). It also incorporates the idea that, in working upon and modifying the natural world, human artifice must at the same time remain true to its laws and to that extent imitate it. I suspect that this concatenation of ideas is borrowed from, as much as it describes, models more generally held. The academic debate to which I alluded, between the anthropologically minded historian (Thomas) and the historian-anthropologist (Macfarlane), leads us to an area where such models are to be found: kinship.

The anthropological study of kinship since mid-Victorian and Edwardian times, as well as the (indigenous) models held by others of the social class from which by and large the authors of such studies came, has drawn heavily on the idea that kinship systems are also after the facts, and specifically after certain well-known facts of nature.¹ The facts, it is held, are universal whereas ideas about kinship obviously vary. In this view, for instance, cultural dogmas differ in the extent to which they recognise biological connection, social classes in the extent to which they emphasise maternal and paternal roles, and historical periods in the emphasis given to family life. In short, societies or sections of society differ in the way they handle the same facts. This is an axiom or assumption that is as much part of English kinship thinking as it is of social constructionist theorising about it. I capitalise on the thought that making this implicit assumption explicit has already deprived it of its axiomatic and paradigmatic status.

The epoch in question covers a span of modern Western thought of particular interest to anthropology, following the hundred years or so after Lewis Henry Morgan's endeavours of the 1860s. Among other things, its practitioners were interested in quantification – not just in enumeration and statistical patterning but in whether whole cultures might have 'more' or 'less' culture (the yardsticks of civilisation), or groups evince 'more' or 'less' cohesion (indices of solidarity), or persons be symbolised as 'more' or 'less' close to nature (women's distance from social centrality). One might think of the modern epoch as pluralist, then, and its successor as postplural in character.

That there has been a succession and that this epoch is superseded is one of

my themes. At least, I hope to show one of the ways in which such successions happen by contriving a postplural vantage point from which to look back to a modern one. The motive lies in a thwarted ambition.

For some time, it had been my ambition to write a counterpart to David Schneider's *American Kinship* (1968): a cultural account of English kinship. However, coming to the task more than two decades later was to realise that times had changed. The twin constructs on which Schneider was confident enough to premise his analysis of American kinship were not to be identified with such transparency. These were the order of Nature and the order of Law, the order of Law referring to human organisation, *viz.* Society or Culture. They had appeared to Schneider to constitute major dimensions of American thinking about kinship in the 1960s, and indeed were indigenous exemplifications of constructs on whose basis anthropology had developed its disciplinary force over the previous century. The social or cultural construction of kinship had always been a special instance of the general manner in which human beings constructed societies and cultures 'out of' nature. Indeed, the development of specifically anthropological models of human life had thus gone hand in hand with the elucidation of kinship systems. I believe this was equally true of British as it was of American anthropology.

Now I had deliberately wished to avoid a 'social' account in favour of a 'cultural' one. In the mid-twentieth century, these terms coded a significant difference between British and American anthropology. However, my cultural interest stemmed, I thought, not from a desire to Americanise my anthropology but from a desire to bring to light certain assumptions that seemed to inhere in British approaches to kinship.² The social anthropological models of kinship so well nurtured in Britain in the mid-century, and so illuminating in relation to non-Western societies, seemed after all to obscure rather than clarify things when it came to elucidating the English. I had in my mind an alternative cultural account because, whatever it was that gave this subtitle to Schneider's work, the twin constructs of Nature and Law were there to be unpacked as premises both of the indigenous English model and of the (British) anthropological studies that sought to describe it. I think in retrospect I had been interestingly naive; or rather, that I am (a cultural) exemplar of the processes that made me write this book.

It is widely the case in contemporary Britain that one's sense of time or change may also be sensed as the Americanisation of the English. Yet in my own case it is not just home-grown conceptualisations of kinship that have come to seem insufficient, *so too* do Schneider's motivating constructs. Neither seeing the English through models developed for non-Western systems, nor seeing them through that particular cultural model of American kinship, will quite do today. And these constructions appear insufficient for one simple reason. They are now visible from the point of view of their previously taken-for-granted assumptions.

The process that leads to the displacement of analytical models, an outcome

of deliberate endeavour on the part of scholars, matches or is an analogy for similar processes in Western (Anglo-Euro-American) social life at large. In fact, anthropologists collapse this analogy when they claim (as they often do) that earlier anthropological accounts are informed by the general social and cultural precepts of their times. What was implicit, and not seen then, is thereby made explicit, and is seen now. Making things explicit I refer to as a practice of literalisation, that is, a mode of laying out the coordinates or conventional points of reference of what is otherwise taken for granted. One effect of literalisation is to realise that describing a process of construction is itself a construction of sorts. This is the autoproof of social constructionism.

Literalisation entails, so to speak, a half-movement; its complement is the recreation of what must be taken for granted and thus apprehended essentially or figuratively for its intrinsic qualities. But the constant opening out of the conventions upon which human endeavour is seen to rest has had such an emphatic place in Anglo-Euro-American discourse precisely for the emphasis given to the role of human construction in the making of society and culture. It is this *particular* investment in the efficacy of 'construction' that leads students of social life to make evident to themselves the basis of their own particular constructions.

Consider the revelations of change and continuity. What we might take as characteristically typical, a product of some continuous and taken-for-granted identity, may well be revealed as equally the product of specific historical times and thus of change. Such an opening out or literalisation of the typical as belonging to one particular period rather than another recreates in turn the taken-for-granted idea that it is, after all, historical periods that are distinctive by what typifies them.

There is one specific move towards literalisation whose effect I wish to make explicit: in the currently prevalent idea that nature and culture are both cultural constructions, the one term (culture) seems to consume the other (nature). We might put it that an antithesis between nature and culture as it might have shaped certain discourses in English life has become flattened; if so, it is flattened in a mode specific to the late twentieth century, and one that has indeed had an interesting effect as far as culture is concerned. This may be illustrated in the awkwardness of a recent critique of mine (Strathern 1988). My objection there was to the way the distinctions between Nature and Culture, Society and Individual, had in the past been attributed unthinkingly to the symbolic systems of certain non-Western peoples. The critique may well be justified, but I could not account for the uneasy status that culture retained in my own analysis. Culture in the sense of system or organisation was easy to make explicit as an analytical device; but the narrative was left taking for granted culture in the sense of a distinctiveness of style or imagery. Crudely, the conundrum is an outcome of an excess of sorts. The excess is that of cultural critique.

Culture exceeds itself (Nature vanishes) and, outcultivated, Culture is

manifest as style. And an excess of individualism? Does Society also vanish; will the Individual become visible only in the exercise of an agency where all is choice? Excesses of style and choice may appear an obvious process of Americanisation from an 'English' point of view. Yet holding that view is equally a process of Anglicisation.

While much of what I say applies to Anglo-Euro-American or Western culture in general, such culture is only lived in specific forms. None of us lives generalised lives, generalise as we might about life as such, and I take English as one form. In any case, the English are adepts at literalisation – a penchant

Why do I prefer that we in Britain should take the route of expansion through diversification and differentiation? Most profoundly, because it seems to me to be the one which is natural to us. Historically, traditionally, Britain is a bottom-up, not a top-down society. We should build on our national genius, on what comes naturally to us. We do best when we avoid the abstract intellectual construct, the grand design. We do much, much better when the practical intelligence of the many is applied at the level where, in this case, the students are taught and the research is done. This is the way I hope British higher education will grow in the next quarter century.

1 *The Secretary of State for Education, 1989*

Extract from a speech by the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Kenneth Baker "Higher Education: the next 25 years". *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. 13 January 1989.

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they share with Euro-Americans becomes a posture in their commitment to the ideals of empiricism and practical action. The stereotype of pragmatism³ has an element of persuasion in it. They apparently love the literal-minded. Their fantasies are about 'the real world' – only clear away the assumptions and you will get to the truth; only clear away the constructions and you will get to the facts.

Making the implicit explicit is a mode of constructing knowledge which has been an engine for change for more than a hundred years. It has also produced an internal sense of complexity and diversity. But to make explicit *this* mode has its own effect: the outliteralisation of the literal-minded. I suspect something similar to this particular literalising move has been behind the prevalent sense of a now that is after an event. This sense of being after an event, of being post-, defines the present epoch.

The single most significant event in question is the earlier modern epoch, when constructions were instead after a fact – the facts of reality, nature or procreation – and where human endeavour bore the imprint of a complex enterprise. This was the epoch that produced the scholars' social constructionism. Anthropology was the discipline that uncovered the quantity of enterprise in human endeavour everywhere. It is its own enterprise that is now made visible, and 'after' the facts has come to mean after the facts have ceased to be quantifiable. We know today that there are as many of them as we care to make. Hence this book is written from hindsight. It deals with the modern epoch from the vantage point of its displacement. The result is no more than a teleology that extends back from the present and in asking about how things appear in the late twentieth century attends only to their possible antecedents.

The following coordinates may be useful to the reader.⁴ Modernists characterised English society as complex or plural, a product of long history and much change. The typical was timeless, and tradition or continuity implied homogeneity; change implied innovation, the introduction of foreign elements, heterogeneity, in short, diversity. Hindsight tells us that it was, of course, the sense of continuity which was subject to change, and all that was necessary to transform a tradition was to bring it into the present and give it a contemporary place. (The stylistic re-introduction of 'traditional' forms that constitutes postmodernism in art and architecture presents this as a revelation.) It was simply a matter of valuing one's already established values. In fact all that was necessary to transform ones' values was to value them in such a way as to make explicit (to oneself) their context or basis. In thereby making the implicit explicit, one took away that axiomatic status and created new taken-for-granted assumptions for excavation. With hindsight we can further see that, as a model of knowledge, such a practice offered a constantly receding horizon of what there was to know: one could seek to know more about something by investigating its context or the assumptions on which its assumptions were grounded.

That modern dimension of grounding or context in turn yielded a sense of perspective, the 'point of view' from which an entity was seen. One could always gain a new perspective by providing a new context for what was being observed. There were thus as many points of view as there were facets of social and cultural, including scientific, life. *This plurality was a given*, and complex society awarded itself the ability to superimpose perspectives (self-conscious 'constructions') upon a plurality inherent in the nature of things.

British anthropology participated in that literalising endeavour. Its claims to attention rested on the dual skills of putting things into (social and cultural) context, and in making implicit (cultural and social) assumptions explicit. It also claimed kinship as a particular domain of expertise and activity. Again with hindsight one can see that it nonetheless ran into problems when it came to dealing with kinship in its culture of origin: there was too intimate a connection between anthropological theories of kinship and indigenous constructs. The connection can be turned to use. In thinking about what English kinship was to become, I propose to use British anthropological kinship theory and English kin constructs as mutual perspectives on each other's modernisms. This necessarily deprives each of its perspectival completeness.

The processes by which the English produced a sense of complexity for themselves were alarmingly simple. But, like simple computer viruses, they could proliferate at speed through the social machinery. In showing the way literalisation constantly produced fresh perspectives, one has said all that need be said about the mechanism by which we once imagined ourselves in a complex world.

The effects were everywhere. The mechanism might be simple, but the products or results were innumerable. Thus when members of a complex society compared it with that of others, they could think of themselves both as producing 'more' individualistic individuals (more subjectivity), and as providing 'more' cultural and social contexts in which to act (more institutions).⁵ In the account that follows, I give recent examples of simple proliferations of form – the shapes that ideas and values and idioms take. The material will appear inevitably disparate, out of scale even, an observation about kitchens in London illustrated by office designs in Manchester; an introduction to the field of English kinship [in Chapter One] offering observations drawn from quite disjunct levels. The immediate effect may suggest plurality taken to excess; but the disparateness is not quite what it seems. It is with postplural vision that the pluralism of the preceding epoch becomes evident.⁶

Illustrations have been selected widely but not at random. I have hoped both to make it evident that the observations that apply to kinship or to anthropological study are not applicable only to these domains and to draw in issues in the management of present-day political and social life from which neither kinship nor anthropology is isolated. At the same time I have also

hoped to suggest that such free-ranging access, such apparent freedom of choice, in the end turns the sense of plurality into an artefact of access or choice itself. An approximation to the insight, then, of what it might be like to belong to a culture whose next imaginative leap is to think of itself as having nothing to construct. It would not, after all, be after anything.