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Other Examples

Serge Tcherkezoff

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Introduction

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I

*Right/left oppositions and
the 'pre-eminence of the right hand'*

The opposition between the categories of 'right' and 'left' is a familiar and quasi-universal feature of the 'symbolic' classifications of human societies. A given object, depending upon its nature, is placed upon the right or left of a house. A human being, depending upon whether he or she is a man or a woman, is buried lying on his or her right or left side. A different status is accorded to the places on the right and left of the master of ceremonies or host at feasts and banquets. Still more generally, people take care not to confuse the gestures which should be carried out with the right hand with those which involve the left hand. There is, for example, an opposition between amorous caresses and bodily hygiene or, in the case of our own customs, one can distinguish between a respectful greeting, where one invariably uses the right hand, and a friendly wave, where either hand may be used.

Oppositions of this kind were already being studied in the late nineteenth century, and scholars were mainly concerned to account for the special value accorded the right hand. Research was not, however, concerned with the social aspects of this one-sided attribution of value. It aimed, rather, to add further refinements to natural explanation. Thus, in accord with Professor Broca's findings, an asymmetrical development of the nervous centres was held to render the greater skill of the right side inevitable: 'We are right-handed because we are left-brained' (Hertz 1960, p.90).

There has long been a sociological awareness of these problems, for Robert Hertz's study of 1909 (1970), in which he linked the 'Pre-eminence of the right hand' with the study of 'religious polarity', followed on the heels of the medical debates of the 1890s. What is the point of reconsidering these questions now? Once Robert Hertz had highlighted the sociological aspect of the problem by noting that societies did not correct the slight natural inequality of the two hands but rather persecuted the left hand quite openly, so

despising it that 'right-handedness' became an 'ideal to which everybody must conform' (p. 93), and once Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) had shown how the 'savage mind' used binary oppositions in classificatory schemas, a firm framework for the solution of this question would seem to have been found, one which would simply require a range of further illustrative examples.

But to accept this resolution of the problem would be to disregard the vast and shifting domain which Hertz, by placing the right/left opposition on the same level as the sacred/profane 'religious polarity', had discovered. Recent writers have thus thought to use it as the basis for a theory of the 'political' and the 'religious'. As I shall show below, it was Rodney Needham who argued for this extension of the question, in 1960. There was, however, something reductive about this contribution. Hertz's article did undoubtedly suggest a possible extension of the debate, but in a different direction. It called upon researchers to give a more precise account of the manner in which classifications are defined by a particular social norm, i.e. in Hertz's terms, by the *variable* form of the 'sacred/profane' relation.

Indeed, Hertz had argued (pp. 93–4) that one should study the complex relation between the general *École Sociologique* model (the sacred/profane opposition) and the particular symbolic realisations which assume a dualist form. On the one hand, there would be a duality of *principles* which were interconnected and which assumed various forms, with either one being liable to encompass a particular aspect of the other, depending upon the site of the ritual and the identity of the actor. On the other hand, there would be symbolic figures which, Hertz asserted, tend to form two complementary series. But this latter simplification, which is attributable to the limited nature of the data available to the author, has in turn been applied to the sacred/profane dualism. Researchers have noted the existence, in the case of Africa in particular, of binary right/left structures, and have hastily constituted them as two juxtaposed and compartmentalised paradigms, inferring that a similar symmetry is applicable to the sacred/profane opposition. These two principles are then reduced to a complementarity of two 'powers', which the two hands reflect.

This would seem to be the path that several English researchers have followed in their attempts to develop Hertz's pioneering study of right/left categories. The most important work in this area was done by Needham. His analysis of the Meru of Tanzania reopened the debate in 1960 and in 1967 he published a detailed analysis of

Right/left oppositions

5

Nyoro symbolism and announced his intention of bringing out a collection of articles on this topic (cf. Needham 1960, 1967). The collection appeared in 1973, with a long introduction by Needham himself. Its title, *Right and left*, shows quite clearly that it is concerned with the same material as Hertz was. But the conclusion of the 1960 article, which was to serve as a point of reference for subsequent researches, was devoted to a 'wider' theoretical significance' . . . related to the 'studies of Georges Dumézil'. In the last analysis, it is the opposition between 'political power' and 'religious authority' which is studied in this article, and which serves as a working hypothesis in the following article (1967), as Needham notes in his introduction to it. Several of the contributors to *Right and left* do not extend the argument in this manner, and do not attempt to define two 'powers'. The majority of them, however, acknowledge the validity of the binary method in the study of classifications, and this is a problem in itself.

This debate is therefore a fundamental one. It touches upon the articulation between what we term 'power' and the 'sacred'; it undermines ethnocentric approaches to the balance of powers and counter-powers (king/priest; chief/orator in Polynesia); consequently, it emphasises the distinction between the principle of symmetry and the principle of hierarchy; it raises the question of the expression of values in the 'symbolism' of a society. In short, it suggests a possible theory of the symbolic.

Evans-Pritchard, in his preface to *Right and left*, implies that, although the road is long, there are already a good number of markers along the way. If we are to assess this claim, we will need to present a detailed analysis of the distance covered by Needham as he moves from Hertz's 'religious polarity' to the dichotomy in Meru symbolism. This trajectory provides the occasion for the emergence of what will be called the *binary method*, where dualism becomes a simple logical complementarity which leaves no room for contradiction. This is a crucial point. All accounts of traditional classification point to the existence of contradictions, but modern logic finds them unacceptable. In 1966, Victor Turner, a specialist in symbolic anthropology with a wide experience of the subtle configurations of traditional thought, chose to interpret the variety of values assumed by the colour black in the Ndembu world in terms of a difference of contexts, and not in terms of a difference of levels of value within the unity of one and the same system of representations (Turner 1966).

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[More information](#)

6

Introduction

Thus, from Hertz's essay at the turn of the century up to the present day, those analysing dualist classifications have sought to discover, behind empirical variety, a coherence based upon unity and upon the non-contradiction of the signifier–signified relation. But one does not have to cast 'savage thought' in the very particular mould of our own logical models in order to acknowledge its coherence. If we set aside our *a priori* assumptions, we find that 'savage thought' in fact enables us to grasp the peculiarity of modern scientific thought. I shall thus attempt to show that reversal is not a 'contradiction', but rather a commonplace and basic figure of the *hierarchical* thought which characterises holistic societies (see below).

Before examining the development of Needham's argument, I shall briefly summarise Hertz's position. Hertz's study contains several different lines of argument, and is not simply concerned with the complementarity of the universal series of right and left. In order to criticise Needham's approach I will have to refer to the Meru ethnography. Of course, if I am to substantiate my criticism of the binary method, and advance an analysis *in terms of levels*, I shall obviously go on to invoke other examples also. Yet I do not regard an analysis in terms of levels as just another analytic strategy, which would be necessary for certain societies but which would not invalidate the binary method in other cases. Indeed, when one subjects the dualist oppositions presented in Needham's study to close scrutiny, it would seem to be just as difficult to apply a principle of symmetry to Meru symbolism as it would be to that of other non-modern societies.

I shall extend my investigation of Hertz's and Needham's arguments by considering the symbolic classification of the Nyamwezi-Sukuma of Tanzania, which, though little known, is well documented and resembles the Meru one. I shall not give an exhaustive account of their system of thought here but shall confine myself to a brief summary. If we consider a few of the oppositions often invoked in studies of dualism (right/left, male/female, even/odd, black/white and, in addition, king/priest), we find that we cannot construct a binary table without seriously distorting the system. Indeed, if one refrains from imposing a binary choice upon the symbols (to the left *or* to the right), one becomes aware of *hierarchical* constructions. The poles of each opposition are not in the same relation to the whole to which they refer. Different values organise hierarchised symbolic levels. Passing from one context to another

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Right/left oppositions*

7

will therefore sometimes involve a *change of level*, and *reversal* will be meaningful too. For the Nyamwezi, a major hierarchy of references organises the whole set, namely, the opposition between the local principle of reference to close, named ancestors and the global principle of reference to royal ancestors, between the single dimension, which signifies incompleteness, and the double dimension, which presents itself as a *totality* uniting asymmetrical opposites. The figure of the twin is one expression of this duality.

Dogon symbolic classification lends credence to this perspective, for it also opposes the inadequacy of singularity to the sense of completion that duality offers. For the Dogon, however, twins are not just one instance of this duality but the actual principle of duality. Germaine Dieterlen implies that ‘complementarity’ (a pair of twins of opposite gender) is not a logical operation but a *value* which underlies the whole set of representations (Dieterlen 1968). This value therefore organises a range of different and hierarchised levels.

The binary method does not therefore seem to be appropriate to the analysis of systems of classification organised in terms of right and left. Yet the Nyamwezi example also serves to show that this debate has still wider ramifications. In opting for a hierarchical analysis, as against the binary method, one is not simply employing a more rational instrument of analysis. A hierarchical analysis allows one to consider values. Are ‘symbolic’ classifications the expression of a logical coherence whose *universal* rationality may immediately be apprehended in terms of European categories, or do they require another approach, involving an emphasis upon the particular values of a given society? In order to answer this question, I shall have to extend the terms of the debate and consider Chinese and Osage examples of classification.

I had no choice but to refer to these examples, given the elegant studies on the question of right and left by Marcel Granet and Francis La Flesche, which Needham took care to place at the beginning of the collection of articles published in *Right and left*. Together with Hertz’s study, these two articles represent, historically, the first statement of the problem. La Flesche, in 1916, and Granet, in 1933, had, through their choice of terms and their use of examples, provided a basic outline of the discussion. Furthermore, the Osage and, in more general terms, the Sioux, have a key part to play in the development of Lévi-Strauss’s theory of classification. The reader may recall his denunciation, in 1956, of the ‘dualist

illusion' (Lévi-Strauss 1968). Yet, in reading Lévi-Strauss's account, one finds oneself wondering whether the error of those who favoured the notion of binary division did actually consist in their not having grasped that dualism, triadism or classification in terms of n dimensions together constitute a transformation group, or whether there is not, over and above their failure to apprehend the whole structure, a still more blatant refusal to relinquish Western European categories of equality and symmetry and an extreme reluctance to come to terms with the hierarchical mode of thought of non-modern societies. The latter represents a difficult but vital task for comparative anthropology, as Louis Dumont (1978) has stressed.

This reluctance to acknowledge the role of hierarchy has many repercussions. It causes anthropologists to place undue emphasis upon universal mental structures and to cast out a part of ceremonial life into the domain of 'belief'. By comparison, those who adopt a hierarchical perspective and thereby constantly refer to the whole, are able to account for the particular values of a given society, for its choices and for its 'ideology'.

A proper recognition of *hierarchical opposition* is vital not only for any interpretation of 'the pre-eminence of the right hand' (or of the left hand), but also for the analysis of ritual. Once the variety of symbolic configurations comes to be interpreted in terms of differences of level within a single system of representations, there is no longer any need to invoke an 'anti-structure' in order to account for the existence of 'abnormal' figures. Reversal, for example, does not refer to such an anti-structure, and 'rites of reversal' are not always 'rituals of rebellion' or stagings of a 'cathartic' resolution of tensions. More generally, structural analysis would seem to be capable of reconciling the search for a global *meaning* with a consideration of the *functions* performed by the various parts. But 'meaning' here involves a hierarchy of values, and the 'functions' involve articulations between the different levels of values.

SYMMETRY AND HIERARCHY

It may help to make my exposition clearer if I now attempt to give a more precise account of the nature of relations between right and left. I shall distinguish between the epithets 'dualist' and 'binary', reserving the former for the simple apprehension of the existence of two poles and using the second where a logical condition is entailed:

Right/left oppositions

9

the relation is symmetrical, or else asymmetrical but complementary, but always remaining on *one and the same plane*. Some studies do not even raise the question of symmetry or non-symmetry, left and right simply serving to name distinctions. In these analyses, a society's symbolism assumes the form of a dichotomous table in which two columns enable one to connect the contrasted items. Whether the author intends this mode of exposition to represent the actual nature of the situation or to have a merely methodological value, it clearly reflects an equalitarian bias.

If, on the other hand, one is concerned with the asymmetry of the relation, one stresses the difference in value between each of the poles. Different emphases may then appear. Some writers insist upon the complementarity of opposites, whilst omitting to study the sole thing which enables one to appreciate (and to represent) a difference in value, namely, the question of *reference*. The union of complementary pairs may sometimes even look like simple arithmetical addition.

If, however, one does not exclude the possibility of their being different planes (*levels*), asymmetry will seem *hierarchical*. An opposition a/b , where a is 'superior' in a given context, expresses two facts: a is posited as value, as idea-value ('we say or do that' = 'we *must* say or do that'), and b is then subordinated to it as its contrary. In Dumont's terms, b is 'encompassed'. There is not simply a linear succession of strata from b to a , a gradation one would follow from the lower to the higher floor. Where something is encompassed by something else, i.e. where there is hierarchy, a new relation is established. The discrepancy between the two terms gives rise to a *tension*, which takes the form of a series of dichotomies in which hierarchy may become less strongly defined, in which the asymmetry may be reversed, or in which combinations with other oppositions may appear.

We then have to think in terms of different levels. *Reversal* ($a > b \rightarrow b > a$), far from being a contradiction, as it would be in our European logic, which is of a mathematical kind, then becomes operative, and indicates a change in level. A change in ritual context and a change in level in the order of values occur when reversal affects one and the same frame of reference. Thus, when a man passes from the pure to the impure pole, he may switch hands for a particular activity. There is also a change in level when the frame of reference itself changes. A Nyamwezi woman may thus, as she moves from a local reference to her own father's lineage to the global

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reference that marriage implies in her society, shift from a plane where the left position is valorised to a plane where the right position is valorised.

Lastly, I will discuss *totalisation*. To pass from a domain in which one is left or right, man or woman, to one in which a conjunction of opposites appears, is to pass from a plane involving single elements to that of the whole set (where this latter is not the sum of the elements but is something that preexists any conceptualisation of the parts and gives these latter their meaning). We shall see how, among the Nyamwezi, $2 + 3$ makes 5 in a very particular fashion, just as the conjunction man + woman implies the level at which kingship symbolises the whole of the society. The totalising level, the level of the whole set, differs from that (or those) at which the elements are located. One has to conceive of 'five' as being a 'whole' which preexists its dissolution into $2 + 3$. It is not the result of an addition. Among the Osage, $6 + 7$ is to 13 what the moieties are to the whole of the tribe. This totalisation, to employ the term used by Lévi-Strauss himself in relation to the Osage '13', must not however obliterate the hierarchies $2/3$ or $7/6$, for these elements are in a differential relation to the whole which is 5 or 13.

It is thus, I hope, clear that the 'hierarchy' with which we are concerned here is in no sense a gradation of substances or a stratification of social groups. It is in fact a question of values. My own study of the logic of dualist oppositions will therefore follow the definition that Louis Dumont, on the basis of a comparative analysis, has given of the term 'hierarchy':

It is immediately obvious that there are two mutually opposed configurations of this kind: one is characteristic of traditional societies and the other of modern society. In the first ... the stress is placed on the society as a whole, as collective Man; the ideal derives from the organisation of society with respect to its ends (and not with respect to individual happiness); ... In modern society, on the contrary, the Human Being is regarded as the indivisible 'elementary' man ... Each particular man in a sense incarnates the whole of mankind. He is the measure of all things ... What is still called 'society' is the means, the life of each man is the end ... (Dumont 1970, p. 9)

... most societies value, in the first place, order: the conformity of every element to its role in the society – in a word, the society as a whole; this is what I call 'holism'. On the other hand, other societies – at any rate ours – value, in the first place, the individual human being ... This is what I call 'individualism' ... On the logical plane, holism implies hierarchy and individualism implies equality ... (Dumont 1977a, p. 4).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Right/left oppositions*

11

Indeed, in a system in which an element is only defined by the place that it occupies in relation to the whole, two elements which are different cannot have one and the same place. Valorisation of the 'whole' implies a hierarchy of elements. If, on the other hand, one encounters a pair of distinct elements occupying one and the same position, they can no longer be defined by their 'place' in the whole set but only by their intrinsic differences, by their 'substance'. Equality, the antinomy of hierarchy, thus brings about individuality.

What is the nature of these 'elements'? They are ideas and values which constitute the ideological system as a whole. The etymology of 'hierarchy' implies that it is an 'order of the sacred', an order of ultimate values. Likewise, 'individualism' is based upon the individual as *value*. In order to clarify this point, we need to be aware of a fundamental fact which Dumont, on the basis of an observation by Talcott Parsons, has emphasised:

the sociologist Talcott Parsons has the great merit of having brought fully to light the universal rationale of hierarchy (I have italicised certain words): 'We conceive *action* to be oriented to the attainment of certain goals, and hence to involve *selective* processes relative to goals. Seen in their relations to goals, then, all the components of systems of action and of the situations in which action takes place, are subject to the process of *evaluation* . . . *Evaluation* in turn has, when it operates in the setting of social systems of action, two fundamental implications. First the units of systems, whether they are elementary acts or roles, collectivities or personalities, must in the nature of the case be subject to *evaluation* . . . But given the process of evaluation, the probability is that it will serve to differentiate entities *in a rank order* . . . The second implication is the well-known one that it is a condition of the stability of social systems that there should be an *integration of the value-standards* of the component units to constitute a "*common value-system*" . . . In other words, man does not only think, he acts. He has not only ideas, but values. To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, and a certain consensus of values, a certain hierarchy of ideas, things and people [on the plane of status] is indispensable to social life. This is quite independent of natural inequalities or of the distribution of power (Dumont, 1970, pp. 19–20).

The hierarchy of values thus possesses a 'universal rationality'. If modern society is unaware of this fact, it is on a specific plane, which does not render the preceding assertion contradictory but instead enables one to set up a comparative perspective: 'A society as conceived by individualism has never existed anywhere for the