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1 Nature, culture and gender: a critique

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I

Categories and transformations

This is an exploration of the belief that human beings differ from animals and its corollary that culture is distinct and contrasted with nature. We are also concerned with the question of metaphoric transformations of the nature–culture contrast into raw–cooked or wild–tame. More controversially, we will explore the possibility that the female–male contrast can be understood as a further metaphoric transformation of an allegedly universal nature–culture contrast (Ortner 1974 and Ardener 1975). However, we are not only concerned with stark categories or metaphoric clusters of contrasts standing in wooden opposition to each other, but will also consider how we conceive of nature becoming culture; the process by which we feel we became human. Or, as formulated by Rousseau, how we passed from a state of nature to become beings with language and culture.

Following Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss attributes this transition to our capacity for culture rather than to the manifestations of culture itself (Wokler 1978:126). From our capacity to make discriminations, such as between 'us' as a kin category and 'other', and our ability to know rules of incest avoidance and marriage exogamy, we are capable of the Rousseau-esque social contract in which we give up a state of nature, which means incest and the social isolation of small kin groups, for reciprocating kin ties and social contracts with others (Badcock 1975). To exist as a species we must eat, copulate, and meet other basic animal needs. To do so is 'natural' in that it is necessary for all animals. Whereas most basic human needs must be met or the *individual* will die, and they can be satisfied individually, procreative sex is not necessary to maintain the life of individuals but of *societies*, and that need cannot be met individually but requires paired

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opposites: male and female. Sexuality is natural but becomes cultural with incest prohibitions and rules of marriage exogamy (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:30).

From the rule to give 'us' (siblings) and receive 'other' (spouse) follows further patterned exchanges in persons, goods and services, and information. Exchanges which manifest the structure of human society give clues to the structure of an ultimate human code. The foundation of an ultimate structure is the human ability to make binary distinctions (Lévi-Strauss 1978:22–3). By perceiving opposites or contrasts the mind builds up its perceptions of the world. One does not perceive light without knowing darkness, nor unvoiced fricatives without knowing voiced ones. But isolated contrasts are not an end in themselves, for the human mind seeks analogies with other contrastive phenomena and upon finding them encompasses the analogies into its system of classification. On a conscious level people are aware of concrete manifestations rather than the relations themselves, but for structuralists the unconscious tendency to perceive relations is fundamental to the mind.[1]

The first distinction all new-born humans make is that between self and nurturing other. Then, as children develop they begin to discern phonetic contrasts, expanding the scope of logical operations inherent in the nature of their minds. Animals have no sense of kin boundaries; have no incest taboo or other socially-transmitted rules. The capacity to know rules binding upon all individuals is essential for the formation of human society, and from this capacity to know and formulate rules comes marriage, social alliances, language, and reciprocities of all kinds (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:32–3). The original transformation from nature to culture is repeated as societies perpetuate themselves by their cultural rules.

Unconscious and conscious

Structuralists proceed upon the basis of belief that there is a single basic structure of binary thinking underlying all human mental functioning and behaviour, which can be discovered through orderly analysis informed by techniques of linguistic analysis. Once that structure is known it can help us understand the whole of human behaviour despite its manifest diversity. When the coding of the mind is known we will be able to decode the products of minds (Scheffler 1970:58).

Structuralist theory is inspired by linguistic theory, particularly by the work of de Saussure, who described language as a set of signs which could be studied in isolation from other cultural products. Language could be broken down into discrete elements, then one could examine the way the elements were combined to produce meaning. De Saussure expanded his

1 See Gardener (1976) for further discussion of this point, especially with reference to Lévi-Strauss and Piaget.

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enquiry to include forms of etiquette, military signals, rituals and other systems of meaning. In all these, one could develop abstract formal models of underlying structure.

Following from de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss sought the cause of kinship, myth and totemic classification in our intellectual nature which, at its deepest and most pan-human level, is largely unconscious, just as comprehension of phonetic opposites is systematic and rational even though we are unaware of them. Kinship and myth are analogous in structure to language and function as codes.[2]

Lévi-Strauss is not an Idealist for whom the mind embodies fundamental logical categories and final truths. He does indeed have a Kantian unconscious which combines and categorizes, but it is a categorizing system homologous with nature or is nature itself (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:11). It is located in the physical brain, with its capacity to constitute codes which we call culture (Lévi-Strauss 1978:8).

For Lévi-Strauss, 'the unconscious . . . is always empty – or more accurately it is akin to mental images as the stomach is to food which passes through it. As the organ of a specific function the unconscious merely imposes structural laws upon inarticulate elements which originate elsewhere' (Lévi-Strauss quoted in Jenkins 1979:14). The brain functions at this unconscious level to generate ordered systems of representations by placing the perceptions which pass through it into relations of contrast and opposition.

One of the great difficulties with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism is the nature of the link between these unconscious functions of the brain and the 'reality' structuralism is meant to explain. Lévi-Strauss locates fundamental structure at the deep level of unconscious function, and gives it an ontological status, or existence, of its own. But what is the exact relationship between the organizing work of the unconscious and the conceptual domain of social structure, political relations, and so forth? On this latter conscious level concepts and operational categories do their work of giving meaning to empirical perceptions. Either we can leave the relationship between the physical brain's function and the mind's work of conceptual model building unexplained, or we can unify them in one of two possible ways.

We might opt for a biological reductionism in which the emphasis is placed on the role of the physical brain. Indeed, much of Lévi-Strauss's thinking is reductionist. He uses nature in two senses; the phenomenological world as we perceive it, excluding culture. Nature then is the residual category of everything outside culture (Badcock 1975:98). But it is also human nature to which cultural codes are reduced and, as Leach has pointed

2 Lévi-Strauss (1978:53) has stated that myth and music are not merely analogous with language but are derived from language.

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out, Lévi-Strauss is caught in paradox. If he succeeds in identifying facts such as the incest taboo and rules of exogamy as universally true for humans, they must be natural. However, he assumes that the unique cultural quality of humanity rests on that which is not natural; on that which is socially transmitted and arbitrary in the way that symbol is to meaning in language (Leach 1970:121 and 1973:39). Thus, in one sense Lévi-Strauss reduced culture to biology; culture is nature, the physical brain and human nature. But in his later work, he suggested that the nature–culture contrast was an artificial creation of culture (1969a:xxxix), and was only a methodological device (1966:247).[3]

Schneider pushed the pendulum the rest of the way; culture is not nature, but nature is entirely a cultural concept (1972). We might regard all representations of structure as *concepts* of structure formulated at a conscious level through the process of model building (Jenkins 1979:36–7). In this book we are not concerned with an unknowable unconscious but with folk models of nature, culture and gender which are consciously expressed in particular societies. That is not to say that every member of the society in question can express a complete, coherent model. The observer must build it up from explicit statements, myths, symbols, modes of classification, and other observations (see chapter 8). Nor is there a single model which characterizes the thought of all people in a society. If we think of a model as a plan for action, for example in making marriage alliances, there may be different plans for action held by different groups with varying degrees of political power in the society. Or, we may think of normative and pragmatic models which actors hold simultaneously.

Scheffler has argued that all formal models should have three qualities: (1) simplicity, (2) consistency, and (3) they should be judged adequate and appropriate by the local people in question (1970:67). Lévi-Strauss dismisses the question of adequacy and correspondence with conscious models, regarding the conscious as a screen which may hide the deep structure (1963:281). Nutini has attempted to find a middle ground, suggesting that unconscious models and conscious models are not different in kind but in degree, and that we are dealing with a single model which is revealed by the most careful, detailed field work possible (1970:82). Leach has commented that when we begin the study of another culture we rapidly formulate a model with which to explain it, but the model is largely shaped by our own presuppositions and may not correspond at all to the conscious model in the minds of the native people. But as months go by and we learn

3 See Badcock (1975) for a fuller discussion, and a comparison of Lévi-Strauss's biological reductionism with that of Freud. In his later work, Lévi-Strauss writes of the ambiguity of nature. It is subcultural, but it is also the means through which man hopes to contact ancestors, spirits and gods. Thus, nature is also 'supernatural' (1977:320).

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the language and the thought patterns of the people, we radically revise the model. Those who work at a distance, from published ethnographic literature, and ethnographers who already 'know' the salient categories and their meaning before going to the field, are likely to give attention only to the phenomena that fit their presuppositions. Leach rejects Lévi-Strauss's definition of social anthropology as a branch of semiology with the internal logical structure of the meanings of sets and symbols as its central concern, looking instead for meaning in the actual social behaviour of human beings (1970:105).

Structuralist theory gives comprehensive explanations, but because it refers to the unconscious it is difficult to validate, while more empirically based theory is easy to validate but offers explanations which are less satisfying and often tautologous. Some observers have suggested that structurally-oriented social scientists model themselves after natural scientists, observing, describing, then constructing formal models with which to draw conclusions about the significance of that which they observed (Gardener 1976:4–7). Leach, however, speculates that Lévi-Strauss started at the other end by first asking himself: 'how is it and why is it that men, who are part of nature, manage to see themselves as "other than" nature even though, in order to subsist, they must constantly maintain "relations with" nature'? (1970:129). Lévi-Strauss observes that such things as the incest taboo or cooking are widespread, but not necessary to maintain life in the animal world. Therefore these things must be symbols 'by which culture is distinguished from nature in order that men might reassure themselves that they are not beasts' (Leach 1970:129). Others have also commented that Lévi-Strauss's method is not inductive but primarily deductive. He hypothesizes that in every myth he should find a structuring binary opposition which is not specific for only one version of the myth. Indeed, he does find it and often complementary pairs of oppositions as well (Pettit 1975:87–8).

'Nature' and 'culture' as cultural constructs

We do not wish to deny that binary contrasts are vital to human thought; it is the allegedly universal meanings given to some category nouns which concern us. Since the structuralist method seeks to reduce data to their symbolic structure, symbols are more real than the phenomena; the signifier is more important than the signified (Scholte 1974:428). But symbols such as nature or female have meanings attached to them which are culturally relative. Douglas, and Kirk, insist that content cannot be ignored; different versions of a myth, for example, cannot be reduced to a single structure (Douglas 1967:66 and Kirk 1970:78). Structuralist analysis should explain with reference to a particular myth how its meanings are

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produced and therefore explanation requires an understanding of the culture in which the myth arises.[4]

Thus, although Lévi-Strauss has attempted to cast the nature–culture contrast in a timeless, value-free model concerned with the working of the human mind, ideas about nature and culture are not value free. The 'myth' of nature is a system of arbitrary signs which relies on a social consensus for meaning. Neither the concept of nature nor that of culture is 'given', and they cannot be free from the biases of the culture in which the concepts were constructed (see chapters 2, 3). Our European ideas about nature and culture are fundamentally about our origins and evolution. The 'natural' is that which is innate in our primate heritage and the 'cultural' is that which is arbitrary and artificial. In our evolutionary history we have improved and constrained ourselves by creating our own artificial rule-bound order.

Our minds structure myth, and in a feedback loop myth instructs our perceptions of the phenomenological universe. Genesis, for example, sets humans in opposition to nature and promises us dominion over nature. With Protestantism, we come to take individual responsibility for the rational understanding and harnessing of nature. The myth in its present-day form reflects the faith of industrial society that society is produced by enterprising activity. Sahlins has expressed the opinion that 'development from a Hobbesian state of nature is the origin myth of Western capitalism' (1976a:52–3).[5] We allocate honour and prestige to people of science and industry who excel in understanding and controlling the powerful domain of nature. We also honour people who overcome animal urges, curbing these urges in accordance with moral codes. When women are defined as 'natural' a high prestige or even moral 'goodness' is attached to men's domination over women, analogous to the 'goodness' of human domination of natural energy sources or the libidinal energy of individuals. It seems quite logical for us now, in our Judaeo-Christian and industrial tradition, to link nature with wildness and with femaleness (Ardener 1975). However, even our own specific European intellectual history has not consistently linked the natural with wildness.

In the eighteenth century, nature was that aspect of the world which had been revealed through scientific scrutiny to have its predictable laws, but also that which was not yet mastered. Women were the repository of 'natural laws' and 'natural morality', but also that which was emotional and passionate, needing constraint within social boundaries (see chapters 2, 3). The opposed categories of nature and culture (or society) arose as part of

4 See Lévi-Strauss (1978:26ff.) for response to this criticism.
5 Sahlins (1976a:53) commented: 'So far as I know, we are the only people who think themselves risen from savages; everyone else believes they descended from gods.'

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a historically particular ideological polemic in eighteenth-century Europe; a polemic which created further contradictions by defining women as natural (superior), but instruments of a society of men (subordinate) (see chapter 2).

By the mid nineteenth century, evolutionary ideas provided a 'natural' explanation of gender differences. In 1861 Bachofen posited an ancient period of 'mother right' in which women ruled the state as well as the household, but were subdued by vigorous Roman patriarchy in classical times. McLennan in 1865 wrote of the stage in history when men captured and exchanged women, stressing the need for rules of exogamy and marriage alliance if human society was to be peaceful. Morgan in 1877 elaborately developed a matrilineal stage of human history, superseded by male control, a theme Engels took up in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884 (Lowie 1937:40ff.). Eighteenth-century ambiguity and contradictions persist into the twentieth century, and the simple nineteenth-century unilineal evolutionary model has been set aside. With this ambiguity and complexity at the heart of our European definitions, how can we agree that the following set of metaphors represent universal human cognative structure?

nature	:	culture
wild	:	tame
female	:	male

Structural models are dynamic in that they are concerned with becoming and transforming. Europeans have a concept of history, of literate accumulation, of progressive change over time, and a notion of genesis as the one and only beginning. We have the concept that one category can transform into another, with nature becoming culture, children through socialization becoming adults who marry exogamously, wild becoming domesticated, and raw becoming cooked. To a great extent, meaning for us depends upon 'becoming' (Wagner 1975). But our meanings are not found to be universally true, and some societies conceive of 'nature' as an immutable category incapable of transformation (see chapter 8). Lévi-Strauss stressed not just becoming, but dominating, with the social dominating the biological and the cultural dominating the natural (1969a:479). The slightly scrambled sequence of events in Genesis, for example, move from seething nature to man's dominion over nature, in accordance with moral rules.

Using a linguistic idiom, the passage from nature to culture is a greatly abbreviated syntagmatic chain of mythic units, forming a metonymic axis from left to right. Reading from top to bottom we have paradigmatic associations, or metaphoric transformation (Leach 1976:25–7):

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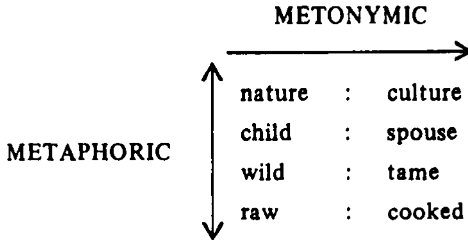
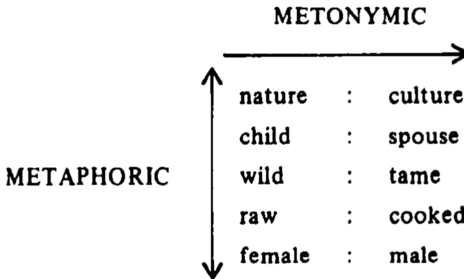


If we add gender to this set we achieve a non-sequitur:



In our European thought system gender provides two obvious categories of social differentiation but lacks the dynamic potential for transformation that other paired contrasts have. On the metonymic axis, in what sense can female become male as nature becomes culture? None, if we are to regard genders as immutable categories 'in nature'. But a case can also be made for gender categories 'in culture'. That is, they are socially constructed (Mathieu 1978). However, in cases where individuals choose to change their social identity it is not only females who take on male identity, but some males move to femaleness.

On the metaphoric axis we have already noted that at some periods of European history female was not exclusively identified with wild but with the harmonious repository of nature's laws. Ardener, in his account of the Bakweri, stresses the metaphor nature=wildness=female. But he tells us men are also associated with nature and wildness, in hunting and ritual, highlighting the problem of knowing which units of mythic text or observed behaviour are to be selected as manifestations of underlying structure.[6]

6 Ardener (1975:14): Men 'hunt on the mountain top away from all villages and farms, this is ritually expressed in the men's elephant dance'. We might conclude that the beast is in all of us, not just women, and the non-social=non-human=the wild=nature is a powerful metaphor for *human* contemplation. Ardener acknowledges La Fontaine's observation that men's wild usually stands for death and destruction while women's wild stands for agriculture and fertility (1975:16).

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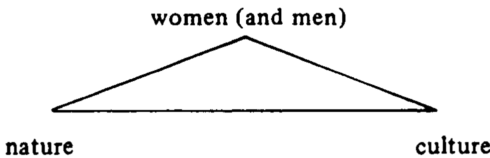
Some writers, following Lévi-Strauss, seem to be giving a greater weight of 'truth' to metaphoric associations than the concept of metaphor will bear. Words such as 'nature' are polysemic, having many implicit meanings. Metaphor is based upon a figurative, not a literal meaning of a word, thus the meaning of a word can be shaped or extended through metaphor. Menstruating women have cyclicity as nature does, therefore they are wild and untamable. But wildness can also be an implicit meaning of maleness. Because metaphor is based upon the polysemic and open nature of words it has great potential for both contradiction and for 'redescribing reality' and must not be taken as truth in any literal sense (Ricoeur 1978:169ff.). As Harris explains, although the Laymis of Bolivia make a series of associations that may lead us to conclude that wild is identified with female, Laymis themselves do not make that association. 'To apply "logical" procedures . . . is to forget that what are being compared are complex concepts, and that in each identification it is different and specific characteristics of these phenomena that are selected for comparison' (see chapter 4).

Much of the ethnographic literature suggests that rather than viewing women as metaphorically in nature, they (and men) might better be seen as mediating between nature and culture, in the reciprocity of marriage exchange, socializing children into adults, transforming raw meat and vegetable into cooked food, cultivating, domesticating, and making cultural products of all sorts.[7]



If we took an extreme position of defining women but not men as socializers, cultivators, cooks – as mediators between nature and culture – and if we viewed them in the structure of kinship as mediators between exogamous social groups, then we must look more closely at the attributes structuralists confer upon mediators. Because they can merge and reconcile opposites, mediators are deity or messiah and at the same time clown and trickster (Lévi-Strauss 1978:32–3). This definition is quite at odds with some structuralists' definition of women as simple, passive objects in kinship systems, pointing to yet another logical inconsistency in structuralist models.

The ethnographic literature does not justify the extreme position of

7 Ortner (1974) builds a theory of female as nature, but retreats from the extreme position by acknowledging women's role in mediating between nature and culture. See also Lévi-Strauss (1966:128).

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defining women but not men as mediators between nature and culture, nor does it uniformly equate women's attributes exclusively with those of nature. In the Mount Hagen area of Papua New Guinea, for example, people do not conceive a nature–culture contrast in the way Europeans do, and they attribute qualities to both men and women which Western structuralists would classify as natural and cultural (see chapter 8). Rather than concepts of nature and culture as we understand them, Hageners think with the categories of 'planted' (*mbo*) and 'wild' (*rømi*). 'Planted' refers to crops, breeding pigs and human beings rooted in clan territory; 'wild' refers to that which is solitary, exotic and non-human. Male–female categories are not consistent secondary discriminators. Hageners do use gender categories, with male representing that which is prestigious (*nyim*) and female that which is rubbish (*korpa*), but those categories are not explained by the difference between the planted and the wild.

Within the Hagen folk model nature does not become culture. The 'wild' is encountered and dealt with, but is not dominated, nor is it incorporated within culture, explained by 'natural' laws, robbed of its powers. It does not become with human 'progress' an ever-shrinking residual category. The power of the wild can be brought to bear on human activity precisely because it is antithesis to *mbo*. Similarly, in the Gimi area of Papua New Guinea nature is not devalued. Male essence is identified with the wild, its spirits and birds. *Kore* means forest, afterlife, and an honorific title of address for high status males. Gender distinctions are not so much the cold rational process of category discrimination Lévi-Strauss emphasizes, as the highly emotive matters of sexuality, birth, nurturing, eating and women's releasing men's spirit essence back into the forest as spirit/flute/bird; a matter ultimately concerned with men's dependence on women (see chapter 7).

There is no way to absolutely verify that the nature–culture opposition exists as an essential feature of universal *unconscious* structure, and there is ethnographic evidence to suggest that in the form in which Europeans now conceive it, the contrast is not a universal feature of consciously-held folk models. If we use the categories 'nature–culture' merely as a methodological device for ordering folk concepts which roughly approximate European meanings, then gender categories are not necessarily linked to them. Goodale's description of the Kaulong of New Britain gives the following metaphoric set (see chapter 6):

animal : human
reproduction : production
forest : garden : hamlet

The Kaulong do not have a strongly defined sexual division of labour. Both men and women develop their social identity by growing produce and acquiring other goods for exchange. Both are at the centre of their own network of cognatic kin, and trading partners. By contrast, reproduction is