

A Case against Functionalism

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In his explanations of moral rules, Montesquieu, who may be said to have been the first sociologist of morality, tacitly implied a certain thesis that was to be found by his successors right up to the present day. Formulated roughly, this thesis said that every moral rule or social custom serves some need. For example, Montesquieu attributed the polygyny found in certain societies to the fact that these societies had a surplus of women. In such a case polygyny was able to satisfy the sexual needs of a larger number of women. In other cases, according to the same author, polygyny was connected with the rapid aging of women in a hot climate. In this case, polygyny was to the advantage of the men, who felt the need to replace their older wives by younger women. Later authors explained polygyny by referring to economic needs, and showed that in some kinds of economy it was advantageous to have a larger number of wives. In some societies, where the chief had the privilege of being able to keep more than one wife, this form of polygyny served his recognized and exercised need for prestige.

Similar explanations may constantly be met with in modern authors. For instance, it has been said that Puritan morality suited the needs of the small business men, but no longer suits the needs of the white collar workers, who have had to adopt other personality patterns. It is well known that there are anthropologists who point out the usefulness of diverse superstitions, and declare that these superstitions could not have survived unless they had satisfied some need in the group which subscribed to them. C. Kluckhohn, for example, in his book on witchcraft among the Navajo Indians, tried to show that their magic practices reduced their anxieties and at the same time canalized their tendencies towards aggression. "Any cultural practice," he said, "must be functional, or it will disappear before long."¹ Here, "to be functional" means "to be eufunctional" as opposed to "dysfunctional," and the satisfying of needs is the satisfying of rational, accepted needs.

This opinion, as is well known, was also the opinion of B. Malinowski, who sometimes gave it the form of an empirical thesis which said that every moral, or even wider, every custom, always serves some need. On another occasion he formulated this opinion in the form of a methodological postulate, and enjoined research workers to look for this need, observing how a rule functions in the given society.

For our part, we are not interested here in the methodological postulate but in the empirical thesis. Its logical value depends completely on the concept of "need." If the word "need" is taken in a wide sense, this thesis cannot be falsified thus being theoretically sterile,

¹ C. Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man*, II Premier red. 1959, p. 28.

whereas if "need" is understood in a definite narrow sense, the thesis in a general form is false.

In the first and wider sense, need is a psychological concept. In this sense, everyone who desires something has a need. When the word is given this meaning, if we give rein to our imagination we can see a need behind every custom, and behind every rule that enjoins the observance of this custom. It has rightly been pointed out by some authors that when a particular society forbids pre-marital sexual relations, it is that this ban serves the need for healthy temperance among the members of that society. In a different society, which approves of pre-marital sexual relations, it is said that this tolerance allows people to make a sensible choice of marriage partner, and lessens the risk of choosing on the basis of a temporary physical passion.

Thus when need is understood in the psychological sense, the view that every custom corresponds to some need, for otherwise it would have disappeared, cannot be disproved. Therefore theoreticians frequently understand the concept of need in a definite, non-psychological sense, and assume e.g. that man's need (conscious or not) is the fulfillment of conditions necessary for his survival. Individual survival is biological survival. But when we speak of the survival of the group, the matter is not so simple, for it is obvious that this may mean biological survival, or in other cases survival as a cultural entity, or survival as a separate and independent political entity.

Everyone is familiar with the view that family unity is absolutely indispensable for the health of society, and that societies where the family bond has become slackened lose their power of resistance and sooner or later succumb to invasion and annihilation. In the light of this view, it is surely strange that in many societies such a social institution as primogeniture has survived for centuries without moral opposition. The inheritance of the father's entire fortune by the eldest son certainly did not encourage integration of the family. But here the need for family unity had to give way to the father's need to pass on the results of his life's work entire to his successors. If the fatal effect of some customs on society should arouse the opposition of society, alcoholism would be denounced by society with particular severity — whereas in actual fact the public usually looks on the drunk man with a tolerant smile. One of the rules that is stressed on a particularly wide scale and with a force that is out of all proportion to the effect that it may have on the survival of the individual or the group, is the ban on incest, at least in those cases where the concept of kinship is extended to include more distant relatives, or to include people whom we would not consider to be kin in the sense we accept.

These examples show that our customs are not always dependent on the fact of whether they encourage survival or not. But this independence comes out still more clearly when we take up the chivalry ethos of the Middle Ages, which for many centuries kept up rules and customs which were absolutely fatal for biological survival of individuals or groups.

Let us begin with the code for knightly combat. It is sometimes said that this code consisted of rules which were in fact never obeyed in practice. This is not true. Undoubtedly the code only applied to combat between knights who were equal in rank, but it was a code which really

was observed, and it had the most fatal consequences for the survival of both individuals and groups, as it sacrificed the elementary rules of strategy for honour. In 1213 a battle took place at Muret between Simon de Montfort, leader of the Crusade against the Albigenses, and Peter II, King of Aragon. Simon de Montfort had much smaller forces, and he saw that it would be quite impossible for him to conquer the enemy, who were in tents behind fortifications. He was therefore anxious to lure the enemy out into the open field. The enemy himself came to his aid in this, for Peter II, not wanting to be thought a coward, scorned the chance to fight in a privileged position. He therefore ordered his men to leave their entrenchments. But this was not all. Simon de Montfort also planned to kill the king himself. The latter again facilitated his plan. Having exchanged arms with another knight, he was fighting in the thick of the battle. The knights belonging to Simon de Montfort at once threw themselves into an attack on the knight bearing the king's arms. At this Peter sprang to the aid of the knight who was under attack, and shouted, "I am the king!". When he was killed, the knights surrounding him let themselves be massacred rather than retreat and abandon the king's body. Simon de Montfort, who was hated by the people, won a complete victory.² The code of chivalry to which Peter II subscribed was still in force for another few centuries, since even at the battle of Fontenoy in 1745 the French allowed themselves to be beaten by the English through sheer gallantry.

But not only the rules of combat, but a certain system of values as well, which was nurtured by certain strata upholding the traditions of chivalry, showed a surprising longevity despite the fact that their influence led very largely not to development but to disaster. Right up to the last war, the Polish gentry³ stubbornly despised not only trade, but also farming for profit. Just before the war, a landowner who had an estate on the outskirts of a large town decided to concentrate on the growing of vegetables which would find a ready market in the town. His neighbours thereupon referred to him contemptuously as a tradesman, and spoke of him almost as if he had betrayed his class. This attitude to the land greatly reduced its productivity. The landowners were continually short of cash, and their properties became more and more neglected. Considering the fact that Poland was an agricultural country and that a large proportion of the land belonged to the gentry class, their contempt for thinking in terms of profit must have been fatal not only for them but for the whole country as well. Yet this attitude was hard to kill, and it was only finally removed by the post-war social changes. Thus the functionalists' thesis, that moral rules or social customs serve the survival of the individual or the group, must be restricted in its application. And if the thesis ceases to be general, the sociologist begins to be faced with the necessity of demonstrating each time, that it may be applied in that particular case.

² See. Z. Oldenbourg, *Le Bûcher de Montségur*, Paris 1950, pp. 170—171.

³ I have in mind here not the magnates, but the gentry of smaller calibre.