Reading “Primitive Classification” and Misreading Cultures: The Metaphysics of Social and Logical Classification

Abstract: The notion of classification as a universal function is explored through the three underlying presumptions of our mainstream practice of classification: the need for mutually exclusive categories, the teleological nature of classification, and the hierarchical nature of classification. This paper briefly reviews these concepts derived from classical Greek thought and then examines their presence in the extended essay, *Primitive Classification*, by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. *Primitive Classification*’s argument is that logical classification is derived from social classification as evidenced in the kinship and other structures of Australian Aboriginal, North American Aboriginal and Taoist Chinese societies. The flaws in Durkheim and Mauss’s position call attention to the culturally specific nature of exclusivity, teleology and hierarchy in relation to the ordering of things. The paper concludes with an example of how ordering structures other than conventional classification can be used creatively to cross cultural understandings and provide enhanced organization of knowledge.

1. Classification as Implied Universal

Classification as we know it has often been described as a universal thought process of humanity. W.C. Berwick Sayers opens his *A manual of classification for librarians & bibliographers* by stating that “We cannot reason, even in the simplest manner, unless we possess in a greater or less degree the power of classifying” (1926, 21). More recently, Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star state on the first page of their *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*: “To classify is human” (1999, 1). These two statements are extremely interesting in their similarities and differences and epitomize the problem I will address in this paper. I infer from both statements some innate need to classify. Sayers suggests that it is a matter of “reasoning.” Logical thought, in his view, is contingent upon classification. Interestingly, he goes on to suggest that animals also classify in some rudimentary way. Bowker and Star suggest that classification is a basically human activity. Their quote might be read to mean that only humans (as opposed to non-humans) are capable of classification, that classification is a defining characteristic of humans, or both. The common element of the two is the implication of some universal quality of classification. However, both of these quotations come clearly from a cultural tradition in which white Europeans or the descendants of European settlers are the dominant influence.

This paper will continue a discussion begun elsewhere on the culturally constructed nature of classification as we practice it and the potential for diversity in that practice. It will pursue this problem in three parts. The first part will summarize the findings of earlier work that sets the parameters for this study. The second part will discuss the links between culture and classification as they have been developed during the past century. The primary vehicle for this discussion will be Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss’s influential work, *Primitive Classification*. The third part will draw on the flaws and ingenuities of *Primitive Classification* to suggest techniques for acculturating classification in diverse contexts.

2. Classification as Culturally Specific

The three main characteristics, which I have identified elsewhere as unquestioned presumptions of classification as we practice it, are the presumed need for mutually exclusive
categories, the teleological tendencies of classification (in the sense of progress towards a
goal), and the hierarchical nature of classification (Olson, 1999). These presumptions go back
to at least classical Greece where their most familiar proponent is Aristotle. Each of them
seems obvious to us as a necessary precursor to an effective classification. We do not even
consider whether or not we should apply them even as they limit our work.

*Mutual exclusivity* presumes that we cannot order things unless we separate them from
each other. It focusses on both sameness and difference — sameness within a category and
difference between what is in a particular category and what is not. *Teleology* I use to express
the notion of progress toward a goal. Whether it is progression from individual to universal,
from concrete to abstract or from primitive to sophisticated, the sequencing of topics within
our classifications tends to work in a particular direction. *Hierarchy* is the characteristic of
these three of which we are the most aware. The hierarchical construction of classification is
a presumption that we enunciate — usually without questioning its appropriateness. The
subsumption of subcategories under categories and sub-subcategories under subcategories and
so forth that epitomizes hierarchy implies for us the ruling of the lesser by the greater in what
is sometimes termed hierarchical force. In this conception, what is true of a higher category is
also true of the subcategories below it.

Aristotle built on the work of his predecessors to bring these three presumptions
together in the form of classification and of formal logic. Sayer's allusion to "reasoning" in
the passage quoted above is an apt one. Reason in our culture is more or less synonymous
with logic and it is the structure provided by logic that is at the core of classification as we
practice it.

3. *Primitive Classification* as an Explication of the Dominant View

My examination of these presumptions through the work of Aristotle and his precursors
led me to an interest in exploring more recent manifestations. Of the many texts that cite
Aristotle as the initiator of classification as we know it, one of the most intriguing is Émile
Durkheim and Marcel Mauss's extended essay, *Primitive Classification*. In it they suggest
that: "... one could almost say that this conception of classification does not go back before
Aristotle" (1903, 4-5). "... this conception ..." as I will illustrate, does indeed resemble the
conception of classification characterized by the three presumptions that I found in Aristotle.

*Primitive Classification* has been and continues to be influential. In the introduction to
the English translation by Rodney Needham the latter, also well-known for his own work on
ethnographic and sociological views of classification, points out that:

> ... the regularity with which it [*Primitive Classification*] has been called upon, in very
different works, over more than fifty years shows its fundamental relevance and its
continued power of inspiration. (1963, xxxii-xxxiii)

Needham notes its influence on a wide range of sociologists including Claude Lévi-Strauss.
A search of the Institute for Scientific Information's (ISI) three citation databases (updated
February 2000) suggests *Primitive Classification*'s widespread discussion since Needham's
observation. This discussion has been steady through the years:

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Bearing in mind the incomplete indexing at either end of this range of dates and the
limitations and possible changes in coverage of the indexes, these numbers clearly indicate
continued interest in *Primitive Classification* at a significant level. Authors still argue about
Durkheim's empiricism versus his rationalism, his positivism versus his relativism, his
conceptions of women and 'primitives,' and his views on knowledge, scientific and otherwise
The idea of "logical" classification being derived from the "social" classification of a culture was the basis of *Primitive Classification.* Durkheim and Mauss suggest that classification is not a natural structure, but one that reflects the social organization of a particular culture. They establish a link, which they deem to be a causal link, between social classification (especially focusing on kinship structures) and logical classification. They propose that both social and logical classification evolve as a culture becomes increasingly "sophisticated." To reach this conclusion they use the results of various ethnographic studies from the nineteenth century. They work through a series of cultures that they judge to go from most primitive to least primitive: Australian Aboriginal cultures, North American Aboriginal cultures and Taoist Chinese culture.

In *Primitive Classification,* Durkheim and Mauss both question and reinforce the concepts of mutual exclusivity, teleology and hierarchy. In the following discussion I will examine examples of each, but will change the order of addressing them to look at exclusivity and hierarchy first and then the concept of teleology as it leads to the supposition of the universality of this view of classification.

**Mutual exclusivity** is, as expressed in *Primitive Classification,* an essential characteristic of classification:

"For us, in fact, to classify things is to arrange them in groups which are distinct from each other, and are separated by clearly determined lines of demarcation." (1903, 4)

However, what Durkheim and Mauss term to be "primitive" societies lack this sort of demarcation. There is no differentiation between an individual and "his exterior soul or his totem," "between sign and thing, name and person, places and inhabitants" (1903, 6). They describe societies that define relationships between kinship groups and specific animals, plants, colours and other natural phenomena. In regard to the Zuñi they give a report typical of the findings on which they base their conclusions:

"All beings and facts in nature, 'the sun, moon, and stars, the sky, earth and sea, in all their phenomena and elements; and all inanimate objects, as well as plants, animals, and men', are classed, labelled, and assigned to fixed places in a unique and integrated 'system' in which all the parts are co-ordinated and subordinated one to another by 'degrees of resemblance'." (1903, 43)

The notion of "degrees of resemblance" is very important here. *Primitive Classification* argues that "primitive" societies exhibit "general mental confusion" (1903, 6). The systems might be deemed "integrated" by Durkheim and Mauss, but they are not "logical" according to the logic of Aristotle:

"Naturally, these classifications [here referring to those of the I Ching] lack anything resembling Greek or European logic. Contradictions, deviations, and overlappings abound in them." (1903, 69)

The structure of the I Ching (an expression of Confucian principles of conduct and the basis for the practice of feng shui) is considered by Durkheim and Mauss to be inferior because it does not present mutually exclusive categories in a singular perspective.

**Hierarchy** follows closely from mutual exclusivity according to Durkheim and Mauss:

"... to classify is not only to form groups; it means arranging these groups according to particular relations. We imagine them as co-ordinated, or subordinate one to the other, ... There are some which are dominant, others which are dominated, still others which are independent of each other. Every classification implies a hierarchical order for which neither the tangible world nor our mind gives us the model. We therefore have reason to ask where it was found. The very terms which we use in order to characterize it allow us to presume that all these logical notions have an extra-logical origin. We say that species of the same genera are connected by relations of kinship; we call certain classes 'families'; did not the very word genus (genre) itself originally designate a group of"
relatives (γενος)? These facts lead us to the conjecture that the scheme of classification is not the spontaneous product of abstract understanding, but results from a process into which all sorts of foreign elements enter. (1903, 8)

A number of statements in this passage are of interest to this discussion. First, hierarchy is suggested as the logical outcome of creating categories. This deduction of Durkheim and Mauss’s seems to lack logic in itself. The idea that forming groups leads to arranging them in some way is plausible, but that this arrangement should necessarily be hierarchical stretches at least this reader’s credulity given the wide range of types of relationships possible. Second, this skepticism is further fostered by the notion that nature does not present us with ready-made hierarchies. What has been suggested to be relativism in Durkheim’s work enters here. If nature does not dictate a particular notion of classification then, suggest Durkheim and Mauss, it is likely to come from the social classification of society. However, they also suggest that societies nearly universally evolve into layered kinship structures of moieties, clans, totems, etc. that contain one another from larger to smaller. Third, they presume a governing relationship between these structures that makes them like genus and species structures. That is, they presume the notion of hierarchical force. Finally, just as we are convinced that logic has a role in creating this classification we find Durkheim and Mauss suggesting that it is the product of all sorts of “foreign elements” that nevertheless come together to produce a predictable structure. It is this evolution of a hierarchical order that most epitomizes the teleological nature of their discussion in *Primitive Classification*.

**Teleology** in the sense of progress toward a goal is integral to the argument in *Primitive Classification*. Durkheim was using this work and others to develop a social science of sociology. He employs the technique of examining what he terms “primitive” societies as a way of understanding elements of more complex and “sophisticated” societies. His notion that so-called “primitive” societies are at a lesser stage of development is apparent in remarks such as: “If we descend to the least evolved societies known ... “ (1903, 6 — emphasis added). Such societies evolve from “a simple dichotomy of things into opposed kinds” to “hierarchized concepts included within each of these kinds” (1903, 14). This evolutionary development toward the teleological goal of mutually exclusive categories in a hierarchical structure is, however, inevitable according to Durkheim and Mauss:

> Far, then, from man classifying spontaneously and by a sort of natural necessity, humanity in the beginning lacks the most indispensable conditions for the classificatory function. (1903, 7)

Development toward logical classification is, then, a universal trait. Presuming this universality allows the definition of “primitive” societies as those lacking the logical structures typified by mutual exclusivity and hierarchy. That this evolution is the case is established in *Primitive Classification* through citation of empirical evidence. However, the link is not consistently obvious:

> Indeed, though we have no means of establishing an historical link between the Chinese system and the types of classification [Aboriginal Australian and North American] that we studied earlier, it is impossible not to remark that it is based on the same principles as they are. (73-74)

The implication is that if all of these more or less underdeveloped classifications keep going they will result in something “resembling Greek or European logic” (69). So while classification is not innate or to be found in nature, its development follows a universal pattern according to Durkheim and Mauss.

These last quotations suggest the nature of the major flaws in the argument made in *Primitive Classification*. Conclusions are drawn from empirical evidence without application of that very logic sought as the goal of cultural evolution. Societies structured into clans within moieties that are crossed by marriage classes arranged to mix kinship relations are
described as hierarchical. Societies organized into twos, threes, fours, sevens and eights are all
described as being reducible to the same structures. Some evidence, all of which is taken from
ethnographic studies by other researchers, is totally misconstrued according to Needham in
his introduction:

... in many of the cases which Durkheim and Mauss examine there is a simple lack of
correspondence between form of society and form of classification, whereas it is the
correspondence which is supposed to make their case. (1963, xv)

Most notably, Durkheim and Mauss fail to establish a causal relationship between social and
logical classifications. Combining this fallacious “finding” with the presumption that the ideal
is a European-based classificatory practice derived from classical Greek philosophy implies
that as cultures become more “sophisticated” they work toward that ideal and cultures that
have not yet approached it are ‘primitive.’ The stream of thought that *Primitive Classification*
represents has reinforced the idea that the dominant conception of classification is the
universal end product of cultural development. Further, it reinforces a hierarchy of cultures by
presuming this universality.

Another aspect of universality presumed by Durkheim and Mauss is the internal
consistency of cultures. As Durkheim notes elsewhere, the relationship between social and
logical classifications also extends to ontological conceptions:

Since the world expressed by the entire system of concepts is the one that society regards,
society alone can furnish the most general notions with which it should be represented.
Such an object can be embraced only by a subject which contains all the individual
subjects within it. Since the universe does not exist except in so far as it is thought of, and
since it is not completely thought of except by society, it takes a place in this latter; it
becomes a part of society’s interior life, while this is the totality, outside of which nothing
exists. The concept of totality is only the abstract form of the concept of society: it is the
whole which includes all things, the supreme class which embraces all other classes. Such
is the final principle upon which repose all these primitive classifications where beings
from every realm are placed and classified in social forms, exactly like men.¹ {Footnote 1:
At bottom, the concept of totality, that of society and that of divinity are very probably
only different aspects of the same notion}. (1912, 441-442)

The totality of which Durkheim speaks is the conception of the universe from the perspective
of a particular culture — its singular ontological stance. Logical, social, even religious or
mythic structures reflect a particular conception of being. The causal nature of the links
Durkheim proposes between different structures may have been wishful thinking on the part
of a thinker interested in establishing sociology as a key science. Consideration of these
structures as representing homogeneous societies is another convenient step in this reasoning.
Peter Worsley in his *Knowledges: Culture, counterculture, subculture* (1997), argues that
Durkheim and others have been mistaken in treating cultures as internally homogeneous and
unaffected by outside influences and demonstrates his point by citing diverse classifications
within cultures from Australian Aboriginal taxonomies to the organization of Fannie Farmer’s
cookbooks (1997, see especially pp. 119-124). The influence of “foreign elements” (1903, 9)
that Durkheim and Mauss cite is an indication of the viability of Worsley’s interpretation and
the internal inconsistency of *Primitive Classification* as well as of most cultures.

4. Approaches to Amelioration

Having found these significant flaws in *Primitive Classification* it seems that its study
should simply be discouraged. However, Durkheim and Mauss also offer some insights that
point toward ways of moderating the culturally specific nature of classification. They have
compiled, in this essay, a wide-ranging catalogue of societies that do show links between
social and logical classifications. Without presuming internal consistency within cultures, this
evidence still implies that classifications in different aspects of a culture are not discrete from
each other. I suggest that herein lies a starting point for developing classification schemes that will operate effectively in cultures outside of the European-derived mainstream. They offer widely comprehensible, even though not universal, patterns within particular cultures or subcultures.

As an example of how such a system might work I turn to what can reasonably be termed a subculture or cultural perspective with which I can claim familiarity without coopting the voices of others — feminism. Within feminism as a cultural perspective, a frequent structural conception is a circle with variants including a spiral and a web. From consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s to feminist management theory to studies of goddess religions to the work of inclusivity of the 1980s and 1990s, these have been the ideal structures. How can one use circles, spirals and webs in a practical manner to make classification more appropriate to this worldview?

A first step is to take as a key to new approaches, Durkheim and Mauss’s quietly damning quote:

> Naturally, these classifications lack anything resembling Greek or European logic. Contradictions, deviations, and overlappings abound in them. (69)

When trying to prove their theory Durkheim and Mauss ignore overlapping and conflicting organizational structures that would suggest social and logical classifications of primitive cultures were not on the teleological road to logic. As Worsley points out, cultures are made up of overlapping and contradicting components. Therefore, it makes more sense to invert Durkheim and Mauss’s statement and suggest that classifications should have contradictions, deviations and overlappings. By creating alternative structures that contradict, deviate from and overlap with our existing mainstream classifications we can make the latter accessible to diverse cultural perspectives.

In the case of a feminist perspective, my colleague, Dennis Ward, and I have been developing a prototype for such a scheme. It unbalances the presumptions of mutual exclusivity, teleology and hierarchy as it makes databases that use the *Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)* accessible from a feminist point of view. In turning the hierarchy of the *DDC* into a circle the first thing we can do is make it into a straight line. Since a classification used to shelve books already manifests itself as a straight line, this change from a pyramid is readily accomplished. The next thing to do is to curve the line and join the two ends in a circle. The circle puts an end to the teleological quality of the *DDC* that otherwise marches from the abstractions of the 000s and 100s to the concrete manifestations of the 900s. Making the *DDC* into a circle allows one to begin anywhere. The other thing that this configuration accomplishes is to put the mainstream on the outside edge of the scheme. The middle, then, can be taken up with the feminist structure of a web. Connections can be made within and across the circle without regard for the hierarchical structure that still exists, but now only as a secondary manifestation. In our project, we are using existing feminist vocabularies, *A Women’s Thesaurus* and *The Canadian Feminist Thesaurus*, to construct the web. While both of these thesauri are more or less hierarchical, their hierarchies do not match each other much less the *DDC*. Hierarchical force cannot operate when the balance has been shifted in this way. Thesaurus terms in our database are typically linked to more than one *DDC* number with the result that categories no longer appear mutually exclusive.

Other culturally specific structures would need other types of techniques, though some might be similar. For example, North American Aboriginal peoples frequently use a circle as an ontological structure. They also often designate different characteristics with the four compass directions, each represented by a colour. While the four colours are not always the same and do not always represent the same thing to each people, the structure is similar. Subgroupings within such structures are not subject to the idea of hierarchical force. Even when smaller groups exist as parts of larger ones the relationship is not hierarchical in the same sense as our ideas of genus and species (Lewis Cardinal, personal communication, 16
March 2000). The three presumptions of exclusivity, teleology and hierarchy are not necessary to or compatible with this type of organization. Identifiable structures such as this would lend themselves to an approach similar to the one we are using for our feminist classification project. Other creative uses of the ‘found objects’ of culture combined with the flexibility that computers offer can bring solutions limited largely by our understanding of each others’ cultural contexts. Perhaps that understanding provides us with an appropriate teleological goal after all.

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References


