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A reconsideration reconsidered

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A RECONSIDERATION RECONSIDERED¹

Introduction

In 1973 Francis Korn's *Elementary Structures Reconsidered: Lévi-Strauss on Kinship* appeared. The publisher's blurb, which recommends this book as "a measured but devastating critique of Lévi-Strauss' work on kinship systems", echoes Needham's evaluation that this is "the first scholarly and technically competent critique of *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*" (Needham 1971: xciv). The former quotation may be discounted as commercial exaggeration, but one might have thought that the praise given by such a serious and committed scholar as Needham is, would have aroused universal interest among professional anthropologists and have led to extensive book reviews in specialist journals. Up until now, however, *Elementary Structures Reconsidered* has only been reviewed in *American Anthropologist* (1976: 145) by Ino Rossi, in combination with some other studies on Lévi-Strauss.

Yet this study deserves more extensive attention, not only because of the re-analyses of Australian kinship systems (Dieri, Iatmul, Mara), and the evaluation of mathematical treatment of kinship systems, but also — and perhaps even especially — because of chapters 1 and 3, which are devoted to an investigation of the internal consistency of Lévi-Strauss' conceptual framework. In particular, Korn's analysis of the incest-taboo (pp. 8-17) and her treatment of the concept-pairs 'preferential-prescriptive' and 'elementary-complex' (pp. 36-39) are important. If the conclusions drawn by Korn were correct with regard to these topics, this would undermine some of the most central arguments of *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. Therefore I will restrict myself to these two chapters.

I shall first of all give a summary of Korn's treatment of the incest-taboo. Then I shall point out some of the shortcomings in her analysis. Next I shall criticize Korn's discussion of the concept-pairs, 'preferential-prescriptive' and 'elementary-complex'.

The incest-taboo as bridge between nature and culture

Korn analyses extensively the definition of the incest-taboo in *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. According to her, Lévi-Strauss characterizes nature by its universality, lack of rules, spontaneity, repetitive processes and biological heredity, while culture is the domain of the particular, rules, non-spontaneity, cumulative processes and alliance (Korn 1973: 10). Because the prohibition of incest is universal but also a rule, Lévi-Strauss concludes that the incest-taboo belongs to both nature and culture. Korn thinks, on several grounds, that this is a misconception.

Firstly, Korn argues that any rule can be thought of as related to basic human needs which are of a biological nature. Not only the incest-rule, but *all* rules fall within the province of nature, while at the same time they are part of culture, because of the very fact that they are rules (Korn 1973: 12).

Besides, if one sees culture and nature as opposite concepts, then a clear categorization of any fact as either belonging to culture or to nature ought to be possible (Korn 1973: 12). In other words, one of the inherent characteristics of any opposition is that the concepts are mutually exclusive. In Lévi-Strauss' work this clear categorization is not possible with regard to the incest-taboo. For Korn these difficulties are mainly due to misconceptions about universality. The fact that different answers can be given to a universal need does not make these answers universal: "What remains universal is the 'need' ... The fact that in any known society there exists a certain regulation of sexual relations is no different, in a sense, from the fact that any society possesses a certain kind of political organization or a special type of economic system" (Korn 1973: 12).

Finally, Korn disagrees with Lévi-Strauss who regards incest prohibitions as a basis for the distribution of women, because these rules always imply reciprocity. But only those kinship terminologies that classify all possible spouses into two categories — prohibited and prescribed — express this principle of reciprocity, and only those kinship systems can be defined as elementary structures (Korn 1973: 15). Because of this, Korn concludes that Lévi-Strauss considers elementary structures as the reverse of incest prohibitions. According to her, the mistake Lévi-Strauss makes is that he has not established the connection between elementary structure and incest prohibition independently of each other. She thinks this is necessary: "If prescriptive systems (elementary structures) exist

because there is a 'basic principle of reciprocity' underlying the incest prohibitions, one cannot give as a proof of the existence of this principle the fact that prescriptive systems do exist" (Korn 1973: 15).

The universality of incest prohibitions and the comparatively rare cases of prescriptive kinship systems introduces another problem. If every prohibition is at the same time a prescription, as Lévi-Strauss states, then, whenever prohibitions of incest are found, a prescriptive rule of marriage should also be found (Korn 1973: 15).

Korn's criticism of Lévi-Strauss can be recapitulated in four points:

- (1) All rules belong to nature *and* culture.
- (2) The different answers are not universal, simply because a universal need underlies these answers.
- (3) Dichotomous concepts should be mutually exclusive.
- (4) Incest prohibitions and elementary structures are the reverse of each other.

These points of criticism, however, can be criticized in turn.

Firstly, although (cultural) rules may be related in some way to basic biological needs, for example in the way Malinowski did this, it is now generally recognized that this does not explain them. Moreover, Korn has not understood the distinction Lévi-Strauss makes between law and rule. This becomes evident when one looks at her enumeration of the characteristics of nature. One of them is the 'lack of rules'. This she opposes to 'rules' in the corresponding row of the column of characteristics of culture. However, the opposition ought to be 'law' — the existence of necessary relations — versus 'rule' — the existence of arbitrary relations.

According to Lévi-Strauss a phenomenon only belongs to both the domains of nature and culture if this phenomenon has a universal characteristic. So the point in question is the universality of the incest prohibition. Korn says that it is incorrect to speak of universality because the content of the incest prohibition differs from culture to culture. But that is not essential; what is the common feature, despite the different contents, of the incest prohibition. This prohibits men from keeping certain female relatives for themselves, so that these relatives become available for other men. It is of secondary importance which female relatives are not available and whether or not there are rules about which categories of persons should marry each other.

Korn's thesis that dichotomous pairs of concepts should be mutually exclusive is only partially correct. Her criticism completely neglects the

fact that they can be at the same time complementary. Her analytical discussion does not pay attention at all to the dialectical tendencies in Lévi-Strauss' method. She overlooks the fact that concepts can be united in and through opposition. Besides, in the preface of the second edition of *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Lévi-Strauss states that the distinction between nature and culture has only methodological value and that the opposition between nature and culture has to be seen as an artificial creation of culture, made possible by the coming into existence of cerebral structures, which themselves belong to nature (Lévi-Strauss 1969: xxix-xxx). In other words, the notion of the distinction between nature and culture exists because nature and culture are connected. One might say that it belongs to the nature of man to have culture. In the same preface, Lévi-Strauss also states that the line of demarcation between nature and culture is certainly more tenuous and tortuous than he imagined twenty years ago (Lévi-Strauss 1959: xxix).² So, Lévi-Strauss himself has become more aware of the problem of the degree to which the contrast between nature and culture may be pushed. Korn ignores these later qualifications, made by Lévi-Strauss, with regard to the opposition between nature and culture.

Finally, Korn's statement that incest prohibitions and elementary structures are the reverse of each other is the result of an inaccurate characterization of the incest prohibition. All societies have incest prohibitions, but not all societies have elementary kinship systems. This is not at all necessary, although Korn believes that it is. From the fact that the elementary structure is the prescribed positive aspect of a rule, of which the incest prohibition is the negative aspect, it cannot be concluded that the incest prohibition and the elementary structure reflect each other. The reflection of the prohibition to keep to oneself certain women is the command to give these women away. But to whom they must be given is quite a different matter. Societies may answer this question in two ways:

- (1) Both prohibition and prescription are specified. This type of society has an elementary structure.
- (2) Only prohibition is specified. This type of society has a complex structure. Although there is no prescribed category of spouses in these societies, a statistical preference may be discovered. This leads us to the next section in which the distinctions between prescriptive and preferential, and between elementary and complex are discussed.

Preference = Prescription = Elementary = Complex

Lévi-Strauss' reaction to Needham (1965, 1967) with regard to the distinction between preferential and prescriptive leads Korn to an examination of the logical consistency of the criteria which Lévi-Strauss uses in the elementary-complex typology. Korn wants to show that if Lévi-Strauss considers the distinction between preferential and prescriptive to be invalid, the same conclusion has to be drawn concerning his own distinction between elementary and complex. She does this through a series of equations, which she derives from certain statements of Lévi-Strauss with the help of the following pairs of concepts: elementary-complex, prescriptive-preferential, prohibition-choice, and mechanical-statistical.

In his early work Lévi-Strauss states that elementary structures prescribe marriage with a certain category of relative, while complex structures leave the determination of the spouse to other mechanisms (Lévi-Strauss 1949: ix). Later he qualifies this statement when he says that all marriage systems have an elementary core, which is manifested in the incest prohibition, as well as a complex aspect, which results from the fact that usually more than one individual meets the demands of even the most prescribed system, so that there always exists a certain degree of choice (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 18). Now Korn concludes that:

(1) prohibition	= elementary;
(2) choice	= complex.

However, this conclusion is not justified, because a distinction must be made between *core* and *structure*. Elementary core refers to prohibition, while elementary structure consist of proscription and prescription together. With regard to choice, misunderstanding also exists. Choice as such is not crucial but the degree of choice. Is the choice limited or is it not to a prescribed category of relatives? When such a limiting condition exists, then Lévi-Strauss speaks of elementary structure. When such a limiting condition does not exist, then Lévi-Strauss speaks of complex structure.

Lévi-Strauss' remark that there are societies (like ours), which have a mechanical model for the definition of prohibited marriages and a statistical model for the determination of marriages which are permissible, gives rise to:

(3) prohibition	= mechanical;
(4) choice	= statistical.

From these equations, Korn deduces:

- (5) elementary structure = mechanical model;
- (6) complex structure = statistical model.

Other statements of Lévi-Strauss, however, lead us to doubt the validity of these equations. According to Lévi-Strauss, for each of the two types of societies a mechanical as well as a statistical model can be used. Sometimes even a combination is necessary (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 311). So, it is not correct to identify types of models with types of societies. Lévi-Strauss explicitly acknowledges this: "It should be kept in mind, however, that the notions of 'elementary structures', and of 'complex structures' are purely heuristic — they provide a tool for investigation — and they cannot be used alone to define a system" (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 18).

The validity of Korn's next step is even more doubtful. From Lévi-Strauss' remark that the difference between preference and prescription does not apply to the systems themselves but to the way in which these systems are conceptualized "according to what I called elsewhere (1958) a 'mechanical' or a 'statistical' model" (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 18), Korn concludes:

- (7) prescriptive = mechanical;
- (8) preferential = statistical.

A combination of (5) and (7) gives:

- (9) elementary = prescriptive;

while a combination of (6) and (8) gives:

- (10) complex = preferential.

Since, according to Lévi-Strauss, an elementary structure can be equally preferential or prescriptive, Korn gives as decisive steps:

- (11) elementary = preferential; so that,
- (12) prescriptive = preferential; and,
- (13) elementary = complex.

In other words, Korn concludes that in Lévi-Strauss' work prohibition = elementary = mechanical = prescriptive = preferential = statistical = complex = choice.³

At first sight Korn's reasoning is convincing. However, she makes no real attempt to understand Lévi-Strauss' typology in the context of his own intentions. The fundamental difference between elementary and complex is not to be found in the concept-pair 'preferential-prescriptive'. The heart of the matter is the presence or absence of a marriage system which starts from an existing kinship tie and which uses this tie to determine the class of potential spouses. Where this marriage system is present, Lévi-Strauss speaks of elementary structures, and where this system is absent he speaks of complex structures. One must note that Korn interprets all statements in which Lévi-Strauss tries to outline the common and the separate aspects of elementary and complex structures from a point of view which is only partially supported by these statements. Korn concludes that an identity exists between elementary and complex structures, although Lévi-Strauss only implies that a certain overlap exists between elementary and complex structures and that this area of overlap is to be located in the Crow-Omaha systems.⁴ It is not elementary = complex, but elementary Ω complex.⁵

The main conclusion to be drawn is that Korn's questionable analyses have not helped towards greater understanding of the issues which she considers in the chapters I have reviewed. One must admit, however, that the task of elucidating Lévi-Strauss' conceptual framework is notoriously difficult.

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NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Jan de Wolf for his incisive criticisms and helpful comments.

² In 1949 Lévi-Strauss considered the incest prohibition as "the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished" (Lévi-Strauss 1949: 31). However, he also gave the coming into existence — suddenly and totally — of articulated speech as a criterion for marking the transition from nature to culture. With the creation of language, women could become signs, which could be exchanged between men. These two characteristics — incest prohibition and articulated speech — would have originated together and simultaneously. However, Lévi-Strauss advances no evidence for this proposition — for that matter, I fail to see how he ever could. It remains an *a priori* statement without any further foundation. Korn neglects this issue.

³ Rossi (1976: 145) states that Lévi-Strauss, in correspondence with him, makes the following equations: prohibition = elementary = mechanical = structurally preferential = structurally prescriptive, while choice = complex structure = statistical = statistically prescriptive = statistically preferential. If Lévi-Strauss really entertains this opinion, than previously made statements become incomprehensible.

- ⁴ It is amazing that Needham appreciates Korn's analysis. As an adherent of Wittgenstein's family-resemblance approach, he should have been fully aware that phenomena and the concepts which denote them are often not mutually exclusive but may overlap to some extent.

⁵ In the form of Venn-diagrams:

in which means elementary and complex.

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