Cousin marriage derives from a culture of incest. It is the attenuated variation of a preference for marriage between members of the same nuclear family that existed in a number of perished civilizations of the Middle East and Mediterranean. True, the idea is not easily acknowledged by scholars with strong roots in social evolutionism of the kind publicized in Victorian anthropology as well as by Durkheim, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss. Supported by a variety of social and cultural factors—Christian marriage prohibitions, the particularities of Northern and Western European social structures, the emergence of biogenetics, and Darwin’s theory of evolution and the survival of the fittest, to name the most important ones—they created an overarching Weltanschauung, according to which civilization comes into being not earlier than the moment when humans abandon incest, which was assumed to go hand in hand with the posited uninhibited promiscuity of early man. Moreover, the fact that those nations, communities, and classes that are known for having permitted incest represented sophisticated cultures, including literacy, cities, elaborate religions, and strict social orders, is likely to make the notion even more distasteful to intellectuals. Nevertheless it has a lot to speak for it.

Before I go on arguing why, I must of course explain my understanding of incest. “Incest” is a multilayered term carrying various biological, social, and legal meanings. They cannot all be unraveled here, especially given that they are to a large extent culturally relative. This relativism goes so far that, on the one hand, even practices that would seem to be outlawed everywhere, such as marriage between full and half-siblings, or between parents and children, were

1 Suffice it to think of Tylor’s “simple practical alternative between marrying-out and being killed out” (Tylor 1889, p. 267, quoted in Kuper 1988, p. 100). We find this idea in one form or the other in Maine 1861; McLennan 1865; Tylor 1871, 1889; Morgan 1877; Smith 1885; Durkheim 1898; and Frazer 1910; for a discussion see Kuper 1988, pp. 105–122. Freud’s Totem und Tabu (1912–1913/1991) transported the idea of the incest taboo into popular science. Lévi-Strauss (1949/63) sanctified it in anthropology.

2 The main reference is to Goody 1983 for a full discussion of the factors contributing to the basic differences in marriage preferences between the Mediterranean and Middle East, on the one hand, and the lands to the north of this region. Cf. also Ottenheimer 1996.
legal at certain times and in certain places, whereas, on the other hand, certain laws prohibit sexual contact of in-laws so remote it takes an effort to even identify them, or they construct fictive ties of kinship, declaring them prohibited. However, in what follows, I will not argue much with the culturally variable incest taboo. Such a perspective would seem to overemphasize the differences between the various degrees of close marriage on the basis of their legality and thus to gloss over the sibling-cousin continuum I am proposing. Instead, I focus on incest as a lived practice: for one thing, I give the term “incest” a universal basis: a simple biogenetic definition to be reckoned according to degrees of biological consanguinity. For another thing, in the present context, the whole idea refers to a specific set of historical givens, as indicated at the beginning, which are the starting substance of the present chapter’s analysis. They may be captioned as “structural incest” in the sense of condoned or even encouraged marriage between brothers and sisters, full and half, as well as, more rarely, between parents and children. Next to those there exist practices that are today legal in many countries and fall shorter and shorter of incest as the distance between the partners increases: here we subsume mainly cousin marriage of the first and more remote degrees, of which the Arab marriage, the subject of debate in the previous chapter, is the dominant sub-preference.

But of course, besides this rather universalistic category, there will be space, too, for the relativist class of incest taboos. From the genetic point of view, this class is composed of a heterogeneous, partly disconnected, array of marriage patterns that refer to a potentially unlimited range of relationships of consanguineous, social, or symbolic character. All they have in common is that they have been prohibited by certain religious or secular law codes, under their own cultural, historical, and social circumstances that may indeed be very specific. Taboos may affect all possible constellations obtaining between individuals, many of which will not answer to our present definition of incest: members of the nuclear family, cousins from the first up to the seventh degree, in-laws, stepchildren and -parents, adoptees, godchildren, and milk kin, as well as all sorts of totemistic or spiritual kin.

Now prohibitions are surely the aspect of incest that is normally put in focus. I have said as much concerning the social sciences, where grand social theories have been built around the hypothesis of the incest taboo. It is true, moreover, for philologists and textual scholars who examine complicated marriage impediments strictly in their particular cultural contexts, normally paying little attention to the possibility that incest was practiced in the civilizations they study. Religious and philosophical systems have a tendency to show off their purported degree of cultural sophistication and enlightenment by elaborating boundaries in marriage patterns, among other things. Customs concerning sex