Did the Primal Crime Take Place?

Robert A. Paul

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually. (Some cultural advance, perhaps, command over some new weapon, had given them a sense of superior strength.) Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions, and of religion.

Sigmund Freud; *Totem and Taboo*

Freud's celebrated essay has this in common with the ancient patriarch who is the tragic hero of the ghastly tale that is the climax

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of *Totem and Taboo*: no matter how often it is smashed over the head and left for dead, it continues to rise up and haunt its murderers and their descendants. Freud taught us that vigorously to deny or refute a threatening idea is the best way to discuss it aloud, at once giving vent to the dangerous impulse, and at the same time, by adding the negative, satisfying the censors who defend the conscious mind. To judge by this evidence, the very number of times that the idea of the primal crime has been rejected provides ample testimony of the extent to which it is very much alive, if not well.

A mere list of the anthropologists who have written passages or whole essays rejecting Freud's hypothesis itself reads like a roll call of the immortals: Rivers, Marret, Boas, Westermarck, Schmidt, Goldenweiser, Kroeber, Radin, Malinowski, Fortes, Levi-Strauss—not even to mention the obligatory back-of-the-hand rejection in every text and history of the discipline.

One could swell this list by adding to it those anthropologists sympathetic to some aspects of Freud's theories, but who nonetheless reject the hypothesis of the primal horde either as historical event or as phylogenetic memory: Roheim, Mead, Devereux, LaBarre, Kluckhohn, Whiting, Derek Freeman, Robin Fox, Anne Parsons, to name only some of the more prominent ones.

Even psychoanalysis itself, in the forms in which it came to England and America, has by and large rejected the idea that the primal crime was a remembered event, favoring the view that Freud's formulation was at best a myth representing in poetic terms a complex that could more satisfactorily be accounted for by the Oedipal situation as it necessarily arises anew in each generation. Roheim, certainly the most orthodox Freudian ever to practice anthropology as a discipline, ultimately placed his imprimatur on this reading (Roheim 1970). In short, I believe I am correct in asserting that no one (except the early Roheim) has ever accepted a literal reading of Freud's tale of the primal crime, and at the same time professed to be a member of the anthropological community.

Anthropologists have often expressed surprise, and others embarrassment, that in the face of such unanimity of rejection, echoed by the biologists, psychologists, historians of religion, and even the psychoanalytic community, Freud persisted in his belief in the reality of the primal crime as a historical event, preserved in the
phylogenetic memory of *homo sapiens*. Nor can there be any doubt that he did really believe it. Once he formulated the idea, he not only took it as an axiom of psychoanalytic theory, but considered it one of his most profound insights. Some reference to the primal crime theory, stated as if it were fact, can be found in most of his major essays after 1912, when he was only a third of the way through his psychoanalytic career.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, the last book he wrote, he had this to say about his belief that the primal crime theory was correct:

That conviction I acquired a quarter of a century ago, when I wrote my book on *Totem and Taboo* (in 1912) and it has only become stronger since (1967:71).

Jones confirms that Freud thought he had written only three really great and immortal passages in the course of his long career: the last chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the essay on *The Unconscious*, and the final chapter of *Totem and Taboo* (Jones 1956:34). Jones also mentions, with some exasperation, how he urged Freud to reconsider his views, since they contradicted all the basic tenets of modern biology. Freud simply responded that the biologists were all wrong, and refused to consider the matter further (Jones 1953).

This last incident displays another aspect of Freud’s attitude toward the primal crime idea, namely his extreme reluctance to discuss or defend his views either in person or in print. Few readers have not been struck by the absence of argument upon which he bases his conjecture that the crime was a deed and not a fantasy. And in his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* he has this to say about the idea he considered one of his greatest: “I should like to tell you more of this, but I had better not” (1975:341). Only in *Moses and Monotheism*, a book he never thought would see the light of day, did he undertake to try to convince the reader that what he had to say on the matter of the primal crime was “on the whole credible.”

It is quite possible to mark this down as a personal aberration of Freud’s, and ignore it altogether, while still retaining the more convincing aspects of his theories. After all, it was Freud himself who gave us the theoretical arsenal with which to show that, in individual lives, “primal” events need not have really happened
to have a lasting psychological effect. It was Freud, too, who first put forward the counterinterpretations of his theory, which have subsequently been suggested by his numerous critics: (1) that the memory of the primal crime is a fantasy, not the memory of an event; or (2) that the story is a myth projected out of the Oedipus complex which man, or at least Freud, has as a result of his infantile experience, not on the basis of an ancestral memory.

Precisely because his final conclusion runs so directly counter to everything he seems to have said before regarding the non-occurrence of influential traumata, we must inquire into his reasons for taking this turn, and we may take his reluctance to discuss the problem as a clue to its depth and complexity. It seems all the more that Freud’s phylogenetic suggestions be taken seriously, for the very reason that they were put forward by the man who had pushed the interpretation of the psyche in terms of socially and individually acquired experience farther and deeper than had ever been done before him.

So, starting from the assumption that Freud may have been many things but not a fool, I intend to address myself here to the following questions: first, what exactly did Freud mean when he insisted that the primal crime was a historical event? Second, why, and on the basis of what fundamental premises did he hold to his views, although they served to isolate him from the colleagues in other fields he hoped to win to his side? And finally, of what value are his ideas for contemporary anthropology?

WHAT DID FREUD REALLY MEAN?

As Malinowski points out, the primal crime is considered by Freud to have been the decisive event by which culture arose out of nature (Malinowski 1966). We might therefore ask, as anthropologists, just when we are to conceive of this event as occurring—among a horde of homo sapiens, or erectus, or among australopithecines, or even earlier? Did it divide Neanderthals from Cro-Magnons? Had it occurred in Peking Man’s time? The answer would obviously vary depending upon what one considers to be the distinguishing feature of culture—tool use, ritual, language, or others. We might note that Malinowski sternly takes Freud to task for his suggestion that a new weapon paved the way for the crime, since if the brothers already had weapons, then by Malinowski’s
criteria, they would already have had culture by the time they committed the crime which supposedly created culture in the first place.

There is little in Freud's work which would clarify when he would have placed the date of the crime. In *Moses and Monotheism* he gives us the following clue: "It is likely that mankind was not very far advanced in the art of speech" (1967:102). But speech is just one of those attributes that it is difficult to surmise from prehistoric remains. Freud concludes, therefore, "When this was is not known; no point of contact with geological data has been established" (1967:102).

We may turn our attention next to the question of whether the crime occurred only once, or repeatedly. Freud relates the story, both in *Totem and Taboo* and in *Moses and Monotheism*, as if it occurred only once—"One day, etc." But he explains in both of those books that this is a condensed way of talking about something that happened over and over again in the course of a span of perhaps hundreds of years. In this latter view, the crime is seen as being committed by numerous hordes during a certain period in human prehistory, so that all contemporary humans are descendents of an ancestor who participated in one of these murders. Though in footnotes and asides Freud clarifies the issue in this way, nonetheless he clings to the archetypal form of the tale itself, relating it as though it occurred once and for all. The suggestion about the repetitions seems to be an attempt to mollify skeptical readers. In a footnote in *Totem and Taboo*, he attributes the short, once-and-for-all form to "the reserve necessitated by the nature of the topic" (1950:143). This is a singularly unhelpful remark, and typical of how cryptic he can become when speaking of this subject.

Having now dealt with these preliminary problems, we come to the sixty-four dollar question that is at the heart of the controversy, namely, how could this event, even if it really happened, account for guilt, the incest taboo, and the concomitant gifts of social organization and religion in contemporary man? Obviously, for his theory to work, modern man has somehow to know that the event occurred in primeval times, and must continue to feel its effects. How could this be?

Here I wish to clear up a serious misunderstanding of Freud's work. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud spends little time on the answer
to this question, and comes to the conclusion that he really doesn’t
know how it happens, only that it happens. He then points out that
all the social sciences must assume that knowledge is passed from
one generation to the next, and that therefore this weakness in his
argument applies not just to him but to everyone else as well. He
does not propose a Lamarckian argument, and insist that the event
is remembered as part of man’s phylogenetic inheritance. It is thus
utterly incorrect to dismiss Totem and Taboo on the grounds
that its argument rests on the phylogenetic memory of an event that
necessarily occurred to the phenotype, and thus falls into the class
of “acquired characteristics.” It is to the credit, incidentally, of both
Kroeber and Fox that neither of them falls into this trap, which
has snared so many other incautious authors (Kroeber 1920, 1939;
Fox 1967a). It is especially surprising that Freeman makes this
error, since he is a careful and serious student of Freud’s writings
(Freeman 1970).

Kroeber, indeed, accepts Freud’s *tu quoque* argument (that is,
the argument that while the criticism is true, it is true of you also)
as the real challenge that it is to anthropology. For Kroeber, who
subscribed to the notion of culture as superorganic, it was not
difficult to concede that ideas survive the individuals who bear
them and pass down through the generations, even though he had
no more idea than Freud in Totem and Taboo of exactly by what
mechanism this occurs.

It should be clear, then, that I am arguing that the supposed
phylogenetic component of the argument in Totem and Taboo
is not the problem it is generally assumed to be—and that on the
contrary it is a source of potential strength. This assertion requires
more detailed documentation:

Freud writes with his usual talent for coming straight to
the point,

No one can have failed to observe . . . that I have taken as the basis
of my whole position the existence of a collective mind. . . . In par-
ticular, I have supposed that the sense of guilt for an action has per-
sisted for many thousands of years and has remained operative in
generations which can have had no knowledge of the event (1950:158).

But now, instead of any reference to phylogeny or Lamarck or
any other such thing, he flings his *tu quoque*:
Further reflection, however, will show that I am not alone in the responsibility for this bold procedure. Without the assumption of a collective mind, which makes it possible to neglect the interruptions of mental acts caused by the extinction of the individual, social psychology in general cannot exist (1950:158).

One must not be misled by his use of the term "collective mind" (German Massenpsyche); Freud in fact makes no judgment about whether this collective mind need be thought of as biologically inherited or contained in cultural tradition. Anthropology, like all other human disciplines, has had to come to terms with ideas that are not contained inside individuals, but transcend the boundaries of the person and his life span. Both the anthropology of the Durkheim school and that of the Boas school have had to posit a "collective mind" to confront this problem; in the one case, the solution is found in the conscience collective located in collective representations; in the other, it is in "culture," existing outside the soma in the sphere of the social. Geertz's more recent definition (Geertz 1973) of culture as a system of inherited meanings embodied in symbols, in which the words "inherited" clearly refers to an external trafficking in public symbolism, not a genetic event, is perfectly compatible with Freud's position as stated in Totem and Taboo.

And Malinowski is talking double talk when he says that Freud is in error because modern anthropology accepts no collective mind, but rather "culture"; for any meaningful definition of culture must assume that an external body of social lore and tradition, inheritable across generations by learning, accounts for the continuities of human society over time.

This is stated perfectly clearly by Freud:

What are the ways and means employed by one generation in order to hand on its mental states to the next one? I shall not pretend that these problems are sufficiently explained or that direct communication and tradition—which are the first things that occur to me—are enough to account for the process [my emphasis] (1950:158).

He follows this admission with a challenge to all of us who follow him in the human sciences:

Social psychology [by which I take it he would include anthropology,
or at least culture and personality] shows very little interest, on the whole, in the manner in which the required continuity in the mental life of successive generations is established (1950:158).

He then goes on to suggest that it is probably a combination of inherited dispositions interacting with real historical events in an individual's lifetime which produce the final socialized product—a position with which I doubt that many will seriously disagree, and which is certainly compatible with contemporary thinking among biologists on the subject of nature and nurture, as well as with the views of Chomsky, Levi-Strauss, Piaget, and a host of others. Freud summarizes this position with a quote from Faust:

What thou hast inherited from thy fathers
Acquire it to make it thine.

When Freud says that "direct communication and tradition" are probably not sufficient to account for cultural transmission, it might seem that he is opening the way here for an emphasis on phylogenetic inheritance as the primary mechanism. But instead of following that track, he writes a paragraph that, it seems to me, has not received sufficient attention or been adequately appreciated.

He argues that even when an idea is seemingly lost in a culture, it still remains latent, but distorted or covered over with layers of symbolism produced by the efforts to forget or conceal it. But since psychoanalysis has discovered that each individual possesses the psychic apparatus necessary to decode the unconscious symbolism that another individual has employed, then cultural knowledge may be passed along in a way that is, if you will allow me, analogous to the passing of recessive traits in biology—unrealized in an individual phenotype, but still potentially there to be understood and used by some future generation. In this way, too, the ideas encoded in the Egyptian hieroglyphs remained passed on but not understood for millenia, until the Rosetta Stone made it possible to decode them. Thus Freud writes:

An unconscious understanding such as this of all the customs, ceremonies and dogmas left behind by the original relation to the father
may have made it possible for later generations to take over their heritage of emotion (1950:159).

It should be clear, then, that Freud nowhere mentions anything even resembling Lamarckism; on the contrary, he has produced a theory of the transmission of culture which greatly broadens the scope of what he calls "social psychology." Freud discovered that "no one can keep a secret," and while people are not consciously aware that they have deciphered the others' intrigues and ruses, they have actually done so unconsciously, as dream analysis so often shows; people thus become the carriers of knowledge that they do not know that they know. This allows us to understand how it is possible for ancient knowledge to live on until now, in latency, through symbolic communication. Indeed, it was only by becoming consciously aware of the power of encoding and decoding symbols which we all possess that Freud was able to "discover" psychoanalysis.

Whether one accepts Freud's argument or not, it is in any case clearly a grave injustice that general opinion has it that Totem and Taboo is marred by Lamarckian heresies, when in fact no such arguments even put in a serious appearance, much less play a crucial role in the argument.

Having now shown that a prime objection to Totem and Taboo is groundless, and that the argument is actually quite compatible with modern anthropological opinion, I could very easily rest my case, secure that I had cleared Freud of a base canard. But I would be acting in bad faith. For the fact is that while Lamarckian arguments play no role in the essay Totem and Taboo, shortly after he published it, Freud noticed the apparent relevance of Lamarck's theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics to his own work, and the rest of his career is marked by an indisputable adherence to the Lamarckian theory. (It would take another paper to clear Lamarck of the misinterpretations of his work too, and so it is a matter of indifference to me here whether "Lamarckism" as the term is generally understood has any relation to what Lamarck really thought.)

The earliest clear statement of this trend is the letter to Abraham which Freud wrote on November 11, 1917. (This letter is quoted by Freeman in his reappraisal of Totem and Taboo, but, as I have
shown, it is out of place in a discussion of that book.) The letter reads, in part:

Have I really not told you anything about the Lamarck idea? It arose between Ferenczi and me, but neither of us has the time or spirit to tackle it at present. The idea is to put Lamarck entirely on our ground and to show that the “necessity” that according to him, creates and transforms organs, is nothing but the power of unconscious ideas over one’s own body (of which we see the remnants in hysteria) in short, the omnipotence of thoughts: this would actually supply a psycho-analytic explanation of adaptation; it would put the coping stone on psychoanalysis (quoted in Freeman 1970:63 f.).

From this point on, although Freud speaks of it only in allusions and almost never at any length, the idea of the primal crime unmistakably carries with it the implication that not only did the crime really occur, but that it formed a deep impression on the psyche of man, so that all subsequent generations have been born with genetically inherited knowledge of it. Thus, while it is true to say that there is no Lamarckism in Totem and Taboo, it is also true that Freud did, subsequently, firmly believe that the idea of the primal crime was part of man’s phylogenetic memory.

WHY DID FREUD BELIEVE WHAT HE DID ABOUT THE PRIMAL CRIME?

If it is the case that in Totem and Taboo Freud proposed a subtle cultural argument about the transmission of knowledge; and if in that same book he actually laid out the alternative theories that later writers have generally preferred; then why did he reject these positions and move towards the stance that the primal crime was a deed, not a fantasy, that it occurred in history, not simply in every nursery, and that it was engraved in men’s psyches?

Two classes of answers have been proposed to this question. One is that he would not have done so had he been more familiar with the latest developments in genetics, which, after all, did not take place until the twentieth century was well under way, long after Freud’s biological education was over. The second is that he had certain (Oedipal) reasons of his own for wishing to project his own neuroses in to the distant past.
Ritvo (1965) has defended the former view, pointing out, among other things, that it was quite easy for Freud to be a true Darwinian and also a Lamarckian, since Darwin himself, never aware of the mechanism of genetic transmission, subscribed to Lamarckian ideas himself in the sixth edition of *The Origin of Species*. It is only the post-Mendelian, neo-Darwinian theory that rejects Lamarckian doctrines in favor of genetic arguments.

But this attempt to get Freud off the hook overlooks his awareness of the developments in biology, and rejection of them. In 1938, at the end of his life, he wrote:

This state of affairs [the necessity of introducing Lamarckian ideas into his argument] is made more difficult, it is true, by the present attitude of biological science, which rejects the idea of acquired qualities being transmitted to descendants. I admit, in all modesty, that in spite of this I cannot picture biological development proceeding without taking this into account (1967:128).

A little later in *Moses and Monotheism*, he is equally unrepentent with respect to the illustrious anthropologists who have criticized him:

I have often been vehemently reproached for not changing my opinions in later editions of my book [*Totem and Taboo*]. . . . I would reply that these alleged advances in science are well known to me. Yet I have not been convinced. . . . contradiction is not always refutation (1967:169).

The second line of attack, adopted by Freeman (1970) among others, attributes Freud's recalcitrance on this subject to his own personality which prevented him from being clear headed and objective on the subject. Now I am not one of those who oppose the psychoanalytic investigation of the motives of great men, including Freud, on principle. In fact, I approve of this tactic, with the proviso that it not be used selectively against Freud, but be applied to anyone involved in the debate. In the field of genetics, one could have a field day if one were once to begin searching out hidden psychosexual motives for the theoretical positions taken by the disputants. For example, if Mendel was so damned interested in genetic inheritance, then what was he doing in a monastery?

I have resisted being drawn into a discussion of this point, not
because I do not think it has value, but because the digression would be too great, and because I think there is enough in Freud's theories to be examined on its merits. But if the argument that he was not well informed is incorrect, and the argument that his theory is a projection of his neurosis is at best not the whole story, then we must investigate other avenues for clues to Freud's reasoning.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud gives us the most extensive and straightforward account of what has led him to his conclusions. He writes:

In studying reactions to early traumata we often find to our surprise that they do not keep strictly to what the individual himself has experienced, but deviate from this in a way that would accord much better with their being reactions to genetic events. . . . The behavior of a neurotic child to his parents when under the influence of an Oedipus and castration complex is very rich in such reactions, which seem unreasonable in the individual and can only be understood phylogenetically, in relation to the experiences of earlier generations (1967:126–127).

And in summarizing his conclusions, he writes:

Though we may admit that for the memory traces in our archaic inheritance we have so far no stronger proof than those remnants of memory evoked by analytic work, which call for a derivation from phylogenesis, yet this proof seems to me convincing enough to postulate such a state of affairs (1967:127).

In other words, according to Freud's testimony, the idea of phylogenetically transmitted ideas was forced upon him because he kept encountering in his patients reactions to events or knowledge of things that seemed unlikely to have been acquired through experience. For example, in the case of the Wolf-man, having traced his neuroses back to a reconstruction of his earliest childhood, he still finds perplexing the infantile knowledge of the Primal Scene that the Wolf-man betrays:

It is hard to dismiss the view that some sort of hardly definable knowledge, something. . . . preparatory to an understanding, was at work. . . . We have nothing at our disposal but the single analogy—and it is
an excellent one—of the far-reaching instinctive knowledge of animals (1973:315).

As was the case during the rest of his career, Freud believed nothing that was not suggested to him, or even forced upon him, by what he discovered in the process of exploring his own and other people's unconscious. In this case, puzzled by the advanced knowledge of the child, he hits on the analogy of animal instincts, which certainly are inherited, and seems never to have abandoned the idea after that.

That Freud thought he had discovered empirical evidence in the psychoanalytic process for inherited memories in itself hardly constitutes proof that these exist: after all, we as anthropologists are very familiar with people who think there is empirical evidence for all sorts of things that, so far as we are concerned, are not there. But it does locate the ground upon which the question must be approached. For as Freud stated, it is an empirical problem before it is a theoretical one. Freud did not believe in inherited memories until he had empirically accumulated evidence that forced him to come to that conclusion. If it were once established that they existed, then the problem would arise of how they work. But it is unfair for writers to dismiss as theoretically impossible what Freud put forward as empirical findings, especially if those who criticize have not themselves reduplicated the research experiences that led Freud to his conclusions. If the evidence for inherited memory appears only at the end of a long and arduous analysis, it is a little too easy for someone who has not made this journey either as doctor or as patient to deny that certain things do emerge, whether there is any explanation or not ready at hand. If Freud had been swayed by this kind of argument, he never would have discovered psychoanalysis in the first place.¹

Having examined the clearly stated motives for which we have documented evidence from Freud's writing, I now pass on to areas that require somewhat more interpretation or even speculation on my part, to deepen our picture of how Freud conceived of his ideas and why he remained loyal to them.

In his Autobiographical Essay (1925:160), Freud refers to his

¹. For a discussion by a Freudian psychoanalyst of the ways in which clinical material calls for interpretation in terms of phylogenetically inherited ideas, see Fliess (1956).
story of the primal crime as a “vision.” We know that both artists and creative scientists often experience this kind of phenomenon, in which the solution to a problem they have been working on presents itself to them in its entirety with an aura of rightness that is compelling beyond mere reason. Only afterwards do they work out the intermediary steps that “scientifically” lead them to the conclusion they have already reached. Most noteworthy in this regard was Freud’s idol, the poet-naturalist Goethe. Freud, more than many modern thinkers, had a respect for poets and philosophers, whom he regarded as having the privilege of speaking truths toward which scientists and men with common sense had to struggle. Goethe provided him with the model of the poet-scientist, whose poetry and whose science both sprang from a deep intuitive apprehension of the inner structure and meaning of the world. When Freud sometimes spoke of his tale as a “myth” or a “just-so” story, he need not have accepted this as a negative judgment on its truth: Faust is not “true” either, in the sense that the events did not really happen. But that fact has no bearing on whether or not there is truth in Faust.

We know, furthermore, that Freud regarded his discovery of psychoanalysis as the result as much of his insight, intuition, and hermeneutic powers as of his scientific observation. The clearest statement of this is in a letter to Fliess, in which he half-jokingly indulges the fantasy that someday a plaque will be erected in the house in Bellevue (where he dreamed the first dream he successfully analyzed), which would read:

In this house, on July 24, 1895, the secret of dreams was revealed to Dr. Sigm. Freud [my emphasis].

It is essential to an understanding of Freud’s thought in full, then, to stress that he belonged to an intellectual tradition that has its modern roots in Kant, which rejects the Cartesian dualism of res cogitans and res extensa in favor of a unitary view that sees mind and matter as different manifestations or aspects of one substance, in the Spinozist vein. With such a view, a more perfect wedding between poetry and science than is widely achieved today is possible.

If one examines the predecessors to whom Freud most frequently alludes in his writing—Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Jean Paul, and
other writers, Spinoza and Schopenhauer among the philosophers, Fechner and Haeckel among the biologists, not to mention Shakespeare and the ancients, Empedocles no less than Plato and Aristotle—it is evident that he accepted premises that are neither "mentalistic" nor "materialistic," but which reject the very dichotomy that makes either of these possible.

These premises include a belief in the dynamic, creative, structured, and goal-oriented nature of life itself, broadly conceived. Today, such beliefs are often labeled as "vitalism" and consigned to the garbage heaps of intellectual history. For my part, however, I can only agree with Polanyi that if this be vitalism, then it seems little different from plain common sense, and that it takes a willful obstinacy to insist that what is alive really isn't any different from what is dead.

Schopenhauer, never one to mince words, put it still more bluntly:

The polemicizing against the assumption of a life force which is now becoming fashionable deserves to be called not so much mistaken as downright stupid. For whoever denies the life force is fundamentaly denying his own existence, and may thus boast of having scaled the topmost peak of absurdity (1970:215).

Be that as it may, I think that any attempt to redefine Freud as a hard-nosed mechanist—with the attendant glorification of his 1897 Project—and attempts to purge his canonical teachings of "German romanticism" (for examples of this, see Holt 1968, or Wollheim 1971), while they may help certain adherents of psycho-analysis feel less embarrassed in the presence of biologists and logical positivists, are quite untrue to the spirit of Freud.

In our contemporary world view it often seems unthinkable to challenge current scientific teachings, even for anthropologists who are trained to see the relativity of knowledge from their cross-cultural experience. Thus it seems to us strange, and, in a man of Freud's intelligence, downright pigheaded, to say that the biologists are all wrong. (But no one thinks it strange for biologists to say that Freud is all wrong—this is something we hear rather frequently, and no one thinks twice about it.)

But the reason Freud could not be convinced is that he disagreed with the biologists not just about facts and findings, but
also about fundamental premises of the paradigm of his discipline. Such premises are based on belief and experience, not on logic and rational persuasion. And Freud simply failed to believe, simply put, that the mutations that account for evolution are random. This assertion requires some explication.

The orthodox neo-Darwinian theory ingeniously allows nature to seem purposeful without actually being purposeful by means of natural selection operating on the variations produced by random mutation of the genes. The doctrine is maintained in modern times by the biochemists’ “central dogma,” so named by Crick (1966), to the effect that all genetic information is carried in DNA; and while DNA can pass information via RNA to protein, that is, the actual substance of the organism, protein can never send information back to the DNA. Therefore, when DNA restructures itself, it cannot do so on the basis of feedback concerning events occurring between the organism and the environment: to argue that it did would be to suggest that it was striving towards certain goals, and that it was able to adapt itself to reach them. This is precisely the Lamarckian heresy.

But Freud was actually prescient in this regard; for the strict neo-Darwinian paradigm, in its purely mechanistic, random-mutation, form is today subject to serious doubts in many quarters, and is giving way to a structural, or systems-theory view. Not only Freud’s early authorities—Driesch, Haeckel, Fechner—but such contemporary thinkers as Waddington, von Bertalanffy, Selye, Bakan, Piaget, Chomsky, Stent, and numerous lesser figures have argued that notions of organization, structure, homeostasis, and cybernetic control must be introduced into the study of genetics; and while few of these accept that this leads to the idea of purpose or striving, as such, all also realize that the genetic events cannot be conceived of as random. The physicist Wigner has argued (1961) that the possibility of random mutation producing the world we know is statistically improbable at best, as have Eden, Schiztenberger, and Gavadan (quoted in Chomsky 1968). Koestler and Smythies have chaired a provocative symposium to explore these ideas (1969), and Dobzhansky himself concludes a recent book (1967) with favorable words and an approach toward a rapprochement with Teilhard de Chardin, perhaps the archteleologist (Teilhard de Chardin 1959). Even Jacques Monod (1971), who sets out to defend pure chance as the ultimate cause of the universe, is
forced to introduce the idea of “teleonomy” in cells, that is, a foreknowledge of which random mutation is likely to prove beneficial for the organism (just as, in trying to recall a forgotten name, one has a blank but definite mental image of what the name will sound like when one does hit upon it).

Furthermore, while no one denies the central dogma, it seems less central in that DNA gives out its information very selectively; and this implies that either some other mechanism is controlling the DNA, or else that the DNA is itself organized into a higher order system, following the same rules as other systems. This view is supported by contemporary research that indicates that non-histone proteins may have something to do with activating and deactivating the information stored in the DNA. And the well-known similarity between the chromosomal structure of chimpanzees and men suggests that the difference between these species must be found elsewhere than in the DNA itself, perhaps in the organization and timing of its activities.

Freud’s own theory is also a systems theory, built on the homeostatic model: it assumes a certain quantum of energy assigned to a given organism or system, which pursues certain goals—at the very least its survival and reproduction—and does so on the basis of information feedback from its inner and outer environment. Freud, however, went one step farther.

As his letter to Abraham clearly shows, he saw an analogy between the Lamarckian heresy in biology and his own “heresy” in psychology. He had shown that all acts, psychic and physical, could be interpreted as the result of wishes, or intentions, though these are for the most part unconscious, and could only be deduced from the analysis of symptomology. This requires the assumption of a primary psychic purposiveness, represented by the instincts, our animal component, and the source of our striving. These instincts are divided into two classes, those having to do with sexuality, and those having to do with survival.

To these instincts are superadded the capability of symbolic transmutation at the level of primary and secondary process thought. Freud had thus discovered that phenomena previously considered “random” or “meaningless,” such as dreams, madness, slips of the tongue, hysterical illness, and the like, were actually the outcome of complex processes of disguised wish-fulfillment and conflict between unconscious intentions.
It is thus not a difficult step for Freud to suppose that not just human organisms, but all organisms, and even higher level living systems, such as societies, ecosystems, and so on, should be regarded as based on similar principles: a creative striving, with protean powers of transformation. Thus, it is, certainly absurd to state, for example, that a giraffe has a long neck because it wants to, and that its stretching results in offspring with longer necks. But this example, so often used to ridicule Lamarckism, confuses two levels of intentionality, that of phenotype and that of genotype.

If the giraffes, as a species, were constantly discovering advantages to having longer necks, the cybernetic government of the giraffe DNA system, not an individual giraffe, would be the agent that would assimilate this information and restructure itself. This view allows for an interaction between organism and environment, which not only seems to sort well with our own common sense experience of life, but also with certain interpretations of systems theory in biology.

Now it may be objected that neither Freud nor anyone else has proposed a mechanism by which this feedback occurs, or how DNA, or its cybernetic organization, could "think." But it is also quite obviously the case that no one can propose a mechanism by which individual humans or other organisms think and change themselves. That is why Freud abandoned his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* in the first place. The only reason that we believe that individual people have minds that think and solve problems is not that we can locate them anatomically or physiologically, which we cannot, but because we know from experience that we do think and solve problems: it is an empirical *fact*, though no *theory* adequately explains it. Of course, some thinkers, carried away by behaviorism and other mechanistic philosophies, have gone so far as to deny that we really do have minds, or that we really think. While this position has a certain admirable consistency and is rigorously logical, it is no more worth discussing than the question of why the sea is boiling hot, or whether pigs have wings.

No less a scientist than Crick himself assures us that what we call our minds "is simply a way of talking about the functions of our brains" (1966). But even he is forced to admit "The real difficulty comes from the vividness of our experience of consciousness"
(1966:87). This is certainly a problem, and one that nonbelievers in mechanism are going to require more than his bland assurances to overcome.

This example is symptomatic of the attitude of some biochemists, who, having "cracked the genetic code," feel there are no more serious questions left about the nature of life. This attitude strikes me as analogous to that of someone who has discovered how the typewriter works, and so imagines that he has understood everything that was ever written on one. Even if he were able to prove a central dogma that letters always go from the keys to the paper, and never vice versa, I doubt if he would convince us that he had really uncovered the secret of world literature.

When Freud argued, then, that psychoanalysis should join forces with a Lamarckian biology, he was on the one hand proposing that men may be treated as part of nature; but on the other that nature itself may be amenable to the kind of direct understanding and symbolic analysis that he had already achieved with humans. The reader may wonder what such an analysis would look like, and regret that nothing ever came of Freud and Ferenczi's project. But while that joint book itself was never written, the Lamarckian "bioanalysis" did come to fruition in Ferenczi's remarkable *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* (1938), one of the great masterpieces of the psychoanalytic movement. The reader may look there to discover to what mind-expanding uses Freud's ideas may be put.

Having now shown that Freud's Lamarckism was quite deliberate, and interpreted what he intended by it, I would like to turn briefly to some other circumstances that may help us understand Freud's adherence to his views about the primal crime. Freud wrote *Totem and Taboo* just before the outbreak of the First World War, during the death throes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—and Ferenczi's *Thalassa* was written to pass the time while he served as a military doctor in the provinces during the war. It is therefore well to remember that this war, the worst in history until that time, was triggered precisely by the assassination of the heir to the imperial throne by a teenaged assassin. This event itself could hardly have done anything other than confirm Freud's belief that a primordial father-murder and subsequent fratricidal war, followed by the return of the slain father in symbolic form,
was a still-active archetype for the course of human affairs.

Let me pursue this point further. In Moses and Monotheism, Freud was to argue that the Jews murdered Moses in the desert, and that Christ's subsequent sacrifice served both as a reenactment and an expiation of that crime. This may or may not be true; but Christianity grew into a world religion not because of its popularity among the Jews, but because of its reception in Rome. We might, following Freud, therefore surmise that the Romans had a "primal crime" of their own weighing on them that needed expiation; and on a moment's reflection we recall that indeed they did: what man in history symbolizes an all-powerful primal father better than Julius Caesar, who founded the empire that ruled most of the known world, and who reigned only a few months before he was assassinated by a senatorial conspiracy?

One has but to peruse Shakespeare's version of this tragedy to see how neatly it fits the paradigm of a primal crime. Nor is it any coincidence that the connection between the murder of Caesar and that of Jesus a hundred years later is explicitly made by that other titan of Western literature, Dante: in the deepest pit of his Inferno, the devil himself, with three heads, eternally chews on the three worst sinners in history—Judas, the arch traitor, and flanking him on either side the co-conspirators Brutus and Cassius. (See Northrop Frye's Fools of Time for a fuller exposition of the archetype of father-murder in Shakespearean tragedy.)

And is it a mere piquant curiosity that the First World War was, from the point of view of the Eastern front, essentially a fratricidal war between two first cousins, one of whom called himself the Kaiser and the other the Czar—the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire still hashing it out? Both of them, though on opposing sides, managed to lose the war. Each totalitarian rule was overthrown, and following a brief flirtation with democracy, each of their realms spawned the most hideous caricatures of authoritarian states it is possible to imagine, ruled by two tyrants whom it is hard to distinguish except that one of them was even worse than the other. Freud lived through all this in the dying Dual Monarchy, and these events too can only have confirmed what he already thought, whatever the biologists might tell him about what was possible and what was not.
Along similar lines of argument, Ellenberger (1970) has pointed out another historical parallel to the primal crime which may very well have been influential in Freud thought: namely, the events in Turkey in the first decade of this century, which were followed with great interest in neighboring Austria. In the decaying Ottoman Empire, an autocratic Sultan, who kept a huge harem guarded by eunuchs, was overthrown by a brotherhood of officers called the Young Turks. Shortly thereafter, the country reverted to autocracy, now under the dictatorship of someone who called himself “Ataturk”—Father of the Turks. Ellenberger cites this astonishing parallel by way of trying to undermine Freud’s idea, by showing that it was nothing but a fantasy based on historical events; but one can just as easily take it as a good example of the archetypal scenario just acting itself out once again.

The final point to which I turn my attention in this section has to do with the intellectual life and milieu of the cultural and artistic community of Freud’s Vienna. Students of the zeitgeist of fin-de-siècle Vienna have shown to what an extent the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were the dominant influences in every segment of educated society, from the artistic community and the political sphere to the world of science (see for example Janik and Toulmin 1973). Among other things, these philosophies teach the primacy of the Will, conceived as a force of nature and representing the universal striving of the world. While Schopenhauer himself saw in the Will only a source of conflict and sorrow, and so was led to pessimism, others among his followers placed a more positive valuation on it. This includes the school of the so-called “life philosophers,” which includes Nietzsche himself, Dilthey, Bergson with his élan vital, and Ortega y Gasset. Writers such as Bernard Shaw also subscribed to the idea of a “life force.”

Almost all these writers addressed the problem of evolution, and for them, Darwinism did not have a mechanistic ring, but quite the opposite: they saw in evolution the activity of the creative power of nature—a view little different from that of Goethe which was such an inspiration to Freud. Bergson’s views on evolution are well known; Ortega argued that the idea of natural selection showed that nature evolved not for utilitarian reasons, but out of sheer creative exuberance—only after she had done so did the
utilitarian law of natural selection put these essentially artistic or playful inventions to some use. Yeats too found no conflict between Darwinism and his own vision:

the dim unconscious nature, the world of instinct, which (if there is any truth in Darwin) is the accumulated wisdom of all living things from monera to man (quoted in Stock 1961:78 f).

That Schopenhauer is the spiritual ancestor not only of these thinkers but also of Freud is well established, the missing link being provided by Hartmann, whose Philosophy of the Unconscious (1893) sought to integrate post-Kantian German philosophy with remarkably sophisticated ideas about animal behavior. Not only psychoanalysis, but also the Viennese biology of the period emerged from this climate: Fechner, Haeckel, and Driesch, the greatest German-speaking authorities of Freud’s day, all took some sort of vital force for granted; and Freud’s ideas differ only from theirs in identifying this life force, the libido or the instinct of Eros, with sexuality in the broadest sense.

Unlike the Anglo-American world, the Viennese milieu retained this “heretical” biological tradition well into the twenties. Przibram’s famous research institute operated on these principles, and it was here that the Kammerer scandal occurred (see Koestler 1972, as well as Kammerer 1924). Kammerer, the foremost proponent of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, which he demonstrated in never-reduplicated experiments, was discredited because of a fraud in one of his specimens, and committed suicide in 1927. Freud must certainly have known of this, as it was headline news in Vienna.

Koestler’s account of the affair argues that Kammerer probably was not responsible for the fraud. Koestler goes on to propose a mini-Lamarckism of his own, arguing that there could well be small but critical holes in the Weismann barrier, which protects the DNA from being effected by events in the phenotype.

If anthropologists are tempted to leap to negative judgments on this intellectual tradition, they would do well to remember that American anthropology is itself also a direct product of the same Geisteswissenschaft tradition of German thought, and the concept of culture itself, from Boas and Benedict to Geertz, flows directly from the post-Kantian hermeneutical tradition of Nietzsche, Dilthey, Cassirer, and others.
Before leaving this section, I would like to refute another charge often leveled at Freud, namely, that he did not have the scholarly wherewithal to pass judgment on anthropological matters as he often did. His greatest passion besides psychoanalysis itself was archaeology, which in those days included all of prehistory, as well as the history and culture of the Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. He himself claimed that he had read more archaeology than psychology, and we also know from Jones’s account that while writing *Totem and Taboo* he systematically read all the available ethnography on the subject, rightly judging Robertson Smith to be the most worthwhile of the lot (Jones 1956).

A graphic illustration of the primacy of the history of civilization as a whole in his intellectual horizon is to be found in a photograph recently displayed at the Jewish Museum in New York, showing Freud’s study just before he fled Vienna in 1938. The photo of the desk reveals the library behind it: most of the psychology books are off to the right and too high to be reached without effort. But just over the shoulder, within easy reach of the desk chair, is an edition of the works of Champollion, the Egyptologist who first deciphered the early records from the dawn of human consciousness.

**OF WHAT VALUE IS THE PRIMAL CRIME THEORY FOR ANTHROPOLOGY?**

So far, this essay has concerned itself with correcting what I take to be a fairly general misreading of Freud. But, as the reader will have guessed, I would not have undertaken this thankless exercise unless I had some good reason for it. Therefore, I now turn my attention to the question of what value Freud’s ideas might have for us as anthropologists today.

To come directly to the point, I think it is essential at the present moment of paradigm upheaval in anthropology to find a place in the center of the discipline for psychoanalysis, interpreted not in the neo-Freudian sense of Horney, Sullivan, Fromm, and others, but in the true spirit of Freud, of Ferenczi, and of such modern thinkers as N. O. Brown, Marcuse, Philip Slater, and David Bakan.

Anthropology is today polarized along an axis at the ends of which are those who favor a “scientific” or “objective” approach versus those who favor an “interpretive” approach. Any solution to this dichotomy, as is usual in the dialectic, must lie in their incorporation into a new synthesis. This must involve, on the one hand, those who favor an interpretive approach, and oppose me-
chanistic reductionism, coming to realize that culture and society are, after all, part of nature. But in return, the natural scientists must realize that natural science itself should not be merely mechanistic reduction, based on an outmoded model of physics, but that nature itself is meaningful, and may be approached as well through interpretation and understanding. Life itself is characterized by urges, plans, information exchange, feedback, cybernetic control, and even purpose and intelligence, and the proper understanding of such a system requires a hermeneutics as well as an objectifying rigor.

Now one often hears two contradictory criticisms made of psychoanalysis. One is that Freud’s theories need to be pruned of their “vitalism,” to leave the valid clinical, neurologically based observations unhampered by idle speculation about civilization and history. The other, diametrically opposed, stresses that Freud was above all a great student of human symbolism, and that therefore semiotics, not biological science, is the essence of Freud’s thought. This is the position taken, for example, by Lacan (1968).

But this apparent contradiction is actually a source of strength: the reason that Freud’s work can strike observers as being either too biological, or else too symbolic and cultural, is that it is both, and in this fact lies its potential contribution. Psychoanalysis provides us with the only theory available at present by which we may trace in detail how man’s animal nature, rooted in the instincts he inherited from his precultural ancestors, becomes transformed through dynamic symbolic processes into culture. It is for this reason that I wish to restore Freud in his totality to anthropology, and especially his much maligned “cultural books,” in which he lays out the basis for a human science that is both thoroughly biological and at the same time fully cultural.

One of the implications of the view I have just sketched is that culture, though widely variable, is not engraved on a tabula rasa, but arises in response to a pregiven set of determinations stemming from man’s phylogenetic inheritance. This model is not radically different from that of Chomsky, who is able to see beyond the variations in languages to the regularities of “human language.” Levi-Strauss, too, takes for granted that certain logical operations are essential to the working of men’s minds. Such “deep structures” (to use that term very loosely) would never themselves
appear as phenotypes, or events; but they would render such phenomena intelligible.

A similar model was proposed much earlier by Goethe. In his theory of plants, he interpreted all observable plants as variations on one hypothetical Ur-plant, which contains the paradigm, as it were, of what a plant must have to qualify as a proper plant. The plethora of plants in nature is nothing but the realization of the possibilities inherent in the paradigm. (Kammerer also suggested that species themselves might be looked upon as "local variants" of a single protean organism.)

Thus a psychic complex, too, might be seen as a phylogenetic paradigm or typical scenario that structures man's society and culture. It would be of value if it empirically proved to be a generative structure, through the assumption of which, along with a system of symbolic transformations, the vast but finite varieties of cultural systems might be explained and rendered intelligible.

This differs little from the Mendeleev model of classical chemistry: one posits a set of underlying elements (which themselves are only structures by which still more primordial "stuff" is organized); and through the laws of their combination, one generates the world and all the things in it. But the elemental structures themselves, like the "instincts" in man, are rarely met with in their pure form in nature; they must be discovered through "analysis," that is, by undoing the combinations into which they have arranged themselves.

The primal crime suggested itself to Freud as a possible root paradigm of some aspects of the human condition, on the basis of his clinical experience, his reading of archaeology and history, his interpretations of religious doctrines, and his understanding of primate behavior. How does this evidence look to us today?

Freeman, one of Freud's most sympathetic anthropological readers, has attempted to render Freud's ideas more acceptable by discarding not only the Lamarckian idea, but also the assumptions about primates and about ethnology with which Freud worked. What would be left would be phylogenetic agonistic and sexual drives, which, in the context of the nuclear family, would adequately account for the Oedipus complex as it exists in man today. But I believe Freeman has been rather too hasty (Freeman 1967).

First, with regard to the primates: Freeman points out that
Darwin and Atkinson had an inadequate knowledge of gorilla behavior: gorillas in fact do not kill junior rivals, and they seem to have a high threshold of both sexual arousal and jealousy. But this objection is negated, as Fox has noted (1967b), because we no longer regard the gorillas as prototypes of early man, but are more inclined to look towards the trooping monkeys and chimpanzees. But if that is true, then it does not matter what Darwin, Atkinson, or Freud thought about gorillas; today they would have turned to the baboons and chimps, whose social behavior does indeed correspond to their suppositions about the primal horde. (Though of course, man's ancestors must have differed from all other known primates in some very crucial respects, in order to have become Homo sapiens.)

I do not have the space here to argue in detail how contemporary observations of primates support Freud's picture of the primal horde. Fox has already argued this case persuasively (1967b). I may merely summarize the relevant points. It is generally agreed that in baboon society, one finds either a single-male family, from which young adult males are excluded altogether; or else larger troops with a core of dominant males monopolizing the breeding with the females, and bands of young bachelor males relegated to the peripheries, where they may serve as guards, but from where they may also attempt raids on the women in the core. One finds, furthermore, that even when there are several males, they are arranged in a hierarchy with a single leader at the top; and that positions along this hierarchy and at the top itself are won through combat, though seldom to the death. Finally, there seems to be a tendency for mother-child units to endure, and for a de facto mother-son incest prohibition to be operative. There seems far less restriction upon the sexual activities of mature dominant males. All these points, it should be obvious, tend to support rather than contravene Freud's hypothesis, with the proviso pointed out by Mead (1964) that the situation in the nuclear family is simply one form of the general pattern of conflict between young and old males.

As for Freud's insistence that the primal father castrated his junior rivals, I may call attention to the observation that the effect of baboon social organization is to exclude all but the dominant male(s) from breeding; but as David Bakan has pointed out, in biblical language to be "cut off" means to be left without descendants. The symbolic equation between this meaning of "cut off"
and the literal one, which has the same effect, allows us to understand Freud's meaning in this way (Bakan 1966).

Secondly, Freeman argues that the ethnographic evidence used by Freud for the existence of the totemic meal, as a support for his hypothesis, is actually fairly skimpy: Saint Nilus's account of the Arabs eating a camel and six other ethnographic examples are the total sum mentioned in Totem and Taboo. Others have argued, further, that Goldenweiser (1910) and recently Levi-Strauss (1963) effectively demolished the notion of a totemic complex involving clan organization, food taboos, and mystical links with certain animals.

But it is precisely Levi-Strauss's own structuralism that allows us to see that we would be wrong to search for whole complexes in the ethnographic record; just as individual myths are fragments of a much larger, hypothetical myth complex, so too we may find only fragments of a proposed totemic complex in any given culture. And though we rarely find all the elements together, it is even rarer to find a culture that does not exhibit some aspect of an overarching totemic complex: communal feasting and an ideology of shared substance through food; food taboos lifted under ritual occasions, or imposed on others; mystical bonds between men and animals; clans associated with myths of fantastic ancestors—who can name a culture in which all of these are completely absent?

If one looks at the ethnographic record with a slightly more charitable eye, one cannot agree with Freeman that the six cases mentioned by Freud—Aztec, Ottowa, Zuni, Bini, Ainu, and Central Australians—exhaust the list of ethnographic cases that lend support to the hypothesis of the primal crime as reflected or re-enacted in totemic feasts and related rituals and beliefs.

The Ainu, for example, perform a bear ceremony that fits to a T the description of a totem feast proposed by Freud as a commemoration of the primal crime. But they are not alone in this: almost all the other ethnic groups of Siberia, as well as numerous North American groups, also have some variant or other of the bear ceremony, though not always in a form that so closely resembles Freud's paradigm as that of the Ainu.

And while attempts have been made to dismiss Saint Nilus and his camel, any reader of Divinity and Experience will have been struck by the similarities to this of the ritual consumption of the still-quivering thighs of an ox by the members of the Flesh clan;
indeed, the parallel is so close that Lienhardt (1961) himself remarks that were one so inclined, one could draw support from his data for a "certain well-known psychological theory."

If one makes the not-unwarranted assumption that a cannibalized part of the father included especially his brains, which are widely linked symbolically with spinal fluid and semen, and hence with both wisdom and power (see Onions 1954), then a great deal more evidence comes to mind; the widespread evidence of trepanning, brain-cannibalism, ritual use of bear heads, and so on, in the prehistoric record, apparently reaching back to the Australopithecines; the common Eurasian practice of making drinking cups from skull caps; scalping; and perhaps most remarkable, the Chinese communal feast on live monkey brains.

The kava rituals of Polynesia, too, seem likely candidates in this regard, and this suggestion lurks hidden in Bott's recent article on that subject. Even this hint, however, was too much for Leach, who was thrown into such a tizzy that he actually proposed a structuralist alternative interpretation and insisted that it was "rigorous," as opposed to the "intuitive" insights of psychoanalysis! (See Bott and Leach in la Fontaine 1972.)

I might also mention, for ethnographic diversity, that among the Kayapo of Brazil (Turner n.d.) the jaguar and other large carnivores are taboo as food. But when a jaguar is killed, boys who are about to undergo initiation are allowed to spend the night on the outskirts of the village, where they alone may eat the jaguar. This one example only suggests the rich area of initiation rites, and men's societies in general, as parallels of the situation in the primal horde, and as ritual solutions to the problems posed by it. The data on Nyakyusa men's societies (Wilson 1951) are among the most fascinating in this regard.

Finally, I may just mention that the Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman cultural tradition is so full of dying gods, murdered heroes, eaten deities, and the rest of it that I need do no more than simply draw attention to it. I do not have the space here to multiply examples, but I have at least shown that the case is not quite so flimsy as Freeman suggests.

But even if we concede that the primal horde may have been composed as Freud suggested, and that the ethnographic record can be interpreted so as to support the hypothesis that the paradigm of the primal horde is operative in structuring some aspects of human
culture, are we to imagine that the primal crime actually occurred in history, and became part of man's inheritance? My answer to that question takes the following form:

The primal crime represents the moment when man passed from the realm of nature into that of culture. But what precisely is the realm of culture? I propose that we do not try to equate culture with any tangible trait such as tool use, complex communication, complicated social organization, even art and ritual, since each of these can be found among animals to whom we would deny culture. Rather, each of these things may be cultural, provided it is done in a certain way. What is that certain way?

To be cultural, a thing must spring not from the compulsion of species-specific behavior patterns and impulses, but must result from the manipulation of symbols. Bees can communicate with each other in complex ways; but they could never be taught to speak French. Bower birds can build bowers of exquisite beauty; but they could never produce even the most uninspired oilpainting.

Culture thus implies that its creator or user exercises choice; and choice implies that there are several possibilities; and therefore that no option is forced upon the cultural being by his "nature." This is precisely what is made possible by the capacity for symbolism. For symbolism, broadly conceived, is nothing but the construction of images or thoughts that are not real, that is, which are not immediate motor responses to immediate internal or external stimuli. If symbol use is defined as simply "being aware of something that is not the case," then we can see how everything from metaphor, metonym, condensation, and meaningful language, to reason, the formal rules of logic, and plans for how to spend the evening, are all equally symbols. These do not simply reflect the real world: they are intrinsic to our perception, in fact our construction, of the world itself, for every physical event is clothed for us in symbolic extensions of meaning beyond itself.

Pursuing this line of thought, we are led to see that a more fundamental peculiarity of our mental structure underlies our ability to symbolize. This is the separation of the subject of conscious awareness from the subject of motor activity in our psyches. The subject of conscious awareness is able to construct an internal "screen" against the background of which the symbolic displays can be observed, without any reference to or effect on actual events in the outside world. This separation allows us to be aware
of ourselves, a central facet of our capacity for culture; and it also allows us to take the perspective of the "third person," that is, to objectify, and, without reacting subjectively, to think over a situation in which we are involved and only then decide on a course of action.

But in making this separation within our minds, which grants us so many benefits, including both our freedom and our ability to be aware of enjoying it, we also cut the links that connect us directly to our phylogenetic and instinctual inheritance, which now must reach their aims through symbolic means. But since symbols, through their power of transformation and recombination, are, like a language, infinitely creative, the demands placed upon us by the cybernetic government of our organism no longer have the absolute authority to compel us to do one, species-specific thing. They leave us free, rather, to choose between manifold symbolic possibilities.

But with this terrible freedom, we have no real basis for deciding which option to choose. Therefore, culture itself must come to the rescue: when we are enculturated, some symbols masquerade as natural imperatives, and take on the authoritative quality that shapes our personal and national character. But precisely because of our capacity for imagining what is not the case, and for thinking through the implications of things apart from action, we can always choose to doubt any proposition, symbolic, or real, and regain our freedom.

I have, therefore, described the process of acquiring culture as a movement by ourselves, conceived of as the subjects of our awareness, away from the thralldom of the biologically innate commands of the cybernetic government of our motor system. This separation, while at first granting us independence, also results in the anxiety of separation, isolation, and a sense of meaninglessness, resulting from the ultimate falseness of the symbolic world. Therefore, there is a constant tendency to elevate some symbols, by cathecting them with libido, to the status of substitutes for the natural imperatives, and to seek in some philosophy or other an ethical and cognitive basis on which to act.

But it is obvious that the scenario I have just described for events taking place within the intrapsychic system in the natural history of culture is exactly parallel to what happens in the social system according to the scenario of the primal crime. In the primal
horde, conceived as a biological system itself, the primal father had absolute authority, and thus embodied the cybernetic governor of the system, enforcing through his power the imperatives of nature. But the disgruntled brothers held secret confabulations among themselves, and with the emergent skills of protoculture, imagined that things might be different. They plotted, they planned, they discussed, they organized, they designed new weapons, and with all these cultural arts under their belt, they declared the freedom of culture from the constraints of nature by killing the upholder of the natural order.

This was, then, the moment of final separation in which culture was born, culture conceived of as the independence of the self from the absolute command of phylogeny. At first, the brothers were ecstatic in their freedom, but this was quickly followed by remorse, as the chill of separation began to set in. The father had been a tyrant, but he also provided security and had not allowed doubt to gnaw at the robustness of action. Now his absence seemed to pave the way to fear, emptiness, the war of all against all, and the sickness unto death.

To flee from this unhappy state, the brothers in a state of remorse imposed upon themselves moral restrictions, and social rules, which they sought to justify by positing a supreme invisible being who might take the place of the absolute father. The central values and beliefs of this "culture" which they set up they sought to imbue with the quality of being not just symbolic, but natural.

But since this culture was, after all, really only symbolic, other variations of it grew and multiplied, until there was a plethora of competing symbolic worlds. In subsequent generations, some men sought to pass themselves off as fathers, with natural (or divine) authority, and if they were imbued with charisma (or libido) they succeeded; but when they lost their charm, others doubted their word, and, imagining that things could be other than they were, overthrew them, only to begin the cycle anew.

The analogy between social and psychic processes which I have described leads me to conclude that something like the primal crime must have occurred. I am not prepared to say when or how or how many times, but the overthrow of nature by culture, whenever it happened, must have been a decisive and earth-shattering time; and this scenario is replicated in each of us, perhaps in our phylogenetic memory, but even more strikingly, in the parallel
structure of our own minds, in which our consciousness first struggles to establish its independence, and then, having separated itself, must move toward rejoining that from which it has cut itself off, either kicking and screaming in protest, or with a sense of having rediscovered a long lost happiness.

I believe that this analysis has enabled me also to understand why Freud insisted in Totem and Taboo that the primal crime was a deed and not a fantasy. If it was truly the origin of culture separate from nature, in the sense I have proposed here, then the primal crime must have been a deed, because in the state of nature there can be no separation between thought and action. That separation, and the phenomenon of "fantasy" which it makes possible, is itself only possible when culture is already highly developed. In the state of nature, once the brothers conceived their plan, they would have had to turn it into action. Since the screen of fantasy on which culture presents itself must be constructed from energy deflected from the natural drives, as Freud argued, the men who participated at the very inception of culture can hardly have been so expert in the art of repression and delayed gratification. The quality of bringing an idea completely to fruition in the mind alone is a distinctive feature of fully cultural man.

It is thus, I believe, that we must understand the penultimate passage of Totem and Taboo, where Freud rejects the idea that the memory of the crime might after all be only a fantasy, as so often happens in analogous cases with neurotics. He writes:

But neurotics are above all inhibited in their actions: with them the thought is a complete substitute for the deed. Primitive men, on the other hand, are uninhibited: thought passes directly into action (1950:161).

Freud's comment may be interpreted satisfactorily if we take it as applying not to contemporary "primitive" peoples, whom we assume are as fully cultural as anyone else, but rather those primordial men who actually made the transition from nature to culture. And as for his often criticized "equation of savages and neurotics," we can see from this quote that he does precisely the opposite: neurotics are suffering, if anything, from too much cul-
ture, not from too little, since for them the symbolic world of fantasy has replaced the real one.

Having now answered the question I set myself essentially in the positive, I have little space left in which to indicate how it might be put to use in the understanding of ethnographic data. In a forthcoming paper I will assay a full-scale cultural analysis from the point of view I have established here. But for the present, I conclude this paper by simply sketching the outlines of how the primal crime theory clarifies a single, albeit important, anthropological problem, that of the importance of the mother's brother in so many kinship systems.

Building on the work of Lowie and his predecessors, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) argued that special relationships between a sister's son and mother's brother would flourish in patrilineal societies, where mother's brother would take on aspects of the nurturant role of mother. In matrilineal societies, the same would apply to the father and father's sister. Levi-Strauss (1967) rejected this view as being not only empirically inaccurate, but also based on wrong assumptions. He pointed out that Radcliffe-Brown had taken as his unit of kinship the nuclear family (see fig. 1).

![Diagram](fig. 1. Radcliffe-Brown's "atom of kinship")

But Levi-Strauss argued that because of the fundamental rule of the incest taboo, universal in human societies, and the attendant necessity of exchange in any marriage, another party must be added to the "atom of kinship," namely the mother's brother, for it is he who must give a woman away before she can produce a
family (Levi-Strauss 1967). Thus Levi-Strauss amended the elementary kinship chart (see fig. 2).

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 2.** Levi-Strauss's "atom"

He proceeds from this insight to argue that a certain relationship necessarily holds among the four basic relationships inherent in this system; these relationships are H/W, B/Z, F/S, and MB/ZS. (It is interesting that he omits M/S altogether.) His proposed rule is that the relationships, judged as either positive or negative in tone will conform to the pattern MB/ZS : B/Z : : F/S : H/W. The astute reader will notice, however, that his own examples do not bear this out. The actual pattern that emerges from his examples and others is that generally speaking, H/W is the opposite of B/Z, and F/S is the opposite of ZS/MB, regardless of how descent is reckoned. That is, if a man is close and friendly with his wife, he is likely to be distant, formal, or hostile with his sister, and vice versa; and the same holds true between a man and his father on the one hand and his mother's brother on the other.

But our present analysis has allowed us to isolate a unit of kinship still more elementary than the one proposed by Levi-Strauss as the paradigm underlying all superimposed cultural transformations, namely, the precultural, preincest taboo primal horde. This "atom" has the structure shown in figure 3.

In figure 3, the male in the higher generation stands for the primal father, or the dominant male; the lower male symbol represents any junior male; and the female may stand in any or all of the following relationships to the senior male: consort, sister, daughter, but probably not mother; while she may stand in the
relation of mother or sister (or both) but not daughter or consort to the junior male.

Thus, as the chart graphically shows, in the primal horde the primal father was the mother’s brother. These two roles were merged; or more properly, they had not yet been separated out one from the other. It is, therefore, no mystery why mother’s brother should enter the picture—he has been there from the start.

As I have argued earlier, when the “atom” of the primal horde is smashed, and its energy released to create culture and society, through the imposition of the incest taboo and the rule of reciprocity (which is just a transform of Freud’s primordial law of the talion), things that were unified are divided and separated, and a multitude proceeds out from the unity.

A new element is introduced into the kinship system—relations by law, or culture, are separated from those by substance, or nature. (See Schneider 1968 for a fuller exposition of this point.) This division creates a distinction between women who may be married and women who may not be married. This produces the new separate categories of wife, sister, and daughter, each mutually exclusive; and these generate their reciprocals on the male side, husband, father, brother, mother’s brother, and so on. These are all thus cultural, symbolic categories, produced by splitting the atom of kinship with the incest taboo—which involves nothing other than simply drawing a distinction. (On the fundamental importance of drawing distinctions, see G. Spencer Brown, 1972.)

Among all the possible relationships, only that between mother and son, and that between junior male and senior male would
seem in some way to precede culture, and spring from nature.

Since Freud argued that the primitive feeling felt by a junior male to his “father” is one of ambivalence, that is, both love and hate, it is easy to see that in human society, the institution of having both a father and a mother’s brother, separated out from each other, is an excellent structural solution to a possible source of conflict, since one can serve as the recipient of love and friendship, and the other as the object of hatred and rivalry.

What should strike us as anomalous, then, is not the presence of the mother’s brother in a prominent role in a kinship system, but rather the absence of a mother’s brother or of some figure who can substitute for him and receive part of the ambivalent feeling evoked by the senior male, such as a substitute father, or godfather.

In our own contemporary society, the nuclear family is the fundamental unit of kinship, and its structure closely parallels in miniature the archetypal phylogenetic paradigm; nor do we provide alternatives for the father such as I have mentioned, or institutions to deal with the conflicts of maturing males such as initiation ceremonies or men’s societies (at least not on any grand scale). Perhaps it is because our inner conflicts are thus thrown back in upon themselves with no escape hatch that we typically have such classical Oedipus complexes, with a maximum of both competitive striving and self-punitive guilt.

From the point of view I have taken here, it is possible to agree with both Malinowski and Jones in their famous debate on the subject of the Oedipus complex and the mother’s-brother (Malinowski 1966, Jones 1925). It is true, as Malinowski argued, that the Trobrianders, as individuals and as a culture, have a different nuclear complex from ours—it would be pointless to deny it, since this is precisely what makes them Trobrianders and not Englishmen, or Poles. This complex of theirs, furthermore, is clearly a product of the different arrangement of their kinship system.

But that kinship system itself, somewhat as Jones argued, is a particular symbolic solution constructed by their culture to deal with the still deeper primal complex upon which all kinship systems must be built. Given the arguments I have put forth, Jones need not have posited the circuitous, Rube Goldberg mechanism he proposed to explain how the Trobrianders really
did not challenge the Freudian doctrine of the primacy of the Oedipus complex. He argued, the reader will recall, that though they seem to deny knowledge of paternity, the Trobrianders have unconscious knowledge of it, which they have repressed, because their delicate egos are too fragile to handle this information; consequently, they invented matriliny as a further denial of any relationship to their father, and finally deflected their Oedipal feelings onto their poor mother’s brother.

But as I have shown, the mother’s brother need not be such a secondary figure. Rather, he is intrinsically just as good a cultural symbol of the primal father as the person we would call “father.” Matrilineal clans are just as good as patrilineal clans for symbolically reproducing the horde as it continues over time: in both cases males succeed each other and perpetuate the line, in the latter case by bringing in outside women to bear the children, and in the former by bringing in outside men to father them. Furthermore, the question of whether Trobrianders really have knowledge of paternity is an irrelevant issue, interesting though it is. As the baboons demonstrate, a social group can have intrinsic structural conflict between junior and senior males without any of the participants being capable of spelling out the biological details of conception—and this although the conflict is in large part concerned with sexual access to the females for the purpose of breeding.

My proposed psychoanalytic argument therefore does not suffer from a possible defect in Jones’s argument, which is the implication that the Trobrianders are more primitive than us, in the sense that they are lower on an evolutionary scale of progressive movement away from nature and childishness, towards culture and mature ego strength.

I simply propose that the Trobrianders, like many other cultures, have solved the male intergenerational conflict problem by spreading the imago of the primal father over two cultural roles, the supportive, affectionate in-marrying father, and the authoritarian mother’s brother, who is the person that the young male must displace to achieve his full stature in society.

Many observers have supposed that because the young Trobriander’s father is his sexual rival, in that he sleeps with his mother, while his mother’s brother is his rival for power and status, this throws a monkey wrench into the whole Freudian
theory of the Oedipus complex. But it is not simply the father as we conceive him in our culture who is the rival in the Oedipus complex, as I have interpreted it; it is rather the archetype of the primal father or dominant male, who is, as I have shown, "father" and "mother's brother" all rolled into one.

Between them, the Trobriand father and mother's brother share all the qualities that characterize the primal father in his relationship to junior males: love and hate, protection and control, fear and respect, sexual rivalry and homosexual or brotherly affection, and so forth. What makes cultures different is not whether all these emotions are present, for they are; but rather how they are symbolically distributed, and what symbolic devices are employed to express them, and to try to resolve the inherent conflicts among them.

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