Nature, culture and gender

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Preface

The book was conceived in Swansea at the 1977 meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists. We listened to Harris's paper in which she mentioned that married couples were the social category considered fully cultural in Laymi society. Chatting afterward about the assumption that nature is to culture as female is to male, one of us (MacCormack) mentioned that on the basis of her field work, the gender part of the equation did not seem universally valid. The other (Strathern) made the more radical suggestion that on the basis of her field work, she could not subscribe to the putative universality of the nature–culture categories themselves. We had been stimulated by ideas in important articles by Ardener, and Ortner, in which the nature–culture and female–male analogy was explicitly, though very differently, developed. Why were we so fascinated by those theoretical propositions? Jordanova, then a research fellow in history and philosophy of science, gave us insights into some of the assumptions of our own intellectual tradition. On another occasion, while co-examining a pile of student scripts with Maurice Bloch, and wishing to talk about anything but the chore before us, we turned to nature, culture and Rousseau. Jean Bloch, a lecturer in French, then added her valuable perspective.

In addition to this process of 'cultural self-analysis', we felt the need for a 'second opinion' from ethnographers interested in folk definitions of nature and gender. Jane Goodale had long ago raised a query about the Ortner paradigm, a query she elaborates here. Gillian Gillison worked in the same geographical region as Marilyn Strathern, but among people whose cultural constructs could not be more different from those in Strathern's Mt Hagen area. Our thinking had also been influenced by Nicole-Claude Mathieu's 1973 article in *L'Homme*, and we were disappointed when the pressure of work precluded her contributing a chapter to the book.

Our invitation to the various contributors was simply to reflect upon the manner in which anthropologists especially have used the concepts of nature and culture in the exegesis of other peoples' gender symbolism. While we have been concerned to bring together a collection of essays focussed on a single theme, this has not been a collective endeavour, and no single line of argument has been imposed on the contributions. Indeed, in

the first place each was written largely independently of the others. They thus represent the meeting of diverse interests; at the same time most at one point or other relate their own arguments to the monumental works of Lévi-Stranss, as well as the inspiration of Ardener on the one hand and Ortner on the other. Although the resultant and numerous citations might give the impression that we are treating these authors' writings as some kind of 'text', we would rather be understood to be using them as exemplars. The ideas of nature and culture, though employed with varying intention, are encountered in their works as explicit analytical devices. If they have drawn, as anthropology must, on philosophical constructs embedded in our own cultural tradition, they have also — unwittingly or no — stimulated an easy acceptance of the conclusion that to illuminate other people's thought systems in such terms yields an ultimate insight into what other 'cultures' imagine they are all about.

That it is necessary to go over again ground long traversed by other disciplines, and by anthropology itself in the old nature--nurture debate, comes directly from the current interest in conceptualisations of gender which has followed the discovery of 'women' as an analytical category. This is not of course restricted to anthropology — far from it; anthropology thrives on and in turn feeds widespread contemporary concern with gender studies. One theme which emerges quite strongly from these essays is the self-consciousness of our own culture about its 'culture' in antithesis to nature, in the same way as many attempts at feminist analysis are predicated upon a self-consciousness about the category 'woman', in antithesis to man. Indeed, these two concerns may be brought into explicit conjunction. So although this book is framed in a largely anthropological idiom, by asking how and to what end we sometimes resort to notions of nature and culture in our explication of gender formulations, it touches on issues much more widely located in the world we inhabit.

The Women in Society Research Seminar at Cambridge organized by Elena Lieven and Marthe Macintyre commented constructively on three of the chapters. We also wish to thank members of anthropology seminars at Cambridge, the London School of Economics, Oxford, Sussex, UCLA, and the Collège de France for commenting on some of these chapters. Our ideas are our own responsibility, but the lively response from colleagues gave the encouragement necessary to see the task through.

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1 Nature, culture and gender: a critique

CAROL P. MacCORMACK

I

Categories and transformations

This is an exploration of the belief that human beings differ from animals and its corollary that culture is distinct and contrasted with nature. We are also concerned with the question of metaphoric transformations of the nature—culture contrast into raw—cooked or wild—tame. More contro·versially, we will explore the possibility that the female—male contrast can be understood as a further metaphoric transformation of an allegedly universal nature—culture contrast (Ortner 1974 and Ardener 1975). However, we are not only concerned with stark categories or metaphoric clusters of contrasts standing in wooden opposition to each other, but will also consider how we conceive of nature becoming culture; the process by which we feel we became human. Or, as formulated by Rousseau, how we passed from a state of nature to become beings with language and culture.

Following Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss attributes this transition to our capacity for culture rather than to the manifestations of culture itself (Wokler 1978:126). From our capacity to make discriminations, such as between 'us' as a kin category and 'other', and our ability to know rules of incest avoidance and marriage exogamy, we are capable of the Rousseau-esque social contract in which we give up a state of nature, which means incest and the social isolation of small kin groups, for reciprocating kin ties and social contracts with others (Badcock 1975). To exist as a species we must eat, copulate, and meet other basic animal needs. To do so is 'natural' in that it is necessary for all animals. Whereas most basic human needs must be met or the *individual* will die, and they can be satisfied individually, procreative sex is not necessary to maintain the life of individuals but of *societies*, and that need cannot be met individually but requires paired

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opposites: male and female. Sexuality is natural but becomes cultural with incest prohibitions and rules of marriage exogamy (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:30).

From the rule to give 'us' (siblings) and receive 'other' (spouse) follows further patterned exchanges in persons, goods and services, and information. Exchanges which manifest the structure of human society give clues to the structure of an ultimate human code. The foundation of an ultimate structure is the human ability to make binary distinctions (Lévi-Strauss 1978:22–3). By perceiving opposites or contrasts the mind builds up its perceptions of the world. One does not perceive light without knowing darkness, nor unvoiced fricatives without knowing voiced ones. But isolated contrasts are not an end in themselves, for the human mind seeks analogies with other contrastive phenomena and upon finding them encompasses the analogies into its system of classification. On a conscious level people are aware of concrete manifestations rather than the relations themselves, but for structuralists the unconscious tendency to perceive relations is fundamental to the mind.[1]

The first distinction all new-born humans make is that between self and nurturing other. Then, as children develop they begin to discern phonetic contrasts, expanding the scope of logical operations inherent in the nature of their minds. Animals have no sense of kin boundaries; have no incest taboo or other socially-transmitted rules. The capacity to know rules binding upon all individuals is essential for the formation of human society, and from this capacity to know and formulate rules comes marriage, social alliances, language, and reciprocities of all kinds (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:32–3). The original transformation from nature to culture is repeated as societies perpetuate themselves by their cultural rules.

Unconscious and conscious

Structuralists proceed upon the basis of belief that there is a single basic structure of binary thinking underlying all human mental functioning and behaviour, which can be discovered through orderly analysis informed by techniques of linguistic analysis. Once that structure is known it can help us understand the whole of human behaviour despite its manifest diversity. When the coding of the mind is known we will be able to decode the products of minds (Scheffler 1970:58).

Structuralist theory is inspired by linguistic theory, particularly by the work of de Saussure, who described language as a set of signs which could be studied in isolation from other cultural products. Language could be broken down into discrete elements, then one could examine the way the elements were combined to produce meaning. De Saussure expanded his

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1   See Gardener (1976) for further discussion of this point, especially with reference to Lévi-Strauss and Piaget.

enquiry to include forms of etiquette, military signals, rituals and other systems of meaning. In all these, one could develop abstract formal models of underlying structure.

Following from de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss sought the cause of kinship, myth and totemic classification in our intellectual nature which, at its deepest and most pan-human level, is largely unconscious, just as comprehension of phonetic opposites is systematic and rational even though we are unaware of them. Kinship and myth are analogous in structure to language and function as codes.[2]

Lévi-Strauss is not an Idealist for whom the mind embodies fundamental logical categories and final truths. He does indeed have a Kantian unconscious which combines and categorizes, but it is a categorizing system homologous with nature or is nature itself (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:11). It is located in the physical brain, with its capacity to constitute codes which we call culture (Lévi-Strauss 1978:8).

For Lévi-Strauss, 'the unconscious . . . is always empty – or more accurately it is akin to mental images as the stomach is to food which passes through it. As the organ of a specific function the unconscious merely imposes structural laws upon inarticulate elements which originate elsewhere' (Lévi-Stranss quoted in Jenkins 1979:14). The brain functions at this unconscious level to generate ordered systems of representations by placing the perceptions which pass through it into relations of contrast and opposition.

One of the great difficulties with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism is the nature of the link between these unconscious functions of the brain and the 'reality' structuralism is meant to explain. Lévi-Strauss locates fundamental structure at the deep level of unconscious function, and gives it an ontological status, or existence, of its own. But what is the exact relationship between the organizing work of the unconscious and the conceptual domain of social structure, political relations, and so forth? On this latter conscious level concepts and operational categories do their work of giving meaning to empirical perceptions. Either we can leave the relationship between the physical brain's function and the mind's work of conceptual model building unexplained, or we can unify them in one of two possible ways.

We might opt for a biological reductionism in which the emphasis is placed on the role of the physical brain. Indeed, much of Lévi-Strauss's thinking is reductionist. He uses nature in two senses; the phenomenological world as we perceive it, excluding culture. Nature then is the residual category of everything outside culture (Badcock 1975:98). But it is also human nature to which cultural codes are reduced and, as Leach has pointed

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2   Lévi-Strauss (1978:53) has stated that myth and music are not merely analogous with language but are derived from language.

out, Lévi-Strauss is caught in paradox. If he succeeds in identifying facts such as the incest taboo and rules of exogamy as universally true for humans, they must be natural. However, he assumes that the unique cultural quality of humanity rests on that which is not natural; on that which is socially transmitted and arbitrary in the way that symbol is to meaning in language (Leach 1970:121 and 1973:39). Thus, in one sense Lévi-Strauss reduced culture to biology; culture is nature, the physical brain and human nature. But in his later work, he suggested that the nature—culture contrast was an artificial creation of culture (1969a:xxxix), and was only a methodological device (1966:247).[3]

Schneider pushed the pendulum the rest of the way; culture is not nature, but nature is entirely a cultural concept (1972). We might regard all representations of structure as *concepts* of structure formulated at a conscious level through the process of model building (Jenkins 1979:36—7). In this book we are not concerned with an unknowable unconscious but with folk models of nature, culture and gender which are consciously expressed in particular societies. That is not to say that every member of the society in question can express a complete, coherent model. The observer must build it up from explicit statements, myths, symbols, modes of classification, and other observations (see chapter 8). Nor is there a single model which characterizes the thought of all people in a society. If we think of a model as a plan for action, for example in making marriage alliances, there may be different plans for action held by different groups with varying degrees of political power in the society. Or, we may think of normative and pragmatic models which actors hold simultaneously.

Scheffler has argued that all formal models should have three qualities: (1) simplicity, (2) consistency, and (3) they should be judged adequate and appropriate by the local people in question (1970:67). Lévi-Strauss dismisses the question of adequacy and correspondence with conscious models, regarding the conscious as a screen which may hide the deep structure (1963:281). Nutini has attempted to find a middle ground, suggesting that unconscious models and conscious models are not different in kind but in degree, and that we are dealing with a single model which is revealed by the most careful, detailed field work possible (1970:82). Leach has commented that when we begin the study of another culture we rapidly formulate a model with which to explain it, but the model is largely shaped by our own presuppositions and may not correspond at all to the conscious model in the minds of the native people. But as months go by and we learn

3   See Badcock (1975) for a fuller discussion, and a comparison of Lévi-Strauss's biological reductionism with that of Freud. In his later work, Lévi-Strauss writes of the ambiguity of nature. It is subcultural, but it is also the means through which man hopes to contact ancestors, spirits and gods. Thus, nature is also 'supernatural' (1977:320).

the language and the thought patterns of the people, we radically revise the model. Those who work at a distance, from published ethnographic literature, and ethnographers who already 'know' the salient categories and their meaning before going to the field, are likely to give attention only to the phenomena that fit their presuppositions. Leach rejects Lévi-Strauss's definition of social anthropology as a branch of semiology with the internal logical structure of the meanings of sets and symbols as its central concern, looking instead for meaning in the actual social behaviour of human beings (1970:105).

Structuralist theory gives comprehensive explanations, but because it refers to the unconscious it is difficult to validate, while more empirically based theory is easy to validate but offers explanations which are less satisfying and often tautologous. Some observers have suggested that structurally-oriented social scientists model themselves after natural scientists, observing, describing, then constructing formal models with which to draw conclusions about the significance of that which they observed (Gardener 1976:4—7). Leach, however, speculates that Lévi-Strauss started at the other end by first asking himself: 'how is it and why is it that men, who are part of nature, manage to see themselves as "other than" nature even though, in order to subsist, they must constantly maintain "relations with" nature'? (1970:129). Lévi-Strauss observes that such things as the incest taboo or cooking are widespread, but not necessary to maintain life in the animal world. Therefore these things must be symbols 'by which culture is distinguished from nature in order that men might reassure themselves that they are not beasts' (Leach 1970:129). Others have also commented that Lévi-Strauss's method is not inductive but primarily deductive. He hypothesizes that in every myth he should find a structuring binary opposition which is not specific for only one version of the myth. Indeed, he does find it and often complementary pairs of oppositions as well (Pettit 1975:87—8).

'Nature' and 'culture' as cultural constructs

We do not wish to deny that binary contrasts are vital to human thought; it is the allegedly universal meanings given to some category nouns which concern us. Since the structuralist method seeks to reduce data to their symbolic structure, symbols are more real than the phenomena; the signifier is more important than the signified (Scholte 1974:428). But symbols such as nature or female have meanings attached to them which are culturally relative. Douglas, and Kirk, insist that content cannot be ignored; different versions of a myth, for example, cannot be reduced to a single structure (Douglas 1967:66 and Kirk 1970:78). Structuralist analysis should explain with reference to a particular myth how its meanings are

produced and therefore explanation requires an understanding of the culture in which the myth arises.[4]

Thus, although Lévi-Strauss has attempted to cast the nature–culture contrast in a timeless, value-free model concerned with the working of the human mind, ideas about nature and culture are not value free. The 'myth' of nature is a system of arbitrary signs which relies on a social consensus for meaning. Neither the concept of nature nor that of culture is 'given', and they cannot be free from the biases of the culture in which the concepts were constructed (see chapters 2, 3). Our European ideas about nature and culture are fundamentally about our origins and evolution. The 'natural' is that which is innate in our primate heritage and the 'cultural' is that which is arbitrary and artificial. In our evolutionary history we have improved and constrained ourselves by creating our own artificial rule-bound order.

Our minds structure myth, and in a feedback loop myth instructs our perceptions of the phenomenological universe. Genesis, for example, sets humans in opposition to nature and promises us dominion over nature. With Prutestantism, we come to take individual responsibility for the rational understanding and harnessing of nature. The myth in its present-day form reflects the faith of industrial society that society is produced by enterprising activity. Sahlins has expressed the opinion that 'development from a Hobbesian state of nature is the origin myth of Western capitalism' (1976a:52–3).[5] We allocate honour and prestige to people of science and industry who excel in understanding and controlling the powerful domain of nature. We also honour people who overcome animal urges, curbing these urges in accordance with moral codes. When women are defined as 'natural' a high prestige or even moral 'goodness' is attached to men's domination over women, analogous to the 'goodness' of human domination of natural energy sources or the libidinal energy of individuals. It seems quite logical for us now, in our Judaeo-Christian and industrial tradition, to link nature with wildness and with femaleness (Ardener 1975). However, even our own specific European intellectual history has not consistently linked the natural with wildness.

In the eighteenth century, nature was that aspect of the world which had been revealed through scientific scrutiny to have its predictable laws, but also that which was not yet mastered. Women were the repository of 'natural laws' and 'natural morality', but also that which was emotional and passionate, needing constraint within social boundaries (see chapters 2, 3). The opposed categories of nature and culture (or society) arose as part of

4 See Lévi-Strauss (1978:26ff.) for response to this criticism.

5 Sahlins (1976a:53) commented: 'So far as I know, we are the only people who think themselves risen from savages; everyone else believes they descended from gods.'

a historically particular ideological polemic in eighteenth-century Europe; a polemic which created further contradictious by defining women as natural (superior), but instruments of a society of men (subordinate) (see chapter 2).

By the mid nineteenth century, evolutionary ideas provided a 'natural' explanation of gender differences. In 1861 Bachofen posited an ancient period of 'mother right' in which women ruled the state as well as the household, but were subdued by vigorous Roman patriarchy in classical times. McLennan in 1865 wrote of the stage in history when men captured and exchanged women, stressing the need for rules of exogamy and marriage alliance if human society was to be peaceful. Morgan in 1877 elaborately developed a matrilineal stage of human history, superseded by male control, a theme Engels took up in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884 (Lowie 1937:40ff.). Eighteenth-century ambiguity and contradictions persist into the twentieth century, and the simple nineteenth-century unilineal evolutionary model has been set aside. With this ambiguity and complexity at the heart of our European definitions, how can we agree that the following set of metaphors represent universal human cognative structure?

nature	:	culture
wild	:	tame
female	:	male

Structural models are dynamic in that they are concerned with becoming and transforming. Europeans have a concept of history, of literate accumulation, of progressive change over time, and a notion of genesis as the one and only beginning. We have the concept that one category can transform into another, with nature becoming culture, children through socialization becoming adults who marry exogamously, wild becoming domesticated, and raw becoming cooked. To a great extent, meaning for us depends upon 'becoming' (Wagner 1975). But our meanings are not found to be universally true, and some societies conceive of 'nature' as an immutable category incapable of transformation (see chapter 8). Lévi-Strauss stressed not just becoming, but dominating, with the social dominating the biological and the cultural dominating the natural (1969a:479). The slightly scrambled sequence of events in Genesis, for example, move from seething nature to man's dominion over nature, in accordance with moral rules.

Using a linguistic idiom, the passage from nature to culture is a greatly abbreviated syntagmatic chain of mythic units, forming a metonymic axis from left to right. Reading from top to bottom we have paradigmatic associations, or metaphoric transformation (Leach 1976:25–7):

METONYMIC

METAPHORIC

nature	:	culture
child	:	spouse
wild	:	tame
raw	:	cooked
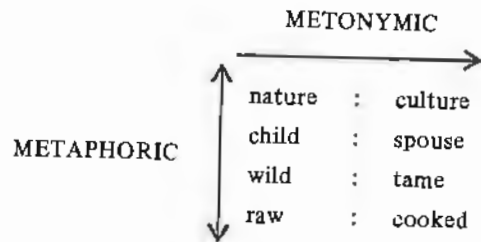
If we add gender to this set we achieve a non-sequitur:

METONYMIC

METAPHORIC

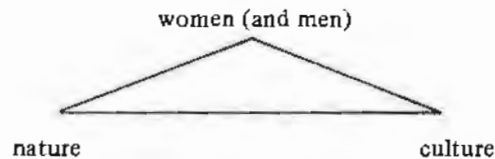| nature	:	culture
child	:	spouse
wild	:	tame
raw	:	cooked
female	:	male
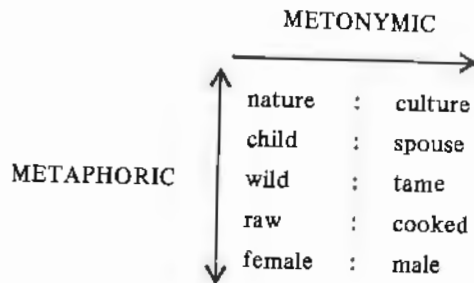
In our European thought system gender provides two obvious categories of social differentiation but lacks the dynamic potential for transformation that other paired contrasts have. On the metonymic axis, in what sense can female become male as nature becomes culture? None, if we are to regard genders as immutable categories 'in nature'. But a case can also be made for gender categories 'in culture'. That is, they are socially constructed (Mathieu 1978). However, in cases where individuals choose to change their social identity it is not only females who take on male identity, but some males move to femaleness.

On the metaphoric axis we have already noted that at some periods of European history female was not exclusively identified with wild but with the harmonious repository of nature's laws. Ardener, in his account of the Bakweri, stresses the metaphor nature=wildness=female. But he tells us men are also associated with nature and wildness, in hunting and ritual, highlighting the problem of knowing which units of mythic text or observed behaviour are to be selected as manifestations of underlying structure.[6]

6 Ardener (1975:14): Men 'hunt on the mountain top away from all villages and farms, this is ritually expressed in the men's elephant dance'. We might conclude that the beast is in all of us, not just women, and the non-social=non-human=the wild=nature is a powerful metaphor for *human* contemplation. Ardener acknowledges La Fontaine's observation that men's wild usually stands for death and destruction while women's wild stands for agriculture and fertility (1975:16).

Some writers, following Lévi-Strauss, seem to be giving a greater weight of 'truth' to metaphoric associations than the concept of metaphor will bear. Words such as 'nature' are polysemic, having many implicit meanings. Metaphor is based upon a figurative, not a literal meaning of a word, thus the meaning of a word can be shaped or extended through metaphor. Menstruating women have cyclicity as nature does, therefore they are wild and untamable. But wildness can also be an implicit meaning of maleness. Because metaphor is based upon the polysemic and open nature of words it has great potential for both contradiction and for 'redescribing reality' and must not be taken as truth in any literal sense (Ricoeur 1978:169ff.). As Harris explains, although the Laymis of Bolivia make a series of associations that may lead us to conclude that wild is identified with female, Laymis themselves do not make that association. 'To apply "logical" procedures . . . is to forget that what are being compared are complex concepts, and that in each identification it is different and specific characteristics of these phenomena that are selected for comparison' (see chapter 4).

Much of the ethnographic literature suggests that rather than viewing women as metaphorically in nature, they (and men) might better be seen as mediating between nature and culture, in the reciprocity of marriage exchange, socializing children into adults, transforming raw meat and vegetable into cooked food, cultivating, domesticating, and making cultural products of all sorts.[7]

women (and men)

nature   culture

If we took an extreme position of defining women but not men as socializers, cultivators, cooks – as mediators between nature and culture – and if we viewed them in the structure of kinship as mediators between exogamous social groups, then we must look more closely at the attributes structuralists confer upon mediators. Because they can merge and reconcile opposites, mediators are deity or messiah and at the same time clown and trickster (Lévi-Strauss 1978:32–3). This definition is quite at odds with some structuralists' definition of women as simple, passive objects in kinship systems, pointing to yet another logical inconsistency in structuralist models.

The ethnographic literature does not justify the extreme position of

7 Ortner (1974) builds a theory of female as nature, but retreats from the extreme position by acknowledging women's role in mediating between nature and culture. See also Lévi-Strauss (1966:128).

defining women but not men as mediators between nature and culture, nor does it uniformly equate women's attributes exclusively with those of nature. In the Mount Hagen area of Papua New Guinea, for example, people do not conceive a nature–culture contrast in the way Europeans do, and they attribute qualities to both men and women which Western structural-ists would classify as natural and cultural (see chapter 8). Rather than con-cepts of nature and culture as we understand them, Hageners think with the categories of 'planted' (*mbo*) and 'wild' (*rømi*). 'Planted' refers to crops, breeding pigs and human beings routed in clan territory; 'wild' refers to that which is solitary, exotic and non-human. Male–female categories are not consistent secondary discriminators. Hageners do use gender categories, with male representing that which is prestigious (*nyim*) and female that which is rubbish (*korpa*), but those categories are not explained by the difference between the planted and the wild.

Within the Hagen folk model nature does not become culture. The 'wild' is encountered and dealt with, but is not dominated, nor is it incorporated within culture, explained by 'natural' laws, robbed of its powers. It does not become with human 'progress' an ever-shrinking residual category. The power of the wild can be brought to bear on human activity precisely because it is antithesis to *mbo*. Similarly, in the Gimi area of Papua New Guinea nature is not devalued. Male essence is identified with the wild, its spirits and birds. *Kore* means forest, afterlife, and an honorific title of address for high status males. Gender distinctions are not so much the cold rational process of category discrimination Lévi-Strauss emphasizes, as the highly emotive matters of sexuality, birth, nurturing, eating and women's releasing men's spirit essence back into the forest as spirit/flute/bird; a mat-ter ultimately concerned with men's dependence on women (see chapter 7).

There is no way to absolutely verify that the nature–culture opposition exists as an essential feature of universal *unconscious* structure, and there is ethnographic evidence to suggest that in the form in which Europeans now conceive it, the contrast is not a universal feature of consciously-held folk models. If we use the categories 'nature–culture' merely as a method-ological device for ordering folk concepts which roughly approximate European meanings, then gender categories are not necessarily linked to them. Goodale's description of the Kaulong of New Britain gives the following metaphoric set (see chapter 6):

animal   : human
reproduction : production
forest : garden : hamlet

The Kaulong do not have a strongly defined sexual division of labour. Both men and women develop their social identity by growing produce and acquiring other goods for exchange. Both are at the centre of their own network of cognatic kin, and trading partners. By contrast, reproduction is

relatively non-social, requiring only one partner. The married must live away from the hamlet, in gardens, and are marginalized by residence and other taboos.

For the Laymis of Bolivia it is not the married, but the unmarried, who are marginal (see chapter 4):

incomplete   complete
division   :   division
of labour   of labour

unmarried   :   married

With a clearly defined sexual division of labour, unmarried men and women are not complete in the socio-economic sense. In Laymi thought, that which is fully cultural is the unity of man and woman in marriage, and even spirits in 'nature' have their spouse.

Sherbros of West Africa resemble the Kaulong in that women transact in goods and services and are important in cognatic kin groups, but resemble the Laymis with a clearly defined sexual division of labour. Socialization is viewed as a process which transforms proto-social children into initiated adults who understand and vow to live by ancestral laws (culture). But females are as carefully and completely socialized as males. Female officials, female imagery and ancestresses are as important in the ritual process as their male counterparts (see chapter 5):

'nature'   :   'culture'

proto-social   initiated
children   .   adults

Gender attributes in models of kinship

Although Lévi-Strauss clearly states that structure does not lie at the level of empirical reality (1977:79), he appeals to empirical 'reality' in construct-ing a model of human society in which women are simple passive objects of male activity (1963:47).[8] His model of human society has the basic pre-mise that it is 'the men who own and the women who are owned . . . wives who are acquired and sisters and daughters who are given away' (1969a: 136). For him, men and women are interchangeable and equal from a for-mal point of view, but they are not from the social point of view. A sister changes her role to that of a wife through the transactions men make, and

8   In the analysis of social structure, Lévi-Strauss follows in the Rousseav-ian tradition of defining men as active and women as passive and con-trolled (see chapter 2). In the analysis of myth, he works with a rich variety of qualities attributed to women and does not consistently link female to nature as Ortner and Ardener do.

he chooses not to acknowledge that men also undergo role changes embedded within marriage transactions, most markedly with uxorilocal residence following marriage. Structuralists using the Lévi-Straussian model of kinship thus define men as actors and women as acted upon; men as subject and women as object. Although Lévi-Strauss has overtly used empiricism to construct the gender aspect of his model, when cases of matrilineal dowry systems in which men move between groups are noted (Junus 1964), or cases of societies where women have formal decision-making roles are noted (MacCormack 1972; 1974; 1976; 1979), structuralists retreat behind a screen of indifference to 'surface manifestations' which mask the deep structure (Lévi-Strauss 1963:281; 1977:78).[9] Is it simply a matter of one man's empiricism being another's 'apt examples', or do those ethnographic observations reveal false models which mask true structure? If that is the case, why do societies hide their fundamental structures with screening models? Nutini has suggested that some conscious models are more accurate than any that could be built up by the anthropologist and, even if there are deceptions, those very errors constitute the social facts under study (1970:73 and 82).

The model of kinship formulated by Lévi-Strauss is a logical construct based upon the allegedly universal rule of incest avoidance and a set of rules for marriage exogamy. It is ambivalent about the far more complex level of what men and women actually do. The logic of the model as constructed denies or is disinterested in observations that women are active in courtship (see chapters 6 and 4), sometimes act as matchmakers, and share in the wealth of affine's labour and goods in marriage transactions. The model has no provision for women who do not marry, nor for divorce and the active role women take in making their subsequent marriages. If we believe the model, then the above behaviour, which may be statistically significant (Bledsoe 1980), is conceptually aberrant, if not 'unnatural'. However, that behaviour might be seen as a healthy adaptation to the physical and social conditions in which women find themselves. Might our own Western cultural assumptions about the natural world being acted upon, and our notions of property, predispose the model makers to view male as subject and female as passive object?

Furthermore, limiting women to passive objectivity limits the explanatory power of the model. As the model stands, sisters (and daughters) are

9 In 'The Meaning and Use of the Notion of Model' (1977) Lévi-Strauss cautions against confusing a theoretical analysis of models with an actual description of data as they appear to the empirical observer. 'Many Southeast Asian societies make the useful and often true statement that women circulate, not men; this does not invalidate the truth (to be covered by a generalized model) that nothing would be changed in the formal properties of the structure if the situation were described the other way around, as some tribes actually do' (p. 78).

denied to men by the incest taboo and are given away by them to become other men's wives (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:136). Thus, the following set of metaphoric transformations:

nature	:	culture
incest	:	rules of exogamy
sister	:	wife

But if we return to first principles, that procreative sexuality requires the binary set of male and female, must not both categories in that set undergo role changes as a concomitant of the incest taboo? When women reach sexual maturity they are indeed regarded by their 'brothers' as other men's wives and, in a balanced way, when men reach sexual and social maturity they must be regarded by their 'sisters' as other women's husbands. The set of metaphors might be reformulated as:

nature	:	culture
incest	:	rules of exogamy
sibling	:	spouse

The reader is probably thinking: of course we know that for the incest taboo and rules of exogamy to do their work of initiating reciprocities and integrating social groups both men and women experience role changes. This is so obvious that it does not need to be stated. Is it then a component of the one 'true' structure, and have Lévi-Strauss and others thrown up a screening model which hides the deep structure?

For prescriptive marriage systems to do their work of interweaving consanguineous groups together into a human society women cannot be simply passive. Some women object to an arranged marriage and manage to cause enough trouble to disrupt the complex pattern of reciprocities over time inherent in alliance systems. Others actively agree to marriage, enabling a brother to marry a wife from a reciprocating group. By agreeing to marry, a woman in a sense provides her brother with a wife, laying a claim upon him to give assistance to her and her children for the rest of his life (Van Baal 1975:76). On the level of myth and ritual, men's and women's ritual associations may exist in balanced reciprocity, each needing the other to make a complete conceptual system (MacCormack 1981). But even in societies where there are men's associations only, men must have the active cooperation of women to provide a terrorized audience to confirm the terror of the gods, or an uninitiated group to confirm the secrets of the initiated (Van Baal 1975:72).

The attributes we assign to gender categories are based upon our perceptions of what men and women do. Ardener has suggested that men move about more widely in social and geographical space than women, becoming aware of others more frequently than do women. They are therefore more likely to develop 'metalevels of categorization' that enable them

to conceptually bound themselves and their women off from other men and their women (1975:6). However, women are not universally restricted to the closed domestic sphere. Some Third World women of low class and caste travel widely to find wage employment (Boserup 1970:79–80). Women migrate in large numbers to some urban areas (Little 1973: chapter 2). Some women traders cover hundreds of miles (MacCormack 1976). Even Ardener describes Bakweri women as having long travelled from stranger quarter to stranger quarter (1975:13). Because the set of behavioural manifestations which reveal putative deep structure is not 'given', any behaviour may or may not be selected by the anthropologist as revealing that structure.

Women seem most restricted in societies with patrilineal descent groups where they enter into bridewealth marriages and do not trade or seek wages. But even in this type of society it is usually the women who actually go and live with their husband's kin group. They are aware in childhood that this will be their fate (Paulme 1963:6–7). Unless we want to deny women a potential for intelligence and intellectual curiosity equal to men's, we logically cannot deny them conceptual models for making sense of their own existence. If they 'giggle when young, snort when old, reject the question, laugh at the topic, and the like' (Ardener 1975:2), might they not be reacting to the cultural assumptions unconsciously biasing the investigator's questions? Does the status difference between a European in a colonialized country and the village woman not predictably shape the kind of responses one can expect within particular cultural contexts (Goody 1978)?

Much of the published literature on social structure which some structuralists use for data reflects the power of an earlier model, Radcliffe-Brown's 'jural model'. The idea of descent is equated with the transmission of rights, duties, power and authority. Jural rules, too often enunciated by male informants, stress male authority roles. However, the folk models of most societies stress a far more complex pattern of male and female interaction than the jural model can accommodate (James 1978:145). In matrilinially organized kin systems, for example, if we look beyond the authority role of mother's brother, we find women controlling the regeneration of lineage identity for both males and females, centrally placed within a structure of reciprocal obligations. Women control items of great cultural significance, and in the Trobriand case control the cosmic cycle itself, 'leaving men to create, through women, artificial extensions of their own historically bounded time' (Weiner 1976:23). Even within patrilinially organized societies men ritually express anxiety about their dependence on women as regenerators of life (see chapter 7), and there is ample evidence that folk concepts of descent and continuity acknowledge the vital attributes of women (Singer 1973; James 1978:155ff.). Within a single society the investigator often receives very different definitions of 'woman' depending upon whether he or she asks about woman-as-mother, or woman-as-wife.

Gender attributes in models of economic exchange

If we shift from the consideration of kinship reciprocities to economic reciprocities, we might look closely at the exchange of goods and services. With the possible exception of advanced industrial societies where machines replace labour and cause an 'unemployment problem', can we attribute to women as passive a role in production and exchange of goods and services as has been assigned to them in kinship transactions?

Most societies have a division of labour based upon gender categories which might be seen as a metaphor for procreative sex. As both male and female are required for sexual reproduction of society, so they are also required for production of goods and services to sustain and integrate it. Logically, both male and female participate in the same cognitive model, each playing by the same set of rules, each dependent upon the other. In some societies women are prodigious producers of goods, and in all societies they provide services (Boserup 1970). Whether the activity of providing goods and services takes place in domestic space or public space has no bearing on the quantity of those goods and services. Domestic production should not be deleted from economic calculations, and if it cannot be reckoned in money terms then better economic models must be devised. Sexually immature children provide services for kin bounded by the incest taboo, but with sexual maturity and marriage they provide services for those in another group outside the boundary of the incest taboo, their affines. In societies with patrilineal institutions, husbands (and their close kin) may give bridewealth and labour defined by affinal obligation, and wives give children and labour defined by affinal obligation:

nature	:	culture
kin bounded by the incest taboo	:	affines
goods and services for 'us'	:	goods and services for 'other'
boys and girls	:	men and women

To restrict the definition of men to giver and women to given is to deny the model of a kind of symmetry and balance that must necessarily exist.

But is there a qualitative difference between goods and services

exchanged by men and those exchanged by women? In many societies men unquestionably have more power and appropriate the product of women's labour, commanding more goods with which to initiate alliances. If to marry out is better than to be killed out, then alliances initiated with men's wealth might be given positive value (Lévi-Strauss 1969a:43). Alliances integrate groups, and in most societies men are more active in the political domain which unifies social units while women are more active in domestic groups which are fragments of the society. In this sense we can assess a high value to men who transcend and unify (Ortner 1974:79), if we ignore the fact that those who unify through politics also divide and destroy through war.

Economic exchange is concerned with services as well as goods. If we consider the full range of goods and services exchanged in human society, can we be confident that the goods men command and bestow necessarily rank above the services women command and bestow? As Lévi-Strauss focussed the analysis of exchange on the biological dictum of 'marry out or be killed out', might we also ask, on a biological level, is Homo sapiens more likely to survive as a species because of the 'high level' exchanges men tend to engage in, or the domestic production, sharing and procreation by women? Domestic services are devalued in advanced industrial societies where 'work' is defined as wage labour and is separated from domestic space, and where a 'population problem' is perceived. But those are the biases of our own culture and are not universally valid.

Nature, culture and biological reproduction of society

Ortner has proceeded in the Lévi-Straussian manner of asking a question about humanity, then setting out to answer it. She asks: how might we account for universal female subordination? Moving quickly to a biological reductionist argument, she sees that 'woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially", through the medium of technology and symbols. In doing so he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcending objects, while the woman creates only perishables – human beings' (1974:75). This view, which originates with de Beauvoir (1953:239), is remarkable for its ethnocentricity. A vast number of societies, and particularly the totemic societies Lévi-Strauss has used for analysis, have lineage systems which exist, by definition in perpetuity. Each human who is born fits into a great social chain of being, ensuring the immortality of both self and group. Houses rot, villages are moved, empires fall, but the great faith is that the lineage, including the 'real' company of ancestors, will endure forever.

Is there anything more intrinsically natural about women's physiology than men's? In most societies men's procreative role is seen as being as

essential as women's for the continuity of social groups. Both men and women procreate, eat, defecate and satisfy other survival needs. To do so is natural, but the etiquette of eating, the time, place and position for defecation, and indeed the rules prescribing time, place and position for ejaculation or parturition are cultural. Fertility and birth are guided by definitions of symptoms and technological modifications brought about by chemical and mechanical therapy in virtually all societies and cannot be used as the single characteristic for defining women as 'natural' (MacCormack 1981).

The statement that women are doomed by their biology to be natural, not cultural, is of course a mythic statement, and both Ortner and Lévi-Strauss retreat from it. Of course woman cannot be consigned fully to the category of nature 'for it is perfectly obvious that she is a full-fledged human being endowed with human consciousness just as man is; she is half the human race, without whose cooperation the whole enterprise would collapse' (Ortner 1974:75–6). Or, as expressed by Lévi-Strauss, 'women could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since insofar as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs' (1969a:496). Thus, Lévi-Strauss's fundamental paradox reappears in metaphoric transformation:

(1) Culture transcends nature, but is grounded in the human mind (brain) which is nature.
(2) Men transcend nature with their mentality, but are in nature as procreated, procreators, and possessors of human minds.
(3) Women transcend nature with their mentality, but are in nature as procreated, procreators, lactators, and possessors of human minds.

Or, two and three might be combined to read:

(4) Men and women transcend nature with their mentality, but are in nature as procreated, procreators, nurturers, and possessors of human minds.

Might we then conclude that both men and women are nature and culture, and there is no logic compelling us to believe that at an unconscious level women, because of their naturalness, are opposed and subordinate to men?

Ideology and the adequacy of models

Ortner states that 'everywhere, in every known culture, women are considered in some degree inferior to men' (1974:69). But she does not say by whom they are considered to be so. By men? By women? By how many? In field work I have talked with women chiefs, women heads of descent groups, heads of women's secret societies, and women household heads who would not agree with the sweeping thesis as it stands. They would say that women are inferior to men in some ways and men are inferior to women in some ways, giving productive tasks in the division of labour as

examples. There would not be the social ferment over gender roles in West-ern industrial societies today if a substantial number of men and women did not subscribe to the thesis of universal female subordination. The methodological problem is this: can structural models stand without refer-ence to consciously-held folk models and actual statistical descriptions? Scheffler opts for models which are judged adequate and appropriate by the people in question (1970:67), and Lévi-Strauss mis-trusts the people's own assessment as a possible screen hiding deep structure (1963:281).

Ardener's position regarding models of nature, culture and gender is ambiguous. On the one hand, he sees reality in the conscious folk model, alleging that Bakweri women perceive themselves as being in nature.[10] As with Lévi-Strauss and Ortner, he does not attempt to put women entirely within the domain of nature, but sees them bounding themselves with both nature and culture while men bound themselves off from nature. But he also sees validity in metaphorically linking female and nature at the level of unconscious structure.[11] However, in the familiar pattern of structural-ist reasoning, he ultimately reduces the argument to biology, saying 'since women are biologically not men, it would be surprising if they bounded themselves against nature in the same way as men do' (1975:5).

But the link between nature and women is not a 'given'. Gender and its attributes are not pure biology. The meanings attributed to male and female are as arbitrary as are the meanings attributed to nature and culture (Mathieu 1973). Those who have developed the nature–culture–gender thesis root femaleness in biology and maleness in the social domain (de Beauvoir 1953:239; Ortner 1974:67–88; Ardener 1975:5; Lévi-Strauss 1969a:482). However, if men and women are one species and together constitute human society then, logically, analysis of intrinsic gender attrib-utes must be made with reference to the same domain. Equally in error is the formulation of sociobiologists who root male gender attributes excess-ively in biology, thus explaining the 'naturalness' of men's political domi-nance over women.[12]

10 In an account of a Bakweri story and associated ritual, Ardener explains: 'Bakweri women themselves bound their world as including the wild that Moto [men] exclude . . . Although the men bound off "mankind" from nature the women persist in overlapping into nature again' (pp. 7 and 8). 'Bakweri women define the boundary of their world in such a way that they live as women in men's definition of wild, as well as partially within the men's world inside the village fence' (p. 13).

11 Ardener interprets the initiation stage of the *liengu* (water spirit) rite to be women's 'final incorporation in the wild, outside the fence of the village' (p. 12). Using 'methods of the type used by Lévi-Strauss in *Mythologiques*', Ardener reveals an unconscious model linking women and nature through structural analysis of the rite (p. 8).

12 See for example, E.O. Wilson (1975: chapter 27). However, socio-

In his conclusion, Ardener seems to return to the level of the conscious model; the dominant male model in which 'some features of women' do not fit within the boundaries of human society as men define it (p. 23). Bakweri women themselves, he tells us, are not confused by the male model, but acquiesce to it because they are subordinate and made 'mute' by male domination (p. 24).

We are now brought to a relativistic point of view where men think one thing, women know another, but are not allowed a hearing because Euro-pean investigators turn to men as the authoritative spokesmen. We are no longer dealing with putative universal categories but with a political prob-lem in which women are kept from speaking by men who constitute the political power elite, and we are left to ponder our own European cultural history to discover why some anthropologists consider the conscious models which colonialized men give them to be so satisfying.

Although structuralist models apply to the synchronic dimension of social phenomena, Lévi-Strauss and others are interested in the diachronic dimension of social change as well. As de Saussure made a distinction in his work on linguistics between the science of *langue* (code) and the science of *parôle* (message), so Lévi-Strauss uses both a synchronic struc-turalism and a marxist dialectic, the latter explaining social change and the final social causes of particular cultural codes. When women garden and weave, their activity is conceived as being within the order of nature. When men appropriate the same type of activity and interpose culture in the form of complex machinery in the process, the male activity is within the order of culture (Lévi-Strauss 1977:321). Presumably women, as poorly paid or unpaid labour, are viewed by men as a cheap natural resource in the productive process. On the topic of Third World development, Lévi-Strauss reasons that societies are not 'underdeveloped' through their own doing, but because capitalistic societies have extracted wealth from them since the sixteenth century. Conquests which yielded gold from the New World, slaves from Africa, and other wealth, link the non-industrial and the industrial countries into a common system with a common history. The relationship between colonialist and colonialized, and the relationship between capitalist and proletarian in industrial societies, are manifestations of the same process: 'the mute slavery of the New World was needed as a cornerstone on which the covert slavery of Europe's wage earners was built' (quoted by Lévi-Strauss 1977:315):

colonialist   :   colonialized
capitalist   :   proletarian

biologists cannot spell out the mechanisms by which the genes instruct humans to the specific behaviour attributed to each gender, especially given the cultural variability of 'natural' attributes. See Sahlins (1977) for a general critique.

For Lévi-Strauss, the creation and very reality of industrial society is found in the irreversible historical condition of oppression, and he criticizes Malinowski for considering development to result from the impact of a higher and more active culture on a simpler and more passive one. ' "Simplicity" and "passivity" are not intrinsic properties of these societies, but the result of the development's action upon them from its very beginnings; a situation created by brutality, pillage, and violence, without which the historical conditions of this very development would not have been brought together' (Lévi-Strauss 1977:316).

Although he acknowledges Engels in his analysis of colonialization and proletarianization, Lévi-Strauss does not acknowledge Engels's analysis of the process by which women as a category have become the 'proletariat' to men, the 'bourgeoisie', through the rise of private property and the privatization of women's labour (Engels 1942:48ff.):

        colonialist   :   colonialized
        capitalist   :   proletarian
        male   :   female

If Lévi-Strauss insists that simplicity and passivity are not intrinsic properties of the colonialized and proletarianized, then logically he must insist that they are not intrinsic properties of females, but the result of a historical process which leaves women marginalized and powerless. We suggest that it is as important to understand the 'message' of property relations as the 'code' of naturalness if we are to understand accounts of women's marginality in human societies.

II

These remarks are a prologue. The following two chapters turn to the constructive task of deepening our understanding of European concepts of nature, human society and gender. In the latter part of the book we examine those concepts in a more comparative frame.

During the Enlightenment the concept of nature was crucial to both political discourse and the rise of scientific enquiry. Maurice and Jean Bloch ground the idea of nature in a political dialectic which opposed 'natural law' to the doctrine of divine right of kings. Later, Rousseau shaped 'nature' to mean the very source by which corrupt society reformed and purified itself. This concept of nature was crucial to Rousseau's radical advocacy of sovereignty of the people and the legitimacy of democracy. The concept of nature takes its meaning in part from that to which it is opposed; divine kings, pre-society, corrupt society, and so forth. Since 'nature' has been opposed to different doctrines at different points in history, its meaning shifts accordingly.

Rousseau set up a further dialectic between the idea of nature as guide and teacher for reformed society, and nature associated with women's emotions and domesticity. Eighteenth-century ideas of social and political reform did not extend to women. Although they were more purely natural than men, women were socially defined as passive, dependent and politically inferior to men. This contradiction is preserved in Lévi-Strauss's vision of social structure, and constitutes part of the dialectic on gender to which this book contributes.

In the eighteenth century, nature was both that part of the world which had not yet been penetrated, and that part of the world which men understood, mastered, and made their own. Jordanova explains how scientific enquiry paralleled political discourse in assigning contradictory attributes to women. They were the repositories of natural law; the founder of human society was the mother of a family. Through the scientific unveiling of women, nature could be revealed and understood. But women were also the repositories of passions which needed to be contained and controlled. By the mid eighteenth century, a well-established bio-medical tradition observed and defined humans, hardening the conceptual division between unique feminine and unique masculine attributes. A biological determinism 'explained' women, but men were defined more by their social acts, an attitude of enquiry which persists in some present-day literature on gender.

Broadening our scope of enquiry, we might return to the relationship between European colonial powers and the Third World. In discourse on the meaning of culture and society, European concepts might be seen as a 'dominant code' (Ardener) which universalizes our European vision of the world. As Harris points out, we are then less likely to hear 'muted codes'. But social scientists must guard against the tendency to use the dominant discourse of European culture to universalize our categories, thus rendering ourselves deaf to alternative ways of structuring the world. Chapters by Harris, MacCormack, Goodale, Gillison and Strathern painstakingly explore some of those alternative structures. Although the peoples considered use binary constructs contingent upon nature or gender, none of the resulting symbolic equations can be reduced to a simple nature:culture::female:male analogy. Strathern's concluding chapter is both a theoretical overview and a searching ethnographic exploration.

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2   Women and the dialectics of nature in eighteenth-century French thought

MAURICE BLOCH and JEAN H. BLOCH

I

Ortner stresses that any link-up between nature and women 'is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature' (1974:p. 87). She notes, following Lévi-Strauss, that 'the culture nature distinction is itself a product of culture'. The implications of that statement, in the context of this book, are quite complex. If the distinctions we examine in other cultures are the product of a specific historical and cultural transformation they must be examined with great caution in their own right without too hasty an assumption that we are in every case dealing with the same phenomena. The article by Strathern in this volume shows how easy it is to slip into unwarranted assumptions. Secondly, the terms we use ourselves cannot be assumed to identify straightforwardly a genuine analytical focus and so we must therefore also examine the formation of European concepts in the specific historical process which has brought them about in order to understand *their* ambiguities and their social implications. This is what we want to do in this chapter.

As MacCormack comments, Lévi-Strauss more than anyone else reintroduced into social and cultural anthropology the opposition between nature and culture, both as an analytical dichotomy to understand the passage from a state of nature to a state of culture, as for example in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, and as an organizing principle of human thought, especially in the fields of myth and symbolism as in *The Savage Mind.* Lévi-Strauss bewilderingly, but intentionally, slips from one concern to the other, thereby stressing the unity of his speculations with those of the people he studies. He chooses to trace his approach back very specifically to Rousseau, and more particularly to the Rousseau of the *Discourse on Inequality* (Lévi-Strauss, 1962:142–6). This is understandable since Rousseau is probably the first writer to make the opposition between nature and something else, whether it be 'society' or the 'arts and sciences',