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ON THE UNDERSTANDING  
OF CULTURE



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**ON THE UNDERSTANDING  
OF CULTURE**

**Inaugural Lecture**

**Delivered on 23 January 1995**

**by**

**Reginald F Byron  
Professor and Head of Department of  
Sociology and Anthropology**

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UNIVERSITY OF WALES SWANSEA  
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**On the Understanding of Culture**

Inaugural Lecture

Reginald Byron

Professor of Sociology and Anthropology

When the Chair of Sociology and Anthropology was created in 1963, and my predecessor W. M. Williams was appointed to it, it was the first of its kind in Britain. Although there were professorships of anthropology, and of sociology, at other universities, there was no other chair of both subjects jointly. As far as I know, the Swansea professorship remains to this day the only chair of both sociology and anthropology in these islands. It is a great honour and pleasure to occupy such a unique position. But of course it is rather more than just a one-of-a-kind job. The Chair is associated with an unusual and distinctive department, which is, in every way, as unique as its Chair.

This distinctive character began to develop even before the department was created. A research project based in the College, on family life and social change in Swansea, begun in 1959, was to have, I think, a great effect. The researchers involved were Colin Rosser, an anthropologist, and Chris Harris, a sociologist. In 1962, a new Faculty of Economics and Social Studies was created and, with it, a new Chair of Sociology and Anthropology was established. Bill Williams arrived in Swansea in 1963, as Dean of the embryonic Faculty and holder of the newly-created Chair. Professor Williams had read geography and anthropology at Aberystwyth under Alwyn Rees, and his research had been in the fields of rural sociology and community studies. This work had involved the application of anthropological methods to the study of rural communities in England, the sorts of social worlds usually studied by sociologists, rather than the exotic, far-flung places that

anthropologists usually went: in those days, doing anthropology "at home" was really quite unusual.

Bill Williams did more than merely encourage collaboration between sociology and anthropology: he made it central to the ethos of the new department. Under his guidance, a pattern of collaboration developed which was committed to the idea that a knowledge of the theories and methods of the two disciplines could converge to produce insights of a kind that neither discipline, on its own, could readily provide (Williams 1964, 1990). The theoretical scale was that of the middle ground: generalisations were drawn directly from empirical observations. The methodological means was fieldwork—the immersion, by the researcher, in the social milieu in question. It was a practical, feet-on-the-ground approach, one that interested itself, above all, in what people thought, said and did. Learning about real lives, by means of field research, perforce located the department's research in the landscape and in social space: in cities, villages, rural townships; in fields, streets, factories, offices, sitting rooms and kitchens. Thus, a sense of place, and of locality, came to infuse the work of the department; so, too, did a kind of domestic scale, which arose from its emphasis on the social relationships between people within families and neighbourhoods and other face-to-face social settings.

Thirty years on, the ethos of equal collaboration and sense of shared problem between the two disciplines is stronger than ever. Indeed, that some of our colleagues in the College believe that sociology and anthropology are actually a single discipline, is at once vexing, flattering and amusing. In most other English-speaking universities, sociology and anthropology are rival and frequently hostile enterprises; sociologists and anthropologists fight like cats and dogs. Divorces between the two disciplines, where they have been thrown together for administrative convenience, are much more common than willing marriages. Their peaceful and productive coexistence within a single department at Swansea is quite extraordinary and really rather special; it is most certainly worth preserving and strengthening.

My own training has been as an anthropologist, but the places in which I have worked—Britain, Ireland, Sweden, Canada, and the United States—industrialised, institutionally-complex countries all of them, are largely the territory of sociologists,

whose work has informed my own as much as that of anthropologists, or nearly so. At Swansea, I am in truly congenial company.

My theme this evening is a question of culture. It is conventional, but as I've already hinted, a little inaccurate, to say that sociologists look at societies like ours, while anthropologists do their studies only in exotic places among people who could be described as "traditional." My predecessor and I are living proof that anthropologists can, and do, study our own sorts of societies and there are many others of us who do anthropology at home—some of them in my audience this evening—although we may not be, quite yet, in the majority. It is also conventional, but even more inaccurate, to say that anthropologists interest themselves in what might be called "the cultural," while sociologists do "the social."

To give a preliminary definition of what society is, is not difficult: the term refers to a set of people who, actually or potentially, have dealings with one another; and who associate with one another. To give even a preliminary definition of what culture is, however, is more difficult. A classic statement about culture, to which anthropologists still refer for authority, was made in 1871 by Edward Burnett Tylor, who wrote the following words in Chapter One of his book *Primitive Culture*:

Culture or civilisation, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Here, "society" refers to a set of people who have dealings with one another *and something in common*: what they have in common is, of course, culture. The genius of Tylor's formulation, and the reason these words are still quoted, is that they draw attention to the intimate inter-linkage of the two concepts. A set of people who had not the slightest thing in common with one another simply would not be a society, for there would be nothing—not even shared language—which could form the basis of their association. Nor is it possible to imagine that people could have things in common or have come to develop a language in which they could communicate unless they had some significant social dealings with one another.

Society and culture are, then, two sides of the same coin. While it has traditionally been the case that anthropologists and sociologists have tended to emphasize the one

concept or the other, anthropologists are not exclusively concerned with culture, nor sociologists with society, since neither, on its own, is a sensible or suitable field for theory-building. In America, such divisions-of-academic-labour have nevertheless been attempted from time to time, and have resulted in some rather odd scholarship: highly abstract studies of culture which have nothing to say about *whose* ideas and meanings are being discussed, and how, when, by whom and for what purpose these ideas are actually used. And, at the other extreme, there have been studies of social behaviour that give no inkling of what is in the minds of the people whose lives are purportedly being analysed. But in European anthropology and sociology, we have been rather less inclined to go to these extremes. Rather, culture and society are seen as different aspects of the same thing: culture, we are more apt to think, is the content of social relations (Goody 1992); in other words, that which invests them with meaning.

Studying everyday life in ordinary places by the kitchen-table method---talking to people on their own ground about their own concerns---is a very direct way of approaching an understanding of society and culture. The special value of this kind of enterprise, which we might call "the sociology of the particular" is that it brings out the similarities in all our lives; that others live as we perceive ourselves living: not as robots programmed by the social order or by their culture, but as people going through life as we all do: hoping for the best, coping with uncertainty and adversity, agonising over decisions, making mistakes, trying to keep up appearances, taking pleasure in things when they go our way. Life is seldom so neat that we always know quite what to do. The consequences of our actions are not always predictable; unbidden things happen to us; sometimes we consciously attempt to manage situations; sometimes we just go with the flow.

The challenge is to capture life in all its rich colour, untidiness and indeterminacy while still having something of consequence to say about it. Studying culture is a risky business, full of methodological pitfalls. For example, although we come to know the world of the people whom we study through talking to individuals, each of whom is different, and has had a unique experience of life, exactly shared by no other person, what frequently emerges from the other end of the theoretical sausage-grinder is a *generic* individual, the typical member of a society, which is a creation of the analytical process; a

composite *thing*---no longer a person---into which all of our bits of information collected from *different people* have been collapsed.

Perhaps Tylor set us along the wrong road, or we have taken the wrong cues from from his words. Tylor's definition asserts that culture is a complex whole acquired by man as a member of society. The "man as a member of society" part we have interpreted to mean the *typical individual*. And, for the most part, we have generally understood "acquired by man as a member of society" not in a temporal or processual sense, but in the sense of *shared with contemporaries*. Attention is thus shifted away from the means by which culture happens in a stream of time, and toward the nature of the beliefs and practices which the members of a society have in common at a given moment. Further, the words "complex whole" suggest a bounded and integrated stock of knowledge and practice. It then becomes a *definitional attribute* of culture, if not to say an act of faith, that there is a discoverable logic or pattern connecting contemporaneous practices within a society. And, that this integrity is to be found in the shared, collective meanings of social and symbolic practices. Culture, that is to say, is pictured as extending laterally across the society: it is a quality of groups and communities, and it is, rather circularly, also that which constitutes them *as* groups and communities.

Surely coherence, and meaning, if such there be, is largely a product of history, of how things happened, and why: each succeeding cohort does not appear from nowhere, to invent its own meanings. Culture, then, is and must be about lineal ties, down the generations, much more than it is about lateral ties, across the generations. Moreover, while these lateral ties can be discovered only by indirect means (and, not infrequently, their significance is even then largely a matter of imputation); the lineal ties are evident to us all through our experience of becoming, and being social persons: the ties to the past are embedded in our biographies: all of us, whoever we are, have a unique personal history; a story about how we came to be who we are. If we focus our attention on generic individuals within an integrated whole, rather than upon particular people whose lives articulate with those of others in myriad ways, then all this rich variety and detail, which gives us important clues about how culture happens, vanishes from view.

The symbols, styles, beliefs and practices that we often take to *be* culture are, arguably, in any society no more than the here-today-and-gone-tomorrow expressions of the *process* of culture, which is itself no more than a signpost to other things including,

centrally, the transmission of human experience from one generation to the next. Culture, thus, to re-frame the words of the sociologist Edward Shils, "has to do with the historical particulars of household and family life as the fundamental institution of this process, for the household and family is the point of departure into any community of belief, or of social relations; it is the institution which, *par excellence*, conveys what went before, in the previous generation, into the present" and so on into the future.

The kitchen table is more than just the metaphorical (and sometimes, indeed, the actual) site of research on everyday culture and society: it is, arguably, the very centre of all our social universes. If "culture" can be said to happen anywhere, its main locus is surely within the domestic domain. Households have a central place in the reproduction of ideas and practices over the generations. For most of us, our household-of-the-moment is the centre of social gravity, a place where we live, eat, sleep, and perhaps work, with other people with whom we are on the most intimate terms; linked to other households through overlapping relationships of kinship, friendship and neighbourliness. Household and locality is the field in which most of us live out a good part of our lives.

We interpret the world through the cultural lenses of the values, attitudes and beliefs we learn within this sphere of direct, first-hand social experience. The power of the ideas which come to us through these, our most immediate social surroundings, should not be underestimated, or trivialised, as they often are. As social persons, we are who we are very largely through the things we learn from, and share with our parents, siblings, friends, neighbours, and associates. These primary relationships of kinship and locality have an important influence upon our practical expectations of the wider world, how we define our place in it, and what we think it does to us.

The household stands at the very crossroads of society and culture, the point where these two most basic concepts of sociology and anthropology meet and intersect real lives: the households of which people are members over the span of their lives are the means by which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, as well as the elementary units of social organisation. What happens within households has a far greater effect upon our development as social persons, and a far greater importance in the transmission of cultural ideas and practices over the generations, than we usually give it credit for.

Within households, the lives of individuals act and react upon one another, transmitting their notions of *we* and *ours* from one generation, and household, to the next. With each generation, *we* and *ours* waxes and wanes through the cycle of birth, marriage, and death; through chance, circumstance, choice and predisposition: as individuals move through their lives, the compass of *we* and *ours* expands and contracts, and changes its composition as new individuals come within it and others fade out. To this way of thinking, the household-of-the-moment is, to the individual, a central point of reference in a fluid process of time and shifting social relationships. But it is more than *just* a central point of reference.

We all, or nearly all of us, come into the world through a household which is at the same time a kinship unit. For perhaps fifteen of our first, and most impressionable years, these surroundings are the primary locus of all those things that create and sustain our competence as social persons. By the time we go out the door, we are equipped with at least one rough template for coping with life, for making order of chaos.

Parents pass on to their children ideas and practices based upon their experience, and, insofar as they can look into the future or have an awareness of alternatives, they may be able to anticipate that their children will encounter different circumstances, and attempt to equip them accordingly, or they may *intend* that their children ought to experience more secure or "better" circumstances than they themselves did. It would appear to be a common human propensity for parents not only to seek the independence of their children, but to improve upon their prospects. It is not only the upwardly-mobile or middle-class parents who wish this for their children: in the maritime societies I have studied, for example, there is an acute awareness of vulnerability to uncertainty; to prepare children to move geographically and occupationally, if necessary, is no more than prudent parenting.

Parents transmit to their children much of that which they will need to know so that they too can become parents: how their household can be reasonably well prepared to cope with the ups-and-downs of life as their parents anticipate they will encounter it. In other words, what they will need to know about social organisation as a set of fundamental principles and practices, and how to use these ideas and skills to make their way in the world, so that their children can, in turn, reproduce themselves and thus guarantee a further generation. At root, what are these bits and pieces *for*, and why do

we bother to transmit them to our children, if not to secure or at least enhance their chances of success in an uncertain world?

The sociologist Edward Shils, in his book *Tradition*, made a number of stimulating observations about the processes involved in the transmission of culture and the constitution of selfhood: his remarks go to the heart of current debate, and are well worth rediscovering. Shils wrote that in a highly-differentiated society, the family is only one of many institutions rather than the one all-inclusive one. Yet in some respects the family retains one essential element of the inclusive functions of the domestic group in a small-scale society. The family is seldom any longer an institution of economic production, but the one function the family never loses is that of self-reproduction, generation after generation. Every family of parents and children passes through a cycle of formation, growth and dissolution. But each child usually then joins in the formation of a new family, and so on and on, each new family carrying forward the general pattern of the institution itself, modifying it slightly in the light of circumstance (1981: 173).

Antedating by nearly a decade contemporary discussions about late modernity, Shils observed that much else may come into the picture. In literate societies, the child is taught to read at a relatively early age. Written works of all kinds offer the potential to extend the range of cultural messages available to the growing child, and within the last century, photographic images, recordings of music and voice, radio and television have further increased by exponential degrees the quantity and variety of cultural messages which nowadays transcend family, locality and even nation; all this is now available to the young person who is forming his or her sense of self, and to all of us as adults revising our ideas about ourselves over the span of our lifetimes.

What is transmitted in each family is different, however homogeneous the society may appear from the outside, for each family is composed of different persons who have their own histories and their own propensities to respond to the messages that surround them; the quantity and quality of these messages, and whether they are regarded as significant in some way, or do not register and are immediately forgotten, will also vary by age, gender and social experience (cf. Ardener 1989).

The lived particulars of social life are not the exclusive constituents of the individual's sense of self: the individual also possesses a stock of knowledge from the past--and

nowadays, in late modern societies, a stock of knowledge about contemporary events and life-styles across the globe--as well as a sense of critical imagination and self-awareness, a sense how one's life compares with other lives one might lead, or might have led (cf. Giddens 1991, Hannerz 1992). Creative, critical imagination is the wellspring of change, yet it is all too easily lost from view in our generalisation-seeking theories of culture and society.

Sociologies of the particular tell us about what, for ordinary people in any society, is "thinkable," and how this may change as the individual passes through a lifetime. Personal narratives, for example, frequently reveal that people have a perspective on their own lives that goes well beyond the purely local, and the givenness of things, and that people can easily imagine other life possibilities. They reveal that people have an awareness that their lives could have been different or might yet be different but for the choices they made or have still to make; that they see themselves as creative, responsible persons, not merely as "actors," so called, who are simply reciting the scripts that we have written about the forces that act upon them: economics, historical circumstances, the exigencies of class or gender, cultural codes, or the expectations of others. These forces are, in any case, seldom perceived--if they are perceived at all--as so compelling and clear-cut that no room is left for individual improvisation and choice. Nor do any of these supposedly critical forces in social life--or all of them taken together--account for more than a few artificially-isolated facets of the self, as selfhood is experienced by real people in real time.

Every person accumulates his or her own individualised fund of cultural knowledge and social experience, the product of a lifetime of cultural acquisition and social interaction: a biography. One's biography is, for all practical purposes, one's social persona. It is through one's history that one is known, and placed in society. Our thoughts, words, and acts are the currency of social exchange. What we say and do, how we say and do it gives us away, establishing who we are in dealings with others, or as we wish to be perceived by them. Our knowledge about ourselves is highly susceptible to re-interpretation and reconstruction, for our biographies are always open to revision: details are added, selected, reorganised, imbued with new meaning, embellished, exaggerated, smoothed over, played down, subtracted or forgotten in the light of individual inclination and past, current and anticipated social experience and



circumstance. Moreover, the biographies of interacting persons will tend toward some conventionality in content--that is to say, what kind of information about ourselves is considered appropriate to the situation and is socially negotiable within it, and what is not appropriate or negotiable. Biographies are, in a word, intersubjectively organised: that is to say, they have a narrative shape and substance that partners to a social exchange can recognise and relate to without undue difficulty: they put people on a cultural wavelength, so that they can understand one another in more than just superficial ways.

The categories we use to organise our biographies are not created individually: they too are cultural and social constructions like all other elements of a social stock of knowledge, handed down from the past, re-forged and recast in the give-and-take of social interaction, but they are tailored to fit our individual lifetimes, embedding the individual course of life as strands of history in that of a family, a generation, a locality, and a society; that is, aspects of one's self are placed in a temporal relationship to events and processes beyond the self (Luckmann 1983). Each of us interprets the present by means of our past, mobilising our past experience to cope with the present, using it as a template for making sense of the present and guiding our current and future actions. If the template does not fit, either new experiences are added to our repertoire and old ones are readjusted, reconstituted or discarded, or we are said, tellingly, to "live in the past."

We become fully human--social persons, with a fully-developed sense of self--only through our relationship to particular histories, and to other people. There are, in any society, intersubjective limits to the constitution of biography, and thus to social personhood with full moral credit. These limits are imposed by the current conventional cultural categories, which are themselves the products of a past, transmitted from one generation to the next, defining for the moment what tokens are exchangeable, when, where, how, and to what effect. Yet these limits, unless they are written into inflexible codes that tolerate no deviation and are vigorously policed, are negotiable. They are continually being renegotiated with each exchange as the parties bring their understanding of them to it: thus the categories or moral boundaries are always moving--broadening, narrowing, being interpreted, confirmed and reinterpreted, changing their shape and meaning, filling in and emptying out, opening and closing.

To this way of thinking, biographies are not just windows upon culture. They *are* culture. Culture is not something that is "out there" in the atmosphere, above and

beyond people, existing in the ether of supposedly "collective" symbols and meanings. Culture, on the contrary, resides in individuals' lives, in what they know, say, and do. How they know what they know is made manifest in, and emerges from their histories and their relationships with other people. These relationships vary in their nature and content over the span of one's life; hence how one knows what one knows changes as life unfolds, as a function of new, or differently encountered situations. If "differently encountered" is little more than just a matter of growing old, of passing from childhood to old age along a fairly well defined life-trajectory that is much the same for most men and most women, we may speak of a life-cycle: a common feature of societies marked by a high degree of cultural continuity over the generations, and thus of so-called "traditionality."

If, however, situations are differently encountered *not* mainly as a function of age, but because situations present themselves in new ways, then the notion of a life-cycle--of a pattern repeated over the generations--has little meaning. In this kind of social setting, the biographical experience of each generation overlaps only in part. What the older generation passes on to the younger will prove only a partial preparation for their future, since the life-trajectories of the children will be different from those of their parents. Some cultural knowledge becomes redundant with each generation, passing away with those to whom it had meaning, remaining, perhaps, for another generation or two as remembered fragments of past ways of life. This is perhaps characteristic of so-called "modernity."

I have been led to this understanding of culture by taking as the focus of my research some maritime communities in the North Atlantic region: fishing families who live in small, out-of-the-way places and have remarkable ways of life: ways of life that are very different from those of farmers or city people. Over the course of two centuries, the people of these North Atlantic communities have had constantly to adapt to changing conditions which have put a high premium on their ability to manipulate their cultural resources and create new forms of social organisation. Things have rarely remained the same from one generation to the next.

A good example is the west coast of Sweden. For centuries, generation after generation of people were provided with a livelihood from the sea. The bays, fjords, channels and inlets round the islands yielded a harvest of fish, as did the waters offshore.



the Kattegat, Skagerrack, and the North Sea. The sea's harvest was sometimes rich, sometimes poor. At the best of times, the riches of the sea made it possible for thousands more young men and women to marry and to establish new households. At the worst of times, these new households, unable to set aside the fish in the sea for rainy days, were exposed to dreadful hazards. Privation forced some to move away, and to find other means of providing for their households. Those who remained had, perforce, to find new ways of catching fish, stretching their ingenuity and willingness to take risks to the limit, experimenting with new forms of technology and social organisation. Over the generations, fishing has become an increasingly specialised business. As each succeeding depression forced some households out of fishing, others countered adversity with still more effective social arrangements and technical innovations. The kinds of lives fishing people led, and how they provided for their families was, until the late 1960s, a product of this history.

Household form and domestic organisation in fishing communities along the Swedish west coast displayed a number of features that are typical of fishing societies in the North Atlantic region. Any household must meet a range of demands occurring over its life-cycle: as a young married couple set up a home, they enjoy a period of relative prosperity until children arrive, and begin to make heavy demands upon the couple's earnings; after the children begin to earn and eventually move out, the parental couple may again enjoy a few years of relative prosperity until they retire and lose their earning capacity, when they return to a condition of dependency either upon a grown-up child or a state pension (cf. Robertson 1991).

In fishing households, this standard life-cycle is complicated by an inherent instability in the economic resource upon which they depend: there is no means of husbanding, or "banking" the fish in the sea, to ensure continuity of supply, and thus of household income. The supply of fish, and the level of fish prices, rises and falls, not always in inverse ratios, from month to month, season to season, and year to year, in irregular and unpredictable rhythms, in response to vagaries in the weather, the complex array of ecological factors governing fish populations, and the intensity of human predation. Since fishermen pay themselves a percentage of the catch, these ups-and-downs are immediately felt in the domestic sphere. There is no telling when feast or famine may occur, how serious these variations might be, how long they will last, or whether they

will catch a family at the "wrong" point in its developmental cycle, when the sons are too young to help their father take advantage of a boom, or a slump catches the family just as the economic demands upon it reach a peak, forcing children out of communities that can offer them no other means of livelihood and no way of setting up households of their own.

Success in bringing up children with good prospects, *and still having any of them nearby in one's old age*, is a much greater test of local organisational ingenuity and good household management than it is in a farming or urban household, where either labour and capital provide a more predictable return, or other means of livelihood are more readily available locally. Characteristically, in fishing societies, elementary families are drawn into flexible networks of alliance with others, jointly pooling their labour and capital within and across the generations in an organisational form which, for want of any established technical term, I have called the maritime joint household. These joint households are composed of elementary families united in production and consumption who, metaphorically, eat from the same pot, even though they do not all, at all times, share the same hearth or sleep under the same roof. The men together own a fishing boat, pooling their capital and drawing from it a common livelihood, as well as frequently providing a livelihood for their sons or sons-in-law. Their wives, daughters and daughters-in-law team up for mutual support while their menfolk are at sea. The maritime joint household is an organisational solution to the problems of economic uncertainty which has independently emerged in countless North Atlantic deep-sea fishing communities.

Along the Swedish west coast, this form of organisation appears to have come about only with the adoption of deep-sea fishing not much more than 100 or 150 years ago. As a form of organisation, the joint household appears to have had its origins in the development of markets, trade and technology in the early phases of mercantilism in Sweden, which gradually transformed fishing from a casual, family-based subsistence activity to a highly-organised industrial process. If this is so, then these groupings of kinsmen and neighbours are a specialised product of the industrial age and are not, as has been conventionally assumed, a survival from a pre-industrial peasant past, or an adaptation of a so-called "traditional" form of rural social organisation to modern conditions (cf. Hasslöf 1980). This is consistent with recent findings by Alan Macfarlane,

Martine Segalen, A. F. Robertson and others who have suggested that the independent elementary family was, in the past, as frequently found as it is today, while, as today, certain situations stimulate the development of extended domestic organisation.

The maritime joint household relied for its development and continued existence upon a set of specific circumstances connected with deep-sea fishing. For most West Coast households, these circumstances have changed over the last 25 years, and no longer apply. Over the last generation, most West Coast households have left fishing. After a long period of prosperity following the Second World War, the herring stocks went into a sudden decline in the late 1960s, with disastrous effects upon dozens of communities whose main source of livelihood was the herring fishery. Yet, although the disappearance of the herring affected all fishing households equally, in that no one knew why the fish had disappeared or whether they would return, the response of people was very different from one community to another. Twenty-five years later, it is quite striking how the decisions that people made then, amid great uncertainty, have cumulatively shaped the course of recent history. These communities have subsequently developed in very different ways. Some now serve the tourist trade; others have become dormitory suburbs, their residents commuting to factory or office jobs in other places; a few have managed to survive as fishing villages; while a number have become seasonal communities, without a year-round population.

The interdependencies borne of economic necessity which had served as a kind of social glue, binding fishing families so tightly together, began to lose their power as soon as the men started working as individuals in factories instead of close-knit teams of kinsmen on the decks of fishing boats. The extended networks of kinswomen, once so vital in the exchange of services to overcome the difficulties of coping with heavy domestic routines while their menfolk were away on fishing trips, gradually became attenuated as their rationale disappeared. In the last twenty-five years, the maritime joint household has all but vanished. Nowadays, in many West Coast communities, little of their former way of life remains to bind together former fishing households, apart from a remembered past. The children of former fishing families have no need of a practical knowledge of how to support a family from the sea, and in another generation few children will have parents who are able to teach them.

To conclude. Historical questions, and the conditions which give rise to social and cultural transformation, have become ever more central to our purpose as sociologists and anthropologists. The future progress of our disciplines will depend on finding ways to reconcile our propensity to typologise--to simplify the world of human affairs by creating classes and categories of social and cultural phenomena--with our common-sense perception that life is a flow, as filled with flux, novelty, indeterminacy and contradiction as it is with comforting certainties. And, that all of us, as individual persons, have our own unique histories and bridges into into wider world beyond our front doors; that our thoughts and acts reflect upon others, as theirs reflect upon ours. Culture, I have argued, exists only as it happens; to this way of thinking, a social system is a momentary composite of separate but inter-linked lives in a stream of time. Finding ever more true-to-life ways of conveying the human experience of society, in all its rich variety, is the challenge of the future.

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