



## The Nature of “Premodern” Mind

Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard, Piaget, and Beyond

Georg W. Oesterdiekhoff

**Abstract.** – The debate about the mental differences between modern and premodern peoples still continues. Since the 1980s, theories of “cultural relativism” and “universality of rationality” have prevailed in ethnological discussions, having largely replaced the previous theories of mental development and evolutionary approaches. The history of ethnology has not been determined by empirical research but largely by ideological and political ambitions. This essay shows that it is necessary to resume the discussion of the previously dominant theories, known as the “British school” and the “French school.” The debate about Lévy-Bruhl’s theory in particular launched into a strange way. It is useful to recall the developmental interpretation of this theory in order to work out an appropriate theory about the changes of reasoning and worldview in the history of mankind. Empirical psychological surveys now tend to support the previous evolutionary approaches rather than the two currently leading theories. [*developmental approach, premodern worldview, modes of thought, mentality differences*]

**Georg W. Oesterdiekhoff**, Dr. Dr., reader in sociology at the University of Karlsruhe; previously deputy chair for sociology at the universities of Aachen and Erlangen-Nürnberg as well as visiting professor at the National University of Colombia. – His publications include: *Kulturelle Bedingungen kognitiver Entwicklung* (Frankfurt 1997); *Zivilisation und Strukturgenese* (Frankfurt 2000); *Kulturelle Evolution des Geistes* (Münster 2006); *Die Entwicklung der Menschheit von der Kindheitsphase zur Erwachsenenreife* (Wiesbaden 2013). He has written about 25 books and 150 articles. – See also References Cited.

### Introduction

The dispute about the characteristics of thinking and worldview of premodern populations has by no means ended. However, the great debates about this subject took place in previous generations, especially between 1880 and 1980. Ethnology and

psychology had been the social sciences that produced the most sophisticated contributions to the subject. Next to ethnological approaches, psychometric intelligence research and Piagetian cross-cultural psychology made a major contribution. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the British Anthropology of Edward Tylor and James Frazer had a considerable impact on the debate. Then, the books of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl more or less dominated the field between 1910 and 1970, especially between 1910 and 1940. Ideas that emphasise the “universality of psyche, reason, intelligence, and rationality” have always existed in the social sciences but they conquered ethnology in particular after about 1980. The ideology of “cultural relativism” has also existed for generations but prevailed as a second interpretation likewise after 1980. Both approaches seem to have dominated the debate since that time, having largely displaced the previous, alternative theories. They seem to have acquired the status of a doctrine in the minds of many current scientists (Jahoda 1999). Yet there are still many who doubt the ability of these theories to deliver a proper interpretative framework for the nature of mind in history and culture. Many researchers argue that they largely serve political and ideological ambitions and, in fact, hinder the formulation of deeper insights into the historical development of mind and reason.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, anyone who studies anthropological textbooks is confronted with prejudices about the

<sup>1</sup> Hallpike (1979, 2004); Ibarra G. (2007); Oesterdiekhoff (2009b; 2011a, b; 2012a, b, c).

ideas of former protagonists that were once widely taken for granted, although detailed scrutiny often reveals only ignorance transmitted from generation to generation. It is time to re-examine previously leading theories in order to remove prejudices concerning the interpretation of traditions and also to search for an alternative to the frequently fruitless debates of today. It has been common practice in some debates to discount whole theories on account of some limited errors. Some theories are held to be “refuted” or “outdated” only by dogmatic statements found in certain criticisms. I will start my essay by summarising the debate between the so-called “British school” and the “French school”, which both prevailed in the first half of the last century.

### 1 Edward B. Tylor, James Frazer, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) wrote seven influential books on the premodern mind between 1910 and 1940 (1923 [1922], 1931, 1938, 1949 [1940], 1971 [1927], 1983 [1935], 1985 [1910]). Even his first book about the subject (1985 [1910]) attracted a wide interest in the international debates after 1910. He outlined the foundations of his theory in the opening chapter of this first book. Only in his last book (1949 [1940]), however, did he resume his discussion of these foundations, shortly before his death 1939. In the thirty years in between and in the other five books he dedicated to the subject, he remained silent of the matter. Very often the criticisms levelled at his work solely target these foundations or this meta-theory, implying wrongly they should be used to determine the quality of his work as a whole. I will show that the errors in Lévy-Bruhl’s meta-theory should not detract from the study of his books, which remain partially unsurpassed and unparalleled today.

Lévy-Bruhl (1985: chap. 1) unfolds his meta-theory in a critical refutation of the assumptions of the “British school.” He maintains that Tylor (1832–1917) and Frazer (1854–1941) had assumed the universality of mind and reason across times and cultures. He presupposes that they had contended a change of worldviews only but that they posited the same structure of mind through time. According to Tylor (1871/II), the “primitive” worldview originates in the experiences of dreams which ancient man takes as real occurrences. The ancient persons or primitive men see especially the dead in the dreams, what cause him to believe that every person and every object has a double existence, a

soul. These immaterial souls are the motors of all beings and phenomena, movements and regularities. The animistic worldview stems from this belief in the existence of souls. Lévy-Bruhl rightly determines that this explanatory model is neither wholly convincing nor sufficient. Furthermore, its central premise, that the ancient mind might be based on the same logic and mechanisms as the modern mind, is misguided. Lévy-Bruhl intended to replace Tylor’s theory by his own. He was moderately successful in this. Tylor’s approach was widely held to be refuted on the basis of this argument (Evans-Pritchard 1965: chap. 2).

But is it really true that Edward B. Tylor believed in the universality of mind and reason? Is it sufficient to use some repeated remarks, especially regarding his dream theory, to assign this idea to him? Close scrutiny of his writings reveals that his argumentation is carried much more by developmental assumptions. He adheres to an evolutionary and stage theory, regarding both mind and culture. He ascribes weak mental capacities and a childlike psyche to premodern man, with regard to morals, social life, and other domains (Tylor 1871/I: chap. 2). This psychogenetic evolution of mind is linked to societal evolution. His book relies more on this idea of development and not, as mostly assumed, on the idea of the universality of mind. His whole theory is based on the idea that premodern humans have a childlike mentality, whereas the rise of modern culture is seen as deeply interconnected to a cognitive maturation of humankind.

The same is true with regard to the second giant of British anthropology. Both Lévy-Bruhl and numerous succeeding authors maintained that James Frazer (1994) combined an evolutionary theory of worldviews (from magic, through religion to science) with a theory of the universality of mind. Of course, there are statements in Frazer that support such an interpretation. But defining his meta-theory in such a way contradicts the practical procedure he adopted in his writings. His actual expositions are largely ruled by a developmental approach with regard to reason and mind. He sees a childlike mentality as the basis of the premodern worldview and a cognitive maturation accounts for the rise of modern rationality and sciences. I cite one remark of Frazer referring to the explanation of the premodern custom to try against animals: “In that hazy state of the human mind it was easy and almost inevitable to confound the motives which actuate a rational man with the impulses which direct a beast, and even with the forces which propel a stone or a tree in falling. It was in such mental confusion that savages took deliberate vengeance on animals and things

that had hurt or offended him” (Frazer 1923: 445). Frazer attributes to premodern man a “hazy state of mind” and “mental confusion,” which causes his adherence to animism and judicial procedures against animals. The study of Frazer’s huge work always reveals this dominance of the developmental approach as a constant thread regarding his expositions about magic, religion, folklore, and whatever. The “savages” have childlike minds – therefore, they practise their archaic forms of magic and religion.

Thus, Lévy-Bruhl starts his own meta-theory with inaccurate or one-sided estimation of the British school, assuming they adhered to the idea of the universality of mind, psyche, and rationality. This estimation has been handed down through generations of textbooks and interpretations. However, the books of the British school entail deep insights and correct notions that are still worthwhile studying today and that remain unaffected by the contentious meta-theories of their authors. There is no reason to believe that the contributions of the British and French schools are mutually exclusive. They should be read as contributions, which complement each other rather than contradict each other. They have more in common than Lévy-Bruhl and other authors have recognised.

Lévy-Bruhl (1985: chap. 1) contests the assumption that humans across societies share the same mind; he denies the theory of the universality of reason and mind completely. He argues that different forms of mind, reason, mentality, and worldview stem from different forms of societies. When different peoples, living in different societies, have different structures of mind, these mental differences result from divergent social structures. He clearly excludes psychology as a possible explanatory model for the different forms of thinking, because he wrongly suggests that psychology always deals with individuals. According to Lévy-Bruhl, the minds and mentalities of individuals, beyond the levels of instincts, are solely made and procured by society. If whole peoples differ in their minds, then, according to Lévy-Bruhl’s argumentation, psychology cannot deliver the explanation for these differences. Moreover, he believes there is a link between the idea of the universality of mind and psychology, providing, of course, that individual psychology could only come to the conclusion that all people have the same mind and reason across cultures.

His argumentation comes from the sociology of Émile Durkheim. Lévy-Bruhl’s meta-theory is deeply influenced by Durkheim’s sociological methodology. Durkheim saw the mind of the individual in complete dependence on society, thus rejecting the influence of psychology on social phe-

nomena. Not only the collective representations but also the Kantian categories of reason originate in social structures, according to Durkheim (1965: introduction). Lévy-Bruhl here largely follows Durkheim, but only in his remarks concerning his meta-theory. He believes that all categories and concepts, ideas and representations are completely caused by the society in which humans live. Thus, all ideas and mental phenomena of humans are collective representations, explainable in terms of sociology and not in terms of psychology. Divergent societies form divergent collective representations, covering the complete mind and reason of humans. These strange ideas build the kernel of his meta-theory. This is why Lévy-Bruhl was held to be someone who belonged to Durkheim’s school or to the French school, and why he was even regarded as Durkheim’s heir after the latter’s death.<sup>2</sup> I will explain the error of his meta-theory below.

Lévy-Bruhl distinguished two types of societies: the primitive or premodern societies and the Western or modern societies. He collected data about various mental phenomena of societies from all over the world and assigned them to specific areas. He described similar phenomena of thinking, customs, and ideologies found in more or less all premodern societies, no matter from which world region or continent. Tribal societies, nomadic bands, peasant societies, and agrarian civilisations shared common traits of mind and behaviour, which disappeared only in modern populations. He found these similar structures in premodern China, India, Indian America, Black Africa, Black Australia, and elsewhere. He showed that these mental forms had mainly vanished in Europe and that they do not characterise modern societies. This mode of distinction and assignment is not a speciality of Lévy-Bruhl. The British school of Tylor and Frazer, the German school of Bastian and Waitz, and many others frequently followed this procedure. The distinction largely arises from real circumstances and does not originate in ideological considerations.

## 2 Lévy-Bruhl’s Theory of Primitive Mentality

Referring to premodern peoples, Lévy-Bruhl (1923: introduction) distinguished between an appropriate and intelligent adoption of reality, on the one hand, and mystical interpretations, which appear in spheres above the level of practical usages in everyday activities, on the other. Premodern peoples know how to use or to make boats, weapons, houses,

2 Jaensch (1923); Jahoda (2000: 219); Tul’viste (1991).

etc., but they largely conceive birth and death, sickness and sanity, rainfall and sunshine, etc. as mystical phenomena. “At the outset Lévy-Bruhl was concerned to show that in spite of the fact that we have a great deal in common with primitives, and can communicate and trade with them, their mentality is nonetheless basically different from our own” (Jahoda 2000: 221).

Lévy-Bruhl defined the thinking of premodern populations as “mystical” and “prelogical.” He does not mean that they cannot think in logical terms but that they do not try to avoid logical contradictions. When someone dreams of being murdered then it may happen that she or he kills the murderer in order to prevent the assassination dreamt (Lévy-Bruhl 1923: chap. 3). What appears to be illogical to the modern mind, convinces a premodern mind again and again, and arouses forms of strange behaviour such as those described.

Premodern peoples around the world, therefore, understand dream contents as real occurrences. They assume that their souls had made real experiences and had watched real incidents. These peoples tend to continue by day the activities they had previously dreamt at night. They have so-called realistic dream concepts. They distinguish between dreams and reality but take dreams as another form of real perception and real experience. They do not understand the illusionary character of dreams and their origin in pure fantasy (Lévy-Bruhl 1923: chap. 3).

Lévy-Bruhl believes that premodern peoples tend to regard objects and phenomena of all sorts as equipped with mystical forces. Rivers, mountains, forests, stars, etc. contain mystical and magical powers that people have to address and to consider. These things can magically influence or cause incidences. A mountain or a rock can cause sickness, death, happiness, or whatever. Conversely, peoples have to apply magical procedures when they want to hunt animals or catch fish (Lévy-Bruhl 1985: chap. 6; 1971: introduction). Every sickness, death, accident, drought, rainfall, epidemic, war, good harvest, or the like, is seen as being caused by mystical forces. They are the real, the primary causes, whereas the empirical causes, the secondary causes, are only the shell or the form of appearance of the mystical beings. Witches, sorcerers, ghosts, objects, animals, or gods create all objects and occurrences. They are the primary causes of the things that happen in the world (Lévy-Bruhl 1923: chaps. 1 and 2).

When important occurrences such as death happen, people around the world used ordeals to detect the murderer. They tended to assume that every death is a murder, identifying heart attacks, disease, or snake attacks only as secondary causes. The or-

deal or other evidences designate the murderer, who has to assume the responsibility (Lévy-Bruhl 1923: chap. 8).

This thinking has a mystical nature. A foot trace, a cloth, a tool belonging to a person is internally linked with or participates in him or her. It is enough to damage a foot trace or to burn hair cut from a person who is thousands of miles away in order to kill him or her (Lévy-Bruhl 1949: 92; 1971: chap. 4). This thinking is also liable to believe in the metamorphosis of beings. Humans can convert into stones or animals; gods or plants can transform into objects, humans, and animals of all kinds (Lévy-Bruhl 1983). The dead rule the lives of their descendants by magic. The living have to make sacrifices to the dead in order to preserve their lives (Lévy-Bruhl 1971: chaps. 8–12).

This is not the place to present and to discuss the main findings and descriptions of the works of Lévy-Bruhl. They convincingly show the deviating forms of thinking, worldview, customs, and behaviour of premodern peoples, forms that largely no longer exist in modern societies. Lévy-Bruhl collected material from ethnographers, missionaries, voyagers, and experts around the world. He described their observations, their data, and their commentaries, and translated them into his more complex theoretical system. On the whole, his descriptions do not deviate much from the usual ethnographic expositions but only concentrate them. His books were seen as exceptional presentations of the ethnographic knowledge collected. Many scholars regarded these books as milestones of theoretical interpretation and ethnographical analysis.

Lévy-Bruhl was all but omnipresent in textbooks about religious studies, in ethnological debates, ancient studies, and also to some degree in sociological and philosophical discussions (Jahoda 2000: 222). Ernst Cassirer based his “Philosophy of Symbolic Forms” (1965) largely on Lévy-Bruhl; Jean Piaget and Heinz Werner referred to him, and countless scholars regarded him as a prime authority. The well-known economic historian David S. Landes (1969) said it would be impossible to explain the rise of modern, industrial society without reference to the replacement of the prelogical mind by the rational mind, according to the analysis of Lévy-Bruhl. Lévy-Bruhl founded many ethnological institutes, especially in Latin America. He was one of the leading scholars in the humanities over decades. Evans-Pritchard (1965) said it would be impossible to start an analysis of “primitive” religion without taking account of Lévy-Bruhl’s ideas.

Nevertheless, criticism of his theory of “primitive mentality” was strong from the outset. It was

said that he never researched among indigenous peoples, that he was nothing but an armchair philosopher. The logic of this argumentation has had huge influence despite its immaterial character. Lévy-Bruhl reports what ethnographers and experts have documented. He reproduces data and interpretations that ethnologists today describe as realistic dream understandings, the use of ordeals, magical procedures, mystical interpretations of accidents, ancestor worship, and other phenomena. Both the data and the interpretations are widespread in ethnographic and ethnological considerations. “However, examples of ‘pre-logical’ assertions similar to those on which Lévy-Bruhl based his hypothesis are also easily found in ethnographic material collected in accordance with all the rules of field work” (Tul’viste 1991: 18).

It was said that mystical interpretations prevail in both premodern and modern societies. But modern societies do not interpret everyday occurrences in terms of mystical forces as was common among premodern societies. Or, it is said that Lévy-Bruhl overestimates the role of mystical thinking, ignoring the role of practical knowledge and acquired intelligence. This judgment only proves the lack of knowledge of the critic. Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973) already saw that nearly all critics of Lévy-Bruhl simply did not understand him and simply did not know what he actually had described. “In my opinion most of this criticism is very ineffective, disproving what no one holds to be proved. It seldom touches Lévy-Bruhl’s main propositions. His theory of primitive mentality may distort savage thought but it would seem better to correct the distortion than to dismiss the theory completely” (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 8). “Contrary to the judgment of most English anthropologists I find Lévy-Bruhl’s writings a great stimulus to formulation of new problems and I consider the influence he has had not only on anthropological theory but also in directing the attention of fieldworkers to a new set of problems to have been most fruitful” (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 35). Evans-Pritchard (1934: 14–17) rightly demonstrates that many well-known ethnographers share Lévy-Bruhl’s main findings, regardless whether or not they are actually familiar with his ideas.

The idea that Lévy-Bruhl’s ideas are outdated is strengthened by Lévy-Bruhl’s own self-criticism in his last book (1949), where he largely abandoned the concepts of “prelogic” and “mystical participation.” But his self-criticism at the age of 82 was not well-founded. Descriptions of “participations” are still found in most ethnological textbooks. Aleksandr Lurija (1982) comprehensibly demonstrated that

premodern peoples are unable to exert syllogisms and other forms of logical conclusions (Oesterdiekhoff 2009b: 130–147; 2011b: 61–86). Furthermore, his strange self-criticism does not affect the mass of his material descriptions at all. The errors of his meta-theory do not touch or influence the validity of the ethnological data he presented. The mass of his material descriptions can be read without any reference to his meta-theory at all or can easily be encapsulated in the developmental approach.

### 3 Edward E. Evans-Pritchard

Evans-Pritchard (1934: 8) raises one central point against Lévy-Bruhl’s theory. It may overestimate the role of mystical thought in premodern societies, as many other critics also had emphasised. However, I doubt the accuracy of this objection, even on the basis of Evans-Pritchard’s own later work such as, e.g., the four years later published book “Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande” (1976 [1937]), which is said to be one of the great studies of these subjects across ethnography. I cannot identify that Evans-Pritchard determines a role of mystical thought in this book that in any way notably diverges from the role ascribed to it by Lévy-Bruhl. He explains that the Azande tend to regard every death as a murder, caused by magic from neighbours or enemies. Then they employ oracles to discover the murderer and ask him for compensation or punish him. They believe that witches and sorcerers continuously exert their evil influences upon society. Hence humans must protect themselves by several forms of magic. The Azande apply oracles not only to detect damaging influences but also to plan every activity including marriages, travels, work, warfare, and the like. Evans-Pritchard emphasises that every Azande really works as a magician and that none of them doubt the influence of magical and mystical forces, ghosts and witches.

Any comparison between the related descriptions of Evans-Pritchard and Lévy-Bruhl shows that they mainly described the same phenomena, used the same theoretical tools, and came to the same conclusions. All of Evans-Pritchard’s main findings had been already included in Lévy-Bruhl’s previous writings. Moreover, the concepts and theoretical tools Evans-Pritchard used stem from Lévy-Bruhl, even the distinction between primary and secondary causes. Eva Gillies (1978: 24–25) wrote in the preface of the German edition of Evans-Pritchard’s book that Lévy-Bruhl had the greatest influence on Evans-Pritchard in conceptualising and writing his book. This is clear although Evans-Pritchard failed

to realise or to admit it. It is possible that he was not even aware of this huge impact. Besides, it is thinkable that Evans-Pritchard wanted to replace Lévy-Bruhl nearly the same way as Lévy-Bruhl has aspired to replace the British school previously (see the imprecise and contradictory remarks in the chapter on Lévy-Bruhl in Evans-Pritchard 1965: 78–99).

Despite the similarities between their ideas, many ethnologists have identified Evans-Pritchard as somebody who surmounted and refuted Lévy-Bruhl. He is someone who seems to represent a true theory born of careful observations made as an ethnographic researcher, whereas Lévy-Bruhl is said to represent an armchair philosopher without any field experience and personal contacts to premodern peoples. “Evans-Pritchard’s ... classical study of Zande witchcraft, which had been inspired by Lévy-Bruhl, was the first empirical demonstration that the latter’s views about the thinking of primitives were false” (Jahoda 2000: 219). Jahoda does not show how Evans-Pritchard refuted Lévy-Bruhl’s theory. He takes this as a simple fact and believes that it is superfluous to demonstrate it. This error of evaluation and assignment has continued over generations. Conversely, a critical comparison of Evans-Pritchard and Lévy-Bruhl comes to the conclusion that both share all main findings and theoretical shortcomings as well. Evans-Pritchard only repeats Lévy-Bruhl’s main conclusions and offers no alternative or additional theory, leaving unanswered all those questions to which Lévy-Bruhl himself had no answers. Evans-Pritchard delivers similar descriptions of the ethnographic materials but has no theory to explain them. This is an enduring problem. Current ethnologists may describe the same phenomena but have no convincing alternative theory to that of Evans-Pritchard and Lévy-Bruhl. Evans-Pritchard and other ethnologists can only say today that the beliefs in magic and mystical influences originate in the “collective representations” born in or made by premodern social structures. But that is something that Lévy-Bruhl had already stated.

#### 4 The Problem of Collective Representations

The meta-theory of Lévy-Bruhl is by no means convincing; the theory of collective representations appears as most dubious. Lévy-Bruhl starts his definition with the simple observation that the collective representations of premodern peoples around the globe share common traits, which differ from those of modern societies. Then he assumes that the collective representations stem from society. Pre-

modern societies cause the “primitive mentality,” whereas modern societies generate the more rational mentality. But he never explains this coherence. He never shows the internal link between premodern social structures and primitive mentality. Which traits of premodern social structures account for the belief in magic, mystical participations, realistic dream understandings, witches, sorcerers, etc.? Why should premodern social structures cause the belief in magic and mystical participations, in pre-logic and conceptual realism? Lévy-Bruhl neither raises this question nor does he answer it, neither explicitly nor implicitly. Using Durkheimian methodology, he cannot grasp the idea that these differences could be linked to the people who live in those societies. He denies psychology as a possible explanatory tool, because the phenomenon encompasses whole peoples and not only individuals. The result is that Lévy-Bruhl, in fact, has no real explanatory theory for all the phenomena he had described with such “rare skill,” as Peeter Tul’viste (1991) rightly judged. He can only say that the “primitives” think magically and mystically because they think magically and mystically. “Lévy-Bruhl does not, in fact, attempt to explain mystical thought” (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 35).

Lévy-Bruhl is incapable of understanding that mental structures can be, or might be, or even should be explained in terms of psychology and not in terms of sociology. He is unwilling to understand that peoples in premodern and modern societies differ in their psychological structures, and that their beliefs and behaviour are only explainable in terms of psychology. He is incapable of understanding that different societies may affect the psychological development of their inhabitants to the extent that their ideas and categories diverge in the extreme way that ethnology has described. Lévy-Bruhl avoids actually stating that the divergences of ideas and categories (= basic functions of reason and mind) cannot directly reflect social structures but only different psychological structures. He recognises the total character of the mental divergences but assigns them to collective representations and not to psychological structures. But the ideas of collective representations and their origination remain wholly opaque and dubious.

#### 5 Lévy-Bruhl’s Theory in the Light of the Developmental Approach

The whole argumentation and all the data collected hint at the necessity of assuming that premodern and modern peoples exist at different psychological

stages, which account for the different mental phenomena. The very notion that the differences encompass not only ideas but also the basic functions of reason, as also Lévy-Bruhl determines, necessitates this conclusion. And the differences between the psychological structures stem from the divergent socialisation techniques of societies. Ancient Chinese society differs from the social structures of African tribal societies. Yet both peoples share common traits such as ancestor worship, belief in magic and ghosts, mystical participations, etc. Thus, the common mental traits do not originate in social structures but in common psychological structures. Only modern societies occupy socialisation techniques, which enable peoples to surmount these forms of mystical and magical mentality. In fact, the developmental approach seems to be the solution to the problem of finding an appropriate meta-theory.

Nonetheless, we find in Lévy-Bruhl’s books traces of the developmental approach, although he clearly denied it in his meta-theory and in what he said about his work. Yet it is often the case that authors employ two or more approaches even when they are not aware of doing so. And Lévy-Bruhl applies the developmental approach implicitly, perhaps not to the same extent as the British school. Thus, he assigns to premodern populations an absence of abstractions and concepts, a tendency to logical contradictions, and other characteristics of the lower stages of mental development (Lévy-Bruhl 1985: chap. 3). There are only a few instances where Lévy-Bruhl compares children to premodern adults. He writes that both groups share animism and the confusion of subjective and objective forms of thinking (1971: 2). He repeatedly remarks that different peoples remain at different stages of mental development (1971: chap. 5). He often says that the modern mind has reached a higher mental and logical stage (1971: chap. 8; 1985: chap. 9). Particularly in the last chapter of his first book on the subject (1985) [1910] he describes in detail the rise of the modern mind as a mental development towards higher stages. Moreover, the steady employment of concepts such as “primitive mentality” or “lower/higher societies” hints at developmental approaches.

However, Lévy-Bruhl’s right hand works differently from his left hand. He also often denies regarding premodern populations as remaining on lower mental stages (1949). He completely denies the reference to child psychology, despite some contrary remarks, as mentioned above. Jahoda (2000: 220f.) relates Lévy-Bruhl’s denial of comparing premodern adults to children to his acknowledgment of the high practical intelligence of these

peoples. But Lévy-Bruhl (1985: chap. 1) generally emphasises another reason for his denial. He says that the mental differences between premodern and modern peoples are bigger than those between children and adults in modern societies. He believed that modern children were equipped with the same structures as modern adults, only having lesser powers of reason. The main idea behind this judgement can only be that he thought that modern children would not practice magic, would not think in mystical participations, and would not behave according to strange customs and patterns as premodern peoples do. Thus, child psychology did not seem to him to be sufficient to explain the huge differences between modern and premodern adults. This is the main reason why Lévy-Bruhl objected to the comparison of children to premodern adults. Besides, all these judgments are found only in isolated sentences spread all over his works. Lévy-Bruhl did not write a single page or chapter upon this issue. He only dedicated the first chapter of his first book to his meta-theory together with perhaps a few sections in his last book. Thus, he did not invest any great effort in this question. The idea seemed to him to be too strange to encourage him to think about it more thoroughly.

His procedure reflects a missing knowledge of and inadequate thinking about child psychology. At a first glance, one could support Lévy-Bruhl’s denial considering that 12-year-old children are mentally more close to modern adults than to premodern adults. But it is impossible that premodern adults are more distant from modern ones than infants are. From that notion emerges immediately the conclusion that the differences between premodern and modern peoples should be referred to the differences between children of certain ages and modern adults.

Consequently, dozens of influential scholars claimed that child psychology was the true theoretical basis of Lévy-Bruhl’s theory. Some authors claimed for this theoretical basis, others took it for granted and self-evident, superfluous to emphasise it at all. John Murphy (1927: 103) put it: “M. Lévy-Bruhl disposes of the parallel to the child in a rather perfunctory way... On the contrary, the parallel is extremely close.” Charles Blondel (1926: 22), one of the most influential supporters of Lévy-Bruhl, determined the status of premodern peoples as follows: “In a word, they are like great children.” Édouard Claparède (1982), a leading scholar of his time and teacher of Jean Piaget, also interpreted Lévy-Bruhl’s theory in terms of child psychology. He suggested that collective representations only reflect childlike mental states and that, therefore, they stem not from social structures but from lower cog-

nitive stages. He argued that a premodern human being, settled in modern culture, would develop a modern mind. Yet the lack of modern socialisation techniques in premodern cultures account for the arrested ontogenesis or blockaded development of these peoples. Claparède interpreted primitive behaviour and primitive mentalities as results of the arrested development of humans.

The topos of the childlike nature of “savages” runs as a constant thread through 19th-century literature and continues well into the 20th century ... The children of savages, it was believed, are not much inferior to European children but, with the onset of puberty their mental development goes no further, and so they remain eternal children (Jahoda 2000: 229).

Pierre Janet, Jean Piaget’s other teacher, also supported this view. He regarded Lévy-Bruhl’s results as evidence of the arrested stage development of premodern humans. Janet criticised parallels drawn too cautiously and demanded their strong elaboration, going even further than Piaget. “Such prudence is a little bit exaggerated; at some time it will be necessary to make such a comparison in a precise manner in order to be able to establish in a general way a hierarchical scheme of psychological operations” (Janet 1926/1: 323; transl. by G. O.).

Raoul Allier (1929), too, saw in child psychology the theoretical basis of Lévy-Bruhl’s theory of primitive mentality. Henri Wallon (1928), a classmate of Lévy-Bruhl and later on an influential child psychologist, viewed Lévy-Bruhl’s material as self-evident proof of the childlike mentality of premodern adults.

The German reception of Lévy-Bruhl also applied developmental psychology as the undeniable reference system for the interpretation of his data and conclusions. E. R. Jaensch, a leading child psychologist of his time, saw the necessity to correct Lévy-Bruhl’s meta-theory of the collective representations by applying the developmental approach. “It is a priori obvious that the universal structure of the primitive mind does not depend on varying collective representations but on specific stages of the mental life. This conclusion results from the similarities between primitive features as described by the psychology of primitive peoples, and peculiarities of young people in modern cultures. Against this background it is clear that there is no other serious theory to explain the differences between modern and pre-modern collective representations” (Jaensch 1923: 92; transl. by G. O.). Alfred Vierkandt (1937), a well-known German scholar, completely reinterpreted Lévy-Bruhl in terms of developmental psychology. Norbert Elias, who is said to

be the last representative of the classical sociology, likewise understood Lévy-Bruhl in terms of developmental psychology, assuming that the humankind went from childhood to adulthood (Weiler 2008).

Moreover, there have been several authors who referred to Lévy-Bruhl as if he, in fact, had applied developmental concepts. They regarded him as a developmental psychologist or as someone who had proved that premodern peoples stay on childlike stages. Some of them took this for granted even without considering about what Lévy-Bruhl himself had thought about this relationship. For example, Heinz Werner, who compared children to premodern peoples across all areas of psyche, referred to Lévy-Bruhl as if he himself had based his theory on developmental psychology (Werner and Hall 1948; Werner and Kaplan 1956). “The seeming inevitability of such comparisons was so ingrained that writers discussing Lévy-Bruhl’s theory often made them without indicating, or perhaps being aware, that Lévy-Bruhl himself had rejected them” (Jahoda 2000: 229).

Jahoda (2000) demonstrated that Jean Piaget, in particular, regarded Lévy-Bruhl as a developmental psychologist. Piaget (1896–1980) referred to him over fifty years as someone who had shown that the same phenomena that are found among children also characterise premodern peoples. “He came to realize how very different childish thinking is from that of normal European adults. At the same time, he was evidently struck by the apparent similarity between children’s responses to his questions and the beliefs and ideas of primitives as reported by Lévy-Bruhl” (Jahoda 2000: 234). Piaget never discussed the problems of Lévy-Bruhl’s meta-theory because he focused on his material descriptions, which reveal features that largely match those of children. This is by no means surprising, because Lévy-Bruhl’s meta-theory is limited, both in quantity and quality, and because the material descriptions represent the essence of his approach. Furthermore, no expert in child psychology would see any necessity to evidence the developmental foundations of Lévy-Bruhl’s work; for every expert in child psychology immediately knows that Lévy-Bruhl’s descriptions completely fit notions about the mentality and psychology of children. “If one compares children’s representations with the quantity of collective representations in lower societies, one cannot help but be struck by their resemblance ... Is there really such a difference between the child who controls the motion of the sun or the moon by running through a field, and the Son of Heaven who controls the motion of the stars while making the rounds of his kingdom?” (Piaget 1995 [1933]: 229).



## 6 Piaget and Piagetian Cross-Cultural Psychology

Heinz Werner and G. Stanley Hall (1948) wrote a most influential book where they described the parallels between children and premodern peoples regarding every aspect of psyche and personality, perception, reasoning, world understanding, physics, social affairs, and morals. Jean Piaget did not write such a comprehensive book. But in all his books he inserted remarks on similarities between children and premodern humans. His books on causality (1969 [1927]) and chance (1974 [1966]) demonstrate that both groups share the same related concepts. His outstanding book on the worldview of children (1960 [1926]) shows at least implicitly that premodern peoples share all the basic structures of the worldview of children, such as animism, magic, mystical participations, artificialism, conceptual realism, etc. His unique book on the morals of children (1932) evidences that all characteristics of children’s morals, such as objective responsibility, immanent justice, understanding of rules, severity of punishment, etc. constitute major elements of the ancient law. Thus, comparable to Werner and Hall, Piaget actually had demonstrated that the parallels between children and premodern peoples concern all dimensions and parts of psyche and personality, reason and world understanding. There is not one feature of children’s psyche which does not bear a full correspondence to ethnological data. Conversely, all the main features of the higher cognitive stages are largely absent in premodern societies.

“Piagetian Cross-Cultural Psychology” has executed thousands of empirical surveys in premodern societies across numerous social milieus, ethnicities, nations, and continents, from 1932 up to now, with a peak between about 1960 and 1980. Surveys including numerous tasks, presenting questions about logical, physical, social, and moral issues, have been conducted. The results are obvious, although seldom clearly recognised. All peoples across all continents develop through the first two stages in nearly the same way and reveal the same patterns Piaget had described. The third stage, the stage of concrete operations, rarely unfolds in premodern societies and only to a limited extent, if at all. The fourth stage, the stage of formal operations, appears among adolescents of modern societies stepwise between their tenth and twentieth year of life. The empirical surveys have shown that this stage does not appear at all among premodern peoples. They remain largely and for the whole of their lives at the preoperational or concrete operational stages.<sup>3</sup> Empirical research has identified school attendance ac-

ording to modern curricula as main motor behind the cognitive advancements. These empirical results confirm the ideas of Piaget, Werner, Blondel, Janet, Claparède, Allier, Murphy, and all those who maintained the childlike structure of premodern man and the theory of the arrested development. “Piagetian Cross-Cultural Psychology” actually forms the true foundation of the theories of Edward Taylor, James Frazer, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, and of many other ethnologists. “In this respect the performance of traditional peoples is closely paralleled by that of young children in industrialized countries” (Gellatly 1987: 37). The second intelligence approach, the psychometric intelligence research, supports this view, showing that premodern peoples never score beyond 75, whereas peoples from all races and regions continuously raise their intelligence during the whole process of modernisation. Such low intelligence levels are equivalent to those of (modern) children exposed to adult test procedures and, therefore, to “mental ages” or “developmental ages” of children (Flynn 2007; Oesterdiekhoff 2009b: 82–98).

Developmental psychology demonstrated that animism, magic, and mystical participations are inevitable dimensions of children’s thinking. Realistic dream understandings and conceptual realism, extensively described by Lévy-Bruhl, are clear manifestations of the cognitive stages of children. The same is true with regard to the beliefs in metamorphosis and in the multi-presence of beings, in ghosts and sorcerers. As Piaget had shown, it is possible and necessary to explain all these phenomena in term of the stages in the development of children (Oesterdiekhoff 2009b; 2011b; 2012a, b, c).

## 7 Conclusions Regarding the Relationship between Developmental Psychology and Ethnology

Some authors have tried already to combine ethnology and developmental psychology (Vierkandt 1937; Werner and Kaplan 1956). The ethnologist Christopher R. Hallpike (1979, 2004) was the first to launch Piagetian psychology into ethnological theory on a broader basis. He showed that premodern humans share with children the same cognitive stages (the qualitative development) but not experience and knowledge (quantitative development).

<sup>3</sup> Dasen (1974a, b; 1977); Berry and Dasen (1974); Eckensberger et al. (1979); Hallpike (1979, 2004); Ibarra Garcia (2007); Piaget (1974); Oesterdiekhoff (2011a, b; 2009b; 2012a, b); Poortinga (1977); Tul’viste (1991); Lurija (1982).

Jürgen Habermas (1976) developed Piaget's theory as the micro-sociological basis for macro-sociology, as the basis for a theory of social change and modernisation. Laura Ibarra Garcia (2007) reconstructed the ideologies of the pre-Columbian America by employing the tools of Piagetian theory. I have myself written ten books and numerous essays on the link between humanities and social sciences, on the one hand, and developmental psychology on the other. I have reconstructed the history of sciences, religion, law, politics, economics, morals, etc., based on developmental concepts (2006; 2007; 2008; 2009a, b, c; 2011a, b; 2012a, b; 2015). The notion of the psychological structures of premodern peoples delivers a new foundation for the humanities and social sciences, on the one hand, and the key to the reconstruction of the history of mankind on the other.

Nearly all (!) founders of developmental psychology, such as Preyer, Sully, Hall, Baldwin, Stern, Werner, Wallon, Claparède, Janet, Piaget, Zeininger, and others worked out the similarities between premodern humans and children. Representatives of the classical sociology, such as Comte and Elias also emphasised these correspondences. These ideas had a strong influence from the era of Enlightenment up to about 1975. More than anything else, the leading ideologies of our time, cultural relativism and universality of rationality, largely express political ambitions. It is necessary to resume the previous discussions and to recover the great achievements of former times, because empirical psychology, basing on developmental and intelligence approaches, continues to enhance and to support the old theories rather than the current ones.

## References Cited

### Allier, Raoul

1929 *The Mind of the Savage*. (Transl. by F. Rothwell.) London: G. Bell.

### Berry, John W., and Pierre R. Dasen (eds.)

1974 *Culture and Cognition. Readings in Cross-Cultural Psychology*. London: Methuen.

### Blondel, Charles

1926 *La mentalité primitive*. (Préf. de L. Lévy-Bruhl.) Paris: Stock. (La culture moderne, 2)

### Cassirer, Ernst

1965 *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. (Transl. by R. Manheim.) 3 Vols. New Haven: Yale University Press.

### Claparède, Édouard

1982 *Inediti psicologici*. Roma: Bulzoni.

### Dasen, Pierre R.

1974a *Cross-Cultural Piagetian Research. A Summary*. In: J. W. Berry and P. R. Dasen (eds.); pp. 409–423.

1974b *The Influence of Ecology, Culture, and European Contact on Cognitive Development in Australian Aborigines*. In: J. W. Berry and P. R. Dasen (eds.); pp. 381–408.

### Dasen, Pierre R. (ed.)

1977 *Piagetian Psychology. Cross-Cultural Contributions*. (Preface by J. Piaget.) New York: Gardner Press.

### Durkheim, Émile

1965 *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press. [1912]

### Eckensberger, Lutz H., Walter J. Lonner, and Ype H. Poortinga (eds.)

1979 *Cross-Cultural Contributions to Psychology*. (Selected Papers from the Fourth International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology; Munich, July 28–August 05, 1978.) Lisse: Swets and Zeitlinger. (International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology, 4)

### Evans-Pritchard, Edward E.

1934 *Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality*. *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* 2/1: 1–36.

1965 *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

1976 *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. [1937]

### Flynn, James R.

2007 *What Is Intelligence? Beyond the Flynn Effect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Frazer, James George

1923 *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament. Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law*. New York: Tudor.

1994 *The Collected Works of J. G. Frazer. Vol. 1 and 2: The Golden Bough*. (Ed. by R. Ackerman.) Richmond: Curzon Press.

### Gellatly, Angus R. H.

1987 *Acquisition of a Concept of Logical Necessity*. *Human Development* 30/1: 32–47.

### Gillies, Eva

1978 *Einleitung*. In: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Hexerei, Orakel und Magie bei den Zande. (Von E. Gillies gekürzte und eingeleitete Ausgabe.); pp. 7–36. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag.

### Habermas, Jürgen

1976 *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. (Suhrkamp-Taschenbücher Wissenschaft, 154)

### Hallpike, Christopher R.

1979 *The Foundations of Primitive Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

2004 *The Evolution of Moral Understanding*. London: Prometheus Research Group.

### Ibarra Garcia, Laura

2007 *Creencias, mitos y rituales en el mundo prehispánico. Una explicación desde la teoría histórico-genética*. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara.

### Jaensch, Erich R.

1923 *Die Völkerkunde und der eidetische Tatsachenkreis*. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 91: 88–111.

### Jahoda, Gustav

1999 *Images of Savages. Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*. London: Routledge.

- 2000 Piaget and Lévy-Bruhl. *History of Psychology* 3/3: 218–238.
- Janet, Pierre**  
1926 De l’angoisse à l’extase. Études sur les croyances et les sentiments. 2 Vols. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Landes, David S.**  
1969 The Unbound Prometheus. Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien**  
1923 Primitive Mentality. (Transl. by L. A. Clare.) London: George Allen & Unwin. [1922]  
1931 Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive. Paris: Félix Alcan.  
1938 L’expérience mystique et les symboles chez les primitifs. Paris: Félix Alcan.  
1949 Les carnets de Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. (Préface de M. Leenhardt.) Paris: Presses universitaires de France. [1940]  
1971 The “Soul” of the Primitive. (Transl. by L. A. Clare. With a Foreword by E. E. Evans-Pritchard.) Chicago: Henry Regnery. [1927]  
1983 Primitive Mythology. The Mythic World of the Australian and Papuan Natives. (Transl. By B. Elliott.) St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press. [1935]  
1985 How Natives Think. (Transl. by L. A. Clare. With a New Introduction by C. S. Littleton.) Princeton: Princeton University Press. [1910]
- Lurija, Aleksandr R.**  
1982 Cognitive Development. Its Cultural and Social Foundations. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [1974]
- Murphy, John**  
1927 Primitive Man. His Essential Quest. London: Oxford University Press.
- Oesterdiekhoff, Georg W.**  
2006 Irrationale Denk- und Verhaltensweisen am Beispiel von Hexerei und Magie und ihr Stellenwert in der Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit. *Sozialwissenschaftliches Journal* 1/2: 79–104.  
2007 The Spread of AIDS in Developing Countries. A Psycho-Cultural Approach. (With H. Rindermann.) *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 32/2: 201–222.  
2008 *Magija i animizam u starim religijama. Važnost sunčanih kultova u svjetonazoru tradicijskih društava* [Magic and Animism in Old Religions. The Relevance of Sun Cults in the World-View of Traditional Societies]. *Folks Art – Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research* 45/1: 43–66.  
2009a The Arena Games in the Roman Empire. A Contribution to the Explanatory of the History of Morals and Humanity. *Folks Art – Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research* 46/1: 177–202.  
2009b Mental Growth of Humankind in History. Norderstedt: Books on Demand.  
2009c Trials against Animals. A Contribution to the Developmental Theory of Mind and Rationality. *The Mankind Quarterly* 49/3–4: 346–380.  
2011a La sociología genético-estructural como heredera de la sociología clásica y de la teoría de la civilización. In: V. Weiler (ed.), Norbert Elias y el problema del desarrollo humano; pp. 71–96. Bogotá: Ed. Aurora.  
2011b The Steps of Man towards Civilization. The Key to Disclose the Riddle of History. Norderstedt: Books on Demand.
- 2012a Die Entwicklung der Menschheit von der Kindheitsphase zur Erwachsenenreife. Dordrecht: Springer.  
2012b Die geistige Entwicklung der Menschheit. Weilerswist: Velbrück.  
2012c Was Pre-Modern Man a Child? The Quintessence of the Psychometric and Developmental Approaches. *Intelligence (A multidisciplinary journal)* 40/5: 470–478.  
2015 (forthcoming) Traumzeit der Menschheit. Wesen und Ursprung der Religion. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Piaget, Jean**  
1932 The Moral Judgment of the Child. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.  
1960 The Child’s Conception of the World. Paterson: Littlefield. [1926]  
1969 The Child’s Conception of Physical Causality. (Transl. by M. Gabain.) Totowa: Littlefield, Adams. [1927]  
1974 Need and Significance of Cross-Cultural Studies in Genetic Psychology. In: J. W. Berry and P. R. Dasen (eds.); pp. 299–309. *[International Journal of Psychology* 1966.1: 3–13]  
1995 Individuality in History. In: J. Piaget, Sociological Studies. (Ed. by L. Smith, Transl. by T. Brown); pp. 23–29. London: Routledge. [1933]
- Piaget, Jean, and Barbara Inhelder**  
1975 The Origin of the Idea of Chance in Children. (Transl. by L. Leake.) New York: Norton. [1951]
- Poortinga, Ype H.** (ed.)  
1977 Basic Problems in Cross-Cultural Psychology. (Selected Papers from the Third International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology; Tilburg University, July 12–16, 1976.) Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger. (International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology, 3)
- Tul’viste, Peeter**  
1991 The Cultural-Historical Development of Verbal Thinking. (Transl. by M. Jaroszevska Hall.) Commack: Nova Science Publ.
- Tylor, Edward B.**  
1871 Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom. 2 Vols. London: John Murray.
- Vierkanndt, Alfred**  
1937 Die entwicklungspsychologische Theorie der Zauberei. *Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie* 98: 420–489.
- Wallon, Henri**  
1928 La mentalité primitive et celle de l’enfant (d’après un livre récent). *Revue philosophique de la France et de L’Étranger* 106: 82–105.
- Weiler, Vera**  
2008 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl visto por Norbert Elias. *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 70/4: 791–822.
- Werner, Heinz, and G. Stanley Hall**  
1948 Comparative Psychology of Mental Development. (With a Foreword by G. W. Allport.) New York: International Universities Press. [1926]
- Werner, Heinz, and Bernard Kaplan**  
1956 The Developmental Approach to Cognition. Its Relevance to the Psychological Interpretation of Anthropological and Ethnolinguistic Data. *American Anthropologist* 58: 866–880.

