

## THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS THE 'PRIMITIVE': FRANZ STEINER'S *TABOO*

MICHAEL MACK

FRANZ Baermann Steiner (1909–1952) was one of the many Jewish immigrants from the continent who greatly enriched English intellectual life around the time of the last war. Unfortunately he is now quite forgotten. Most of his work is still unpublished: his thesis on slavery, his lectures on the definition of labour, and many volumes of aphoristic essays on the sociology of religion have been awaiting publication for forty-five years.<sup>1</sup> Steiner's life was short, tragic, and intense. He was a poet as well as an anthropologist, and developed his anthropological thought also in his literary writings. His health suffered from the psychological and financial strains he had to endure as a refugee. His parents were murdered by the Nazis, and following the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, he received no financial support from home.

Steiner was a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1930), the German University at Prague where he took his first Ph.D. in Semitic languages, and at the ethnological department of the University of Vienna before he went to London to do research at the British Museum. In London, Malinowski invited him to attend his seminars at the London School of Economics. In 1937, he undertook field studies in the Carpathians. As a refugee he continued with his research at Oxford, where he was supervised first by Radcliffe-Brown and then by Evans-

1. An edited version of the lectures on labour was in fact published as an article by Paul Bohannan (Steiner 1957), and republished in Bryant (ed.) 1972, but they deserve unabridged publication in book form.

Pritchard. In 1949, he completed his D.Phil. on a comparative study of types of slavery, and in 1950 he was appointed a university lecturer. During the last two years of his life he lectured in Oxford on the definition of labour as well as on taboo, and planned a lecture course on Marx.

## I

In the first part of this article, I shall analyse Steiner's style and methodology in his book *Taboo* (1956), focusing on his deconstructive particularism and his sociological preference for generalization. In the second part, I discuss Steiner's theory of taboo as the avoidance of danger and power. Rather than being a superstition or an emotional expression of values, Steiner argues, taboo behaviour is a carefully thought-out structure of social behaviour.

As in his thesis on slavery (1949), Steiner's lectures on taboo deconstruct categories that are supposed to embrace a whole range of social practices within non-European societies. Steiner's first lecture opens with a discussion of the inadequacies of the comparative method as advocated by Radcliffe-Brown and of the general defects of using a European terminology in translating non-European concepts. Steiner's critique of Radcliffe-Brown's comparative method and his attack on an unreflective usage of European words in the definition of non-European ways of behaviour are closely connected. Radcliffe-Brown examines one particular society in detail and then, from it, establishes categories which have general validity. For Steiner, the structures of 'primitive' societies are so complex that they differ to a great extent among themselves, and he criticizes Radcliffe-Brown's inductive approach towards the comparative method from this angle. The terminology Radcliffe-Brown used for societies he had studied in the field is often not valid for any other one, even though he claims this to be the case in his search for scientific, universal laws. Broad sociological categories like taboo and totemism change meaning when an anthropologist talks about a range of particular societies: indeed, 'the meaning of words appearing in the terminologies of comparative and of analytic sociology have drifted apart without our noticing it' (1956: 20).

Two characteristics of Steiner's anthropological approach can be gathered from his criticism of Radcliffe-Brown: one is a sociological desire for generalization, the other a strong tendency towards deconstructive particularism. Steiner's critique of Radcliffe-Brown's use of categories also shows evidence of Max Weber's influence on his deconstructive particularism. After all, it was Weber who argued that the establishment of scientific laws with generally valid applications distorts the singularity of a variety of cultural contexts. Like Weber, Steiner questions the transfer of a positivist methodology into the field of cultural studies. For Steiner, as for Weber, recognition of social phenomena exclusively unfolds itself within a

referential system and therefore has to reflect critically upon the medium of reflection (Weber speaks of 'the discursiveness of our epistemology' (*die diskursive Natur unseres Erkennens*) (1956: 239));<sup>2</sup> Radcliffe-Brown's positivism, by contrast, places anthropology within the natural sciences.

Throughout his lectures, Steiner criticizes the unreflective usage of general signifiers for a whole range of divergent particular social phenomena. He analyses a passage from R. J. B. Moore's article 'Bwanga among the Bemba' (Moore 1940) with the aim of illustrating how a European taxonomy is insufficient for the understanding of 'primitive thinking'. Steiner comes to the following conclusions:

...what the native thinks cannot be satisfactorily summarized under the categories. [...] The writer thinks of the *observable* attitudes of individuals and of particular situations against the background of sociological categories. (1956: 19, original emphasis)

Here we encounter Steiner's critique of the use of a European terminology as a means of describing 'primitive' ways of life: the anthropologist introduces European categories, taken from the discipline of sociology ('sociological categories'), into the analysis of a 'primitive' society. Steiner, however, argues that this imposition of the European onto the non-European results in a distorted image of a singular 'primitive' community ('what the native thinks cannot be satisfactorily summarized under the categories'). According to Steiner, 'primitive' thinking is too complex to fit into the broad categories of a European taxonomy.

Steiner attacks the confusion of categories resulting from Radcliffe-Brown's comparative method—which, as we have seen from Steiner's analysis of Moore, is premised on induction—but he also examines the problem of translatability from a European into a non-European language.<sup>3</sup> This is a matter of concern in both *Taboo* and the comparative study of slavery: in both works, Steiner analyses European mistranslations of non-European concepts, often perceiving these mistranslations as motivated by the will to generate fictions about 'primitive' societies. This recalls Nietzsche's view of the will to power as the ability to impose fictions upon other people. For Nietzsche, all exertions of power work through deception (*Schein*); they are fictions that pose as truth (*Schein ist für mich das Wirkende und Lebende selber* ('for me deception equals the influential and the active itself'), (Nietzsche 1980: 417)). Nietzsche, like Weber,<sup>4</sup> radically questions the supposed convergence between signifier and signified. Instead of having an intrinsic effect,

2. For an example of Weber's criticism of the transfer of positivist methodology into *Kulturwissenschaften*, see Weber 1956.

3. For a discussion of the importance of the concept of translation in the Oxford school of anthropology after the war, see Pocock 1971: 74–5; Beidelman (ed.) 1971.

4. For a discussion of the influence of Nietzsche's deconstructive approach to Weber, see LaCapra, 1972: 178.

an object has impact by virtue of the meaning that man invests in it. The discourse analysis that Steiner engages in brings to light the fictions that specific political interests attach to the things that language denotes. His examination of European (mis)translations of non-European social practices shows that the inaccurate description of native ways of life establishes the conviction of the West's superiority over the East: 'savage' forms of the integration of foreigners are fictitiously labelled 'slavery', while the taboo behaviour of 'primitives' is entered under the heading of 'superstition' in order to prove the supremacy of European rationality.

Steiner's methodology consists in subjecting the work of a number of prominent Western intellectuals to close critical scrutiny. Examining Tregear's translation of the Maori word *tapu* (Tregear 1904: 472), Steiner points out that European interpreters 'artificially' introduced the 'distinction between prohibition and sacredness' (1956: 34). The reduction in the meaning of the word 'taboo' to the 'sacred', while excluding any connotation of the 'prohibited', is explained with reference to the Christian agenda of 'missionaries' (ibid.). Similarly, Steiner examines a passage from *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, in which the traveller and missionary James Cook describes taboo behaviour (Cook 1784, vol. 3: 10–11). Steiner detects in this passage 'that superior and slightly irritated indulgence—which some people have for others who cannot think clearly' (1956: 25).

Steiner rejects the idea that 'primitive' cultures are uniform, that differences in particular communities are only accidental, and he quotes Margaret Mead's article on 'Tapu' in the 1937 edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* in order to show that 'modern' anthropologists still tend to reduce the complexities of 'primitive' worlds. Mead demands that 'comparative discussions' of 'taboo' be 'stripped of all accidents of interpretations' (1937: 502). Steiner opposes this quotation in a polemical spirit as follows:

These are severe restrictions indeed. And one cannot expect much success from such an attempt; the world accepts an extension of meaning much more readily than it allows for a loss of connotation. (1956: 22)

Irony pervades this quotation. The polite and donnish tone of this extract shows Steiner mimicking the style of the typical Oxford Senior Common Room.<sup>5</sup> It also shows the extent to which Steiner uses masks in his anthropological writing. Foucault has argued (1989: 93–4) that it is not only writers of fiction who adopt different voices:

...it is in the nature of literature that the author should appear to be absent... delegate his authority, or divide himself up [...]. Yet this gap is not confined to literature alone. It is absolutely general in so far as the subject of the statement is a particular function, but is not necessarily the same from one statement to

5. This point has been made by Adler 1994.

another; in so far as it is an empty function, that can be filled by virtually any individual when he formulates a statement; and in so far as one and the same individual may occupy in turn, in the same series of statements, different positions, and assume the role of different subjects. (1989: 93–4)

In his anthropological work, Steiner adopts different voices, different ways of writing, which he uses to undermine authoritative texts of sociological thought. Steiner's comments on Margaret Mead's article show how he attacks anthropological writings head-on. Steiner quotes Mead to show the simplistic nature of what is being put forward in the quotation and criticizes her as a representative of the 'modern' social sciences for not being willing to engage with a complex concept.

For Steiner, the quotation from Mead's article serves as an illustration of the undifferentiated way in which 'modern' anthropologists still write about 'primitive' culture. Steiner also gives us the history of the translation of the word 'taboo' from Polynesian into European languages, illustrating that Mead's simplification stands in a long tradition of Western writing about non-Western peoples. After quoting various glosses of 'taboo' which make an artificial distinction between the sacred and prohibited, Steiner employs an ironic style of writing:

Up to this point my report is straightforward, and I only wish I could continue, as so many have done, with the following words: 'A brief glance at any compilation of the forms and meanings of this word in the various Polynesian languages shows that in all of them the word has two main meanings from which the others derive, and these meanings are: prohibited and the sacred.' The comparison of the data, however, suggests something rather different to me; namely, (1) that the same kind of people have compiled these dictionaries, assessing the meaning of words in European terms, and (2) that, with few exceptions, there are no Polynesian words meaning approximately what the word 'holy' means in contemporary usage without concomitantly meaning 'forbidden'. The distinction between prohibition and sacredness cannot be expressed in Polynesian terms. Modern European languages on the other hand lack a word with the Polynesian range of meaning; hence Europeans discovered that taboo means both prohibition *and* sacredness. Once this distinction has been discovered, it can be conveyed within the Polynesian cultural idiom by the citation of examples in which only one of the two European translations would be appropriate. (1956: 33–4, original emphasis)

I have quoted this long passage because it says a lot about Steiner's style and his criticism of Western attitudes towards the non-Western. Here too, Steiner draws attention to the simplistic way of thinking of the 'modern' social sciences. It is important to catch Steiner's jocular seriousness in expressions like, 'I only wish I could continue, as so many have done...'. More recently, Payne has drawn attention to Malinowski's irony *vis-à-vis* 'savages': 'on frequent occasions, he could not resist his apparently innocent assertion of the superiority of science over native lore. Such irony allowed him a bit of playful detachment...' (Payne 1981: 424). Similarly, in the extract above, Steiner shows with joking aloofness how

Western scholarship does not reach up to its own standards, having failed to verify theories with empirical evidence ('comparison of the data'). He argues that Western beliefs in the intellectual simplicity of 'primitives' have blinded anthropologists to the complexity of a 'savage' concept. Instead of engaging with this complexity, the anthropologist imposes a European taxonomy on a Polynesian word which is too complex for a one-way translation. The word 'holy' does not embrace all the connotations of the Polynesian 'taboo', which almost always means prohibited and dirty as well as sacred. Here Steiner argues that it is modern 'Europeans' rather than 'primitives' who are being simplistic. Instead of trying to understand an alien concept, the anthropologist 'Europeanizes' a Polynesian word. At the Institute of Anthropology in Oxford, Steiner would certainly have found ample support for the idea that concepts are not isomorphic between cultures. Evans-Pritchard may have been lecturing on the complexity of Nuer religious ideas around this time. Fortes would have been lecturing on Tallensi ancestors.<sup>6</sup>

Steiner critically examines the writings of late nineteenth-century scholars. At all points, his discussion of Western interpretations of 'taboo' involves a critique of European thought about the 'primitive'. Steiner gives pride of place to Robertson Smith, whom he represents as an outstanding Victorian scholar. Evans-Pritchard's influence can clearly be discerned in this appraisal of the Scottish philosopher of religion.<sup>7</sup> As Gellner points out (1981: xxx), Frazer provokes Evans-Pritchard 'into sustained and effective criticism', whereas he enthuses about Robertson Smith. Steiner criticizes Frazer as a 'debunker' of religion, but pays respect to Robertson Smith<sup>8</sup> as an anthropologist of religion:

...while Robertson Smith was a Semitic scholar, James Frazer was a classical one, and while the latter became one of the chief debunkers of religion in his period, religion, in the fullest meaning of the word, was the most dutiful concern of Robertson Smith throughout his life. (1956: 53)

Robertson Smith's interest in Semitic cultures was closer to Steiner's heart than the classical and deeply secular studies of Frazer. Nevertheless Steiner does not accept Robertson Smith's evolutionist agenda. Robertson Smith marks the 'holy'

6. I owe this information to Professor Richard Fardon.

7. The extent of the admiration for Robertson Smith in post-war Oxford anthropology can be gathered from Beidelman's book on him: 'It can be claimed confidently that Smith is the founder of the modern sociology of religion. Smith's work contains many flaws, some due to the prejudices of his time, some due to his own personal involvement in scholarship and religion. Yet no other Victorian seems to have touched upon so many different issues still vital to our anthropological interest, or seems so enduring in the quality and freshness of his insights. Of all great Victorian anthropologists, he seems nearest to being our contemporary.' (1974: 68). Beidelman has long been an admirer of Evans-Pritchard.

8. For Evans-Pritchard's high praise of Robertson Smith, see Evans-Pritchard 1981: 80.

off from the 'primitive' form of 'taboo'.<sup>9</sup> It would run counter to Robertson Smith's understanding of Christianity if he were to argue that what belongs to God can be tabooed. How can the Christian God who loves man be considered 'taboo'? This caused deep revulsion in the Victorian theologian, who firmly held that 'modern' crises of faith can only be overcome by a strong belief in the personal relationship between man and Christ. According to Beidelman, Christianity was the yardstick for Robertson Smith's assessment of all religions: 'For Smith Christianity was the true measure by which all other religions were defined; it was a religion of love, fellowship, joy, and communion with God, with little emphasis on sin, suffering, and guilt' (1974: 61). In 'Christianity and the Supernatural', Robertson Smith stresses the direct character of such relationships between the human and the divine:

A true consciousness must embrace a right conception of God's moral and personal character, and must therefore be based on an historical manifestation of God. We must learn that God is ready to enter deeper relations with man than those with nature. [...] God must enter as an actor into human history so that even the eye dimmed by sin cannot fail to recognize his presence. (1912: 126)

The divine revelation must be primarily an immediate manifestation of God; a manifestation of God in events that are at once seen to form no part of the chain of nature but to be directly personal and explicable *only* as acts of God. (ibid.: 127, original emphasis)

Robertson Smith stresses that God is closer to man than to nature, and further, that any divine manifestation goes through human history rather than through an agency grounded in nature. For the Protestant theologian Robertson Smith, God speaks directly to man, and any connection between the divine and the tabooed must, therefore, be termed 'heathenish':

The irrationality of laws of uncleanness, from the standpoint of spiritual religion or even of higher heathenism, is so manifest, that they must necessarily be looked on as having survived from an earlier form of faith and of society. (1894: 449)

Robertson Smith's evolutionism is prominent in this quotation. He follows the evolutionist ranking of societies, constructing a hierarchy which moves from heathenism to 'higher heathenism' and which finds its peak in 'spiritual religion'. The history of religion progresses from 'paganism', which lives in superstitious dread of the supernatural, to Judaism, which has a more personal relationship with the 'holy', with perfection in Christianity, where God and man engage in a close, intimate dialogue. Steiner does not share Robertson Smith's evolutionist views.

9. For an example of Robertson Smith's discrimination between the 'tabooed' and the 'holy', see 1894: 446.

Like Beidelman, Steiner, while admiring the Victorian sociologist of religion, sees that Robertson Smith's Christianity blinds his critical perception as far as certain elements in Judaism are concerned. Steiner highlights Robertson Smith's search for Christian meaning. He criticizes the theologian for making his material fit his own interpretative framework while neglecting the social context of Hebrew society. The criticism of 'Europeanizing' non-European ways of behaviour, of constructing fictions about the 'alien' by neglecting the complexity of the available data, runs through Steiner's major anthropological writing like a leitmotif. Here it is the Christian theologian who is fantasizing about the 'primitive':

It is always the meaning that is explained and always the recorded behaviour that is used as explanation. This procedure derives from Robertson Smith's leading interest, which is theological. However much watered down, it is always the doctrine that demands explanation and not the ways of man. (1956: 56)

'Meaning' here denotes theological explanations in which the Old Testament is seen as prefiguring the New (as an example, Steiner refers to the 'relation' made 'between the ancient sacrificial feast and the Eucharist' (ibid.: 55)). Discussing Robertson Smith's theological search for meaning, Steiner ironically establishes a relationship between the nineteenth-century scholar and a seventeenth-century poet: 'the ways of man' refer to Milton's famous justification—or rather lack of justification—of 'God's ways to man'. In making this polemical allusion, Steiner is implying that Robertson Smith, instead of engaging in sociological discourse, is embarking on a theodicy or defence of Christian 'doctrine'. However, the jocular seriousness that goes with this polemical allusion to Milton does not imply any of the resentment which can clearly be perceived in Steiner's writing on Frazer. Rather, Steiner is trying to understand why Robertson Smith wrote as he did. This is corroborated by the fact that Steiner acknowledges that his critical remarks are easily made in the present context: 'I have also made a few critical remarks—easily made after sixty years of research have gone by' (ibid.: 68).

Steiner sets out to undermine Robertson Smith's understanding of Judaism through a linguistic analysis of the Hebrew word *hitborah*. Linguistic analysis, as we have already seen, is one of Steiner's most common deconstructive methods. Steiner argues that there is a problem of translatability between Hebrew and English, and that there is no European equivalent which could embrace the full range of meanings of the Hebrew word. Thus, the word *hitborah* has never had the same signification as the English term 'blessing', by which it is frequently translated. Unlike *hitborah*, 'blessing' does not have the connotations of 'contagion'. Steiner embarks on this detailed linguistic analysis in order to question Robertson Smith's conception of 'contagion' as the 'lowest form of superstition'. The examination of *hitborah* shows that 'blessing' involves contagion:

But however we look at it, contagion is the principle of the transfer of blessing no less than in Robertson Smith's 'primitive' pollution taboos. How then are we to say that the priest spreading his hands over the congregation, or the father touching



the head of the child, is not engaging in one of the 'lowest forms of superstition'? (1956: 64)

Steiner undermines Robertson Smith's evolutionist belief in the progress of religion from paganism to Christianity by claiming to detect 'paganism' as an element in the 'advanced form' of Christianity. Robertson Smith's binary opposition between 'primitive' superstition and 'modern' Christianity dissolves under Steiner's critical inquiry. The question mark at the end of the last sentence of the passage quoted above illustrates Steiner's dialogical way of writing in what was originally a series of lectures. He asks his audience directly, making his listeners think critically about the assumed superiority of developed forms of faith.

Another way in which Steiner subverts such feelings of superiority over the 'primitive' consists in his stylistic sleights of hand. He often adopts a patronizing tone while writing about such 'grand old men' as Frazer and Robertson Smith. He declines, for example, to discuss Robertson Smith's characterization of the 'primitive' as irrational by assuming that such evolutionist assumptions have themselves become anachronistic: 'Instancing irrationality as proof of primitiveness is such a strange procedure to the twentieth-century mind that I do not think it necessary to refute it' (1956: 67). By saying that 'the twentieth century mind' does not call the 'primitive' irrational, Steiner establishes a direct identification with his audience, who all belong to the twentieth-century and would not like to be out of touch with the progress being made in their age. Steiner makes clear the ethical agenda of his scholarship when he identifies himself, as an anthropologist, with the 'primitive'.<sup>10</sup> Rather than using the 'I' formula, Steiner employs 'we', thus implicating the reader, drawing him or her into his 'primitive' point of view. This identification of the 'we' of the author and the audience with 'primitiveness' is established at the end of a discussion about *qodesh* ('holy'):

God himself—this comes as a shock to most superficial Bible readers—is never called holy, *qodesh*, unless and in so far as He is related to something else. He is holy in his capacity as Lord of Hosts, though He is not here related to man. Very often the Bible says, The Holy One, blessed be He, or blessed be His name. The name is, in the framework of the doctrinal logic of the Pentateuch, always *qodesh* because it establishes a relationship; it has, so we primitives think, to be pronounced in order to exist. (1956: 85–6)

Steiner ironically conflates Judaism (or the 'Oriental') with 'primitiveness'. Apart from implicating his audience, the 'we' also refers to Steiner's Jewish/'Oriental' identity. This quotation needs greater contextualization. Steiner refutes Robertson Smith's claim of a personal relationship between the divine and the human by arguing that nowhere in the Pentateuch can authority be found for *qodesh* meaning

10. For a discussion of an ethical agenda in the ethnology of James Clifford and Clifford Geertz, see Barnett and Chen 1989: 119–32.

a 'relation with humanity' (1956: 85). The Christian and 'modern' European Robertson Smith holds that God reveals himself directly in human history. The Jew and self-declared 'Oriental' Franz Steiner, on the other hand, argues that the attributes of God are known relationally. According to Steiner, the manifestations of such relationships constitute danger spots that are to be avoided, thus making a connection between power and danger. As we shall see, this also occurs in Steiner's discussion of mana as a form of 'taboo', though at this point human power is meant. Here, though, Steiner focuses on divine power and equates it with danger. This paves the way for his own theory of 'taboo' as developed in the last chapter of *Taboo* and as elaborated theoretically in his 'Über den Prozes der Zivilisierung' (1944).

What is important to note in this context, however, is Steiner's identification of himself as a Jew with the 'primitive'. Not only does a strong binary opposition emerge between the Jew as the 'primitive' and the Christian as the 'modern' European, but the conflation between Jew and 'primitive' is employed in serious scholarly discourse so as to mark off the Christian, scientific West, from the non-Christian, non-modern rest of the world. Indeed, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from Herder onwards, the Oriental 'Semites' were contrasted with the Christian 'Aryans'. Herder and Renan believed that the resistance of the Jews to attempts to convert them to the new religion of Christianity symbolized the conservatism of 'Orientals' as such.<sup>11</sup> As Starobinski has pointed out, in the twentieth century a reversal took place: the Jews were now blamed for all the disagreeable features of 'modernity'. Steiner implicitly alludes to the discussion of Jews as 'modern' in antisemitic discourse. Hobsbawm, among others, has shown that antisemites saw 'the Jews' as symbols of 'modernity':<sup>12</sup> 'They [the Jews] could serve as symbols of the hated capitalist/financier; of the revolutionary agitator; of the corroding influence of "rootless intellectuals" and the new mass media' (1994: 119). The capitalist, the revolutionary and the mass media all represent modernity. Opposing antisemitic discourse, Steiner argues that Jews have nothing in common with 'modern' Europe. Like a 'primitive', Steiner as a Jew believes in the physical reality of names: man can establish some form of relationship with God by pronouncing the word *qodesh*. However, this relationship is never a direct one, as Robertson Smith argues; rather, the pronunciation of the Hebrew word for God is itself tabooed in Judaism. By writing that 'we primitives' believe in the power of words to bring something into existence, Steiner also alludes to the tabooed Hebrew name of God. In this way he again stresses the difference between Robertson Smith's Christianity and the 'primitive' context of the Hebrew Bible.

11. For a discussion of Herder's ranking of cultures and his belief in the supremacy of Christian revelation as opposed to the spiritual and scientific 'under-development' of non-Western, non-Christian civilisation, see Olender 1995: 52–7.

12. For a discussion of this reversal, see Starobinski, 'Nachwort', in Olender 1995: 144–50.

Steiner also attacks Frazer's evolutionism. Whereas Robertson Smith's evolutionism is based on a belief in the progress of religion from pagan superstition to Christianity, Frazer argues for evolution in terms of scientific achievements. It is this utter absence of any religious background that irritates Steiner most, as can be seen in the following criticism of Frazer's bourgeois 'anti-clericalism':

An ill-disguised anti-clerical bias which attacks, *faut de mieux*, the priests of bygone Polynesia; an exhibition of evolutionism at its slickest and least appetising; a justification, to a point, of what he regards as the most horrible superstitions, because they produced, according to his belief, a law of property and sexual propriety. All that fear and self-inflicted torture, all that pondering about life and death, all those proud and humble and desperate patterns of obedience in order to produce the *summum bonum* of the late nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. (1956: 93)

These are well-calculated and at the same time passionate and highly modulated formulations by which Steiner constructs a complex scholarly persona. Foucault has defined 'discursive practice' as 'a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period' (1989: 117). Steiner's voice is determined by the ironic and at the same time polite way of writing of an anthropologist like Evans-Pritchard: '*faut de mieux*' is an expression adapted to the francophilia of British intellectuals like Radcliffe-Brown or indeed Evans-Pritchard. Steiner also uses a comic way of speaking by exploiting the vocabulary of disgust ('at its slickest', 'least appetising'). The 'all that' anaphora are built up, only to lead to the polemical bathos of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

## II

Steiner exposes Robertson Smith's scholarship as an attempt to justify Christian doctrine, and he unmasks Frazer's 'scientific' approach as a defence of pathetic bourgeois values: he associates Frazer's anthropology with the lifelessness of sexual hypocrisy, a bourgeois conviction to the right of property, and of self-sacrifice the cause of capitalism. Frazer emerges from Steiner's critique as a pathetic petty bourgeois. Having stigmatized Frazer thus, he criticizes his scholarly method and, as with Robertson Smith, finds fault with the wilful interpretation of meaning while neglecting social contexts. Robertson Smith isolates social phenomena so as to construct fictions about the superstitions of 'primitives'. Frazer disconnects social phenomena in order to fit some empirical facts into his theory of the evolution of the human psyche: 'analysis is reserved for the meaning, in psychological terms, of the isolated items but no degree of analysis is necessary for distinguishing or evaluating social contexts' (1956: 98).

Steiner also repudiates his teacher Radcliffe-Brown. He closes his discussion of Radcliffe-Brown's *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* with the following terse words:

What have we learned from Radcliffe-Brown's *Taboo* essay? At least two things: (1) that it is impossible to describe danger behaviour in terms of value, and (2) that one cannot describe supposedly non-human sanctions without some reference to social pressure. This result is wholly negative, but it is, I believe, rather salutary. (1956: 125)

Most of the time, Steiner's discussion of Western anthropology yields negative results. His deconstruction of a Europeanizing discussion of a non-European concept serves as a backdrop for his own theory of 'taboo', which is presented at the end of the book. What Steiner resents most is Radcliffe-Brown's attempt at 'explaining danger behaviour in terms of negative values' (ibid.: 124). Radcliffe-Brown holds that 'primitives', though being unable to work out an abstract moral system, give voice to values in the form of emotive rites. Rites, including ritual taboos, express the moral *sentiments* of the natives. We thus encounter a patronizing approach to the 'primitive'. Steiner tackles this patronizing approach by patronizing Radcliffe-Brown himself, as the school-masterly 'what-have-we-learned' formulation makes clear. Steiner shows that the natives are self-reflexive when they follow taboos, which, rather than being the emotional expression of values, are values themselves. Consequently he proposes that one should 'explain value behaviour in terms of positive danger' (ibid.: 124). Whereas Radcliffe-Brown belittles the effectiveness of taboo-commands by arguing that they are enforced by an irrational belief in a supernatural power, Steiner argues that there are well-calculated social pressures that motivate taboo behaviour. These social pressures are organized so as to keep disruptions through violence at bay. In Steiner's discussion, taboo emerges as a complex form of behaviour and a social value whose importance all the natives agree on. Steiner also discerns a patronizing attitude towards taboo behaviour in Freud's *Totem und Tabu*. Like Robertson Smith and Frazer, Freud separates the prohibited from the sacred.<sup>13</sup> Steiner therefore places Freud within the nineteenth-century evolutionist tradition: 'Freud has given us a very lucid resume of the views of Robertson Smith and Frazer' (1956: 130). Ironically, although Freud is called an important psychologist, he is placed in a nineteenth-century context:

In his entire discussion of the ethnographic material Freud has really stressed two, and only two, points: the difference between, and distinctiveness of, sacredness and horror, and the automatic nature of the taboo sanction. There is a certain arbitrariness in this narrowing down of the rather complex problems and institu-

13. For Freud's distinction between the prohibited and the sacred, see 1986: 357.

tions involved. Nevertheless, in so doing, Freud remains in the best tradition of the Victorian intellectualists. (1956: 133)

By saying that Freud 'remains in the best tradition of the Victorian intellectualists', Steiner ironically undermines the psychologist's claim to be progressive. Indeed, Freud follows Frazer's tripartite evolutionist framework when he writes about the three stages through which mankind passes on its way to intellectual improvement: 'Die Menschheit hat...drei grosse Weltanschauungen im Laufe der Zeiten hervorgebracht: die animistische (mythologische), die religiöse und die wissenschaftliche ('through the centuries mankind has produced three great world-views: the animistic (mythological), the religious and the scientific'), (1986: 366). Psychoanalysis is the science that rationalizes man's irrational elements and, in so doing, liberates him or her from a neurotic fear of danger. Steiner, however, argues that fear of danger is not 'irrational', but that, on the contrary, it gives rise to rational and practical actions that help prevent the outbreak of violence.

As well as deconstructing Western attempts at understanding 'primitive' concepts, Steiner tentatively suggests a theoretical discourse on 'taboo': 'As I suggest tentatively later, taboo is an element of all those situations in which attitudes to values are expressed in terms of danger' (1956: 21). Steiner makes it clear that instead of being an irrational superstition, taboo behaviour has a rationale in that it constitutes 'values' regarding the avoidance of 'danger'. Here Steiner develops a highly significant theory of 'taboo'. It seems slight on account of its fluent, modest formulation, for which reason Evans-Pritchard may have overlooked its significance. Yet every word counts. As the words 'all those situations' in the above passage illustrate, Steiner generalizes on an abstract level, but, as the 'tentatively' demonstrates, he is also aware of the danger of such generalizations. His use of the word 'element' is both cautiously modest and scientifically exact. It defines 'taboo's' specific role. Steiner uses a cautious terminology while talking about 'taboo' on an abstract level, again underlining the fact that the forms of taboo behaviour differ from society to society. This outline of 'taboo' is part of Steiner's methodology: it serves to give a positive backdrop to the negative discussions of Western philosophers, theologians and anthropologists. Steiner shows that the concept of 'taboo' is more complex than some anthropologists like to think.

Steiner draws the reader's attention to the confusion of this non-European form of behaviour in European discussions:

A warning is necessary at the very outset that several quite different things have been and still are being discussed under the heading 'Taboo'. Taboo is concerned (1) with all the social mechanisms of obedience which have ritual significance; (2) with specific and restrictive behaviour in dangerous situations. (1956: 20)

Steiner establishes what, for him, are the most significant parts of a theory of 'taboo' which have hitherto been made, and the words 'a warning is necessary' as well as the 'different things' formulation makes the reader aware of a highly

complex rather than 'primitive'—in the sense of 'simple'—topic. The 'social mechanism' of the first point refers to Durkheim's notion of laws that are accepted as valid by the whole of a community. As LaCapra has pointed out in his detailed discussion of Durkheim's concept of repressive sanctions or social mechanisms, these are enforced, but, rather than being individualistic, unethical and arbitrary, the force behind them originates in the values shared by the whole community. LaCapra points out both the element of enforcement and the communal and ethical aspect of such force (1972: 90–159). Social mechanisms also have a religious dimension: they 'have ritual significance'.

Steiner's second point defines the value of such rituals as brought forth by the action they entail, making all members aware of limits whose transgression leads to an encounter with danger and giving a precise description ('specific') of behaviour that confines itself ('restrictive') to limits 'in dangerous situations'. Thus using a Durkheimian understanding which Steiner seems to subscribe to here, 'taboo' partakes of religion and, at the same time, lays down rules for ethical behaviour—behaviour that avoids violence—in dangerous situations of everyday life. According to LaCapra, for Durkheim the question of value and meaning goes hand in hand with the notion of boundaries, limits and taboos. Indeed, Durkheim contrasts the anomie found in modern societies with the awareness of limits in 'primitive' cultures, characterizing anomie 'as the absence of legitimate limits' (LaCapra 1972.: 159). Steiner goes on to add a third and fourth element inherent in the concept of 'taboo':

One might say that taboo deals with the sociology of danger itself, for it is also concerned (3) with the protection of individuals who are in danger, and (4) with the protection of society from those endangered—and therefore dangerous—persons. (1956: 20–1)

Here Steiner explains how behaviour in terms of danger has as its aim protecting individuals who, having become endangered, pose a danger to their environment. The comparative study of slavery (1949) gives a detailed analysis of the latter point. What Europeans called 'slavery' consists of a type of taboo behaviour: it differentiates and then reintegrates 'endangered—and therefore dangerous—persons'. Like other forms of taboo behaviour, this form of differentiation and integration has to be seen as a way of avoiding violence: the individual who is endangered is also dangerous, and, according to Steiner, to face danger is to face another power. This encounter with danger or power is circumvented through the social differentiation of the one who is dangerous. In this way 'taboo'—by laying down rules of avoidance rather than control and, therefore, contact with power/danger—protects 'individuals who are in danger' (3) and also offers protection to those who are connected with the endangered by integrating these same individuals into new societal units (4). Steiner sensitizes us to possible understandings of 'primitive' culture in terms of danger behaviour. As a corollary of such understandings, it follows that the 'primitive' differentiates himself or herself from the 'civilized' through an awareness of danger and the willingness to avoid all its

specific manifestations in everyday life. But although Steiner analyses behaviour in response to danger in a highly detached anthropological manner in *Taboo* and in his comparative study of forms of slavery (his thesis of 1949), in 'Über den Prozes der Zivilisierung' (1944) he contrasts the 'primitive' eagerness to avoid every type of danger with the readiness of modern European civilization to establish contact with the dangerous.

By describing 'taboo' as danger behaviour, Steiner attempts an abstract interpretation of all 'primitive' cultures. As we have seen, Steiner makes it clear that the 'primitive' also encompasses the 'Oriental' by identifying himself as an 'Oriental' Jew with the 'primitive'. Furthermore, as Robertson Smith's writing on Hebrew superstition demonstrates, the notion of 'taboo' and the Hebrew concept of law are closely related. Steiner, however, qualifies this abstraction by saying that 'taboo' finds different forms of expression in different societies:

Now we cannot see all this in terms of a single problem, whether we solve it or leave it unsolved. There is no sociological-situational unity in the attitudes and customs under discussion; a psychological unity is equally absent. [...] We are thus in the position of having to deal, under 'Taboo', with a number of diverse social mechanisms expressed in forms which, from the psychological standpoint, stretch beyond this one category. (1956: 21)

Although 'taboo' always has to do with danger, forms of avoiding danger differ from one society to another: each culture has its own distinctive way of life and its own situational context.

In only one single culture does taboo have complex convergences with other concepts. Steiner elaborates on the complexity of the Polynesian notion of 'taboo'. He writes that 'mana and taboo were often independent aspects of one thing' (ibid.: 41). 'Mana' is the power that marks certain individuals off from others. These individuals have 'mana' on account of their ability to impose 'taboos': 'mana' is the power to call something a 'taboo'. By interrelating the notion of 'taboo' with that of 'mana', Steiner claims that Polynesians organize their society according to taboo behaviour. Hence 'taboo', while being a ritual, is at the same time a socio-political way of life. Rather than being a superstition, as nineteenth-century evolutionists like Frazer and Robertson Smith held, or an unreflective form of practice voicing emotions about values, as Radcliffe-Brown claimed, Steiner argues that 'taboo' is a carefully thought-out structure of social behaviour. 'Taboo' limits contacts with danger/power and violence in the context of socio-political interactions:

The power to restrict was the yardstick by which power was measured; here was the social manifestation of power. Second, the exercise of this veto was in terms of taboo, that is, the actual sphere of any person's or office's power was delimited by the kind of taboos he could impose. Taboo thus provided the means of relating a person to his superiors and inferiors. (ibid.: 39)

Taboo gives notice of anything that, if touched without permission, disrupts peace and thus leads to dangerous situations. Far from being an expression of superstition or a form of emotional assertion about values, 'taboos' are carefully thought-out rituals that help prevent social tensions and violent divisions within societies. The objects which are tabooed must not be touched on pain of their inflicting danger—here a manifestation of social power—on the violator. In Polynesia, social disruptions are avoided as a result of the communal acceptance of such prohibitions. The tabooed is always the powerful and must therefore be avoided. Polynesian society as a whole is conscious of power and the dangers it engenders. The highly complex notion of 'taboo' developed out of this consciousness of the danger of power.

In the first two chapters of *Taboo*, Steiner lays the ground from which to attack Western thinkers' simplistic interpretations of this complex term. At the end of the book, Steiner returns to his interpretation of 'taboo' as a way of avoiding encountering risks, taking up the most important elements he has developed in his discussion of 'taboo'. He equates danger with power, and, proceeding with his critique of Radcliffe-Brown, calls 'taboo' a value:

To face danger is to face another power. Indeed, the older meaning of the English word danger is 'power', 'jurisdiction', 'dominion', 'the power to dispose of or to harm'. (ibid.: 146)

...it is a major fact of human existence that we are not able, and never were able, to express our relation to values in other terms than those of danger behaviour. (ibid.: 147)

Here Steiner develops his theory about power and danger. 'Taboo' emerges as the key to solving the problems that power and danger pose to any society. Communities in which the social pressure to follow 'taboos' embraces the whole of the society are free from violent encounters with danger and power, which Steiner explicitly pairs. He alludes to the *condicio humana*, saying that humanity has always been surrounded by danger. 'Primitive' societies circumscribe power and therefore limit danger to certain places that are to be avoided. Those areas that belong to the chief or king are not to be entered. Similarly, danger spots in nature, in which the power of the divine is believed to dwell, are not to be touched. 'Taboo' is a value in that it prescribes the avoidance of any form of power and gives instructions concerning such avoidance by indicating exactly where the danger lies:

Danger is narrowed down by taboo. A situation is regarded as dangerous: very well, but the danger may be a socially unformulated threat. Taboo gives notice that danger lies not in the whole situation, but only in certain specified actions concerning it. These actions, these danger spots, are more challenging and deadly than the danger of the situations as a whole, for the whole situation can be ren-



dered free from danger by dealing with or, rather, avoiding the specified danger spots completely. (ibid.: 146–7)

Steiner argues for a form of 'dealing with' danger by 'avoiding' it. The ethical connotation of 'taboo' consists precisely in this avoidance of violence. At the end of his book, 'primitive' culture emerges as a well-thought-out form of establishing human relations and relations with the natural world by keeping a distance from both power and danger. Steiner theorizes the concept of 'taboo' as a constitutive way of putting power into a setting. In depicting 'taboo' as a *rational* way of avoiding danger, Steiner also opposes Robertson Smith's view of religion as being an expression of a loving and personal relationship between God and man. Religious behaviour, like the following of taboos, has a practical rationale for Steiner in that it helps create a society in which distance from power and danger is established. Robertson Smith, however, argues that taboo is a remnant of an inferior primitive society:

It is not with a vague fear of unknown powers, but with a loving reverence for known gods who are knit together by their worshippers by strong bonds of kinship that religion in the true sense of the word begins. (1894: 54–5)

Whereas Robertson Smith tries to convince us of the irrationality of 'taboo', calling the powers that are to be avoided 'unknown', Steiner draws attention to the precise localization of danger in 'primitive' society.

In contemporary anthropology, René Girard has confirmed that 'primitive' prohibitions are indeed rational acts. According to Girard, menstrual blood is tabooed, as 'it seems to confirm an affinity between sexuality and those diverse forms of violence that invariably lead to bloodshed' (1977). In *Violence and the Sacred*, he writes that

...the prohibitions of primitive peoples display a knowledge of violence and its ways that surpasses our modern comprehension [...] the prohibitions were dictated by violence itself [...] and they are fixed in place as a bulwark against similar outbursts. (ibid.: 219)

Instead of calling 'taboos' irrational, Girard attributes a depth of knowledge to them which is not found in 'modern' societies. Like Steiner, Girard credits 'primitive' prohibitions with a sophisticated localizing procedure ('they are fixed in place'), rather than ascribing them to vague, irrational fears or neuroses. This is one example of modern scholarship confirming Steiner's theory of taboo behaviour. Indeed, in echoing Mary Douglas's title *Purity and Danger* (1966) Girard's work may ultimately be traceable to Steiner's *Taboo*.

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