

JOHN MILLAR (1735-1801)

One of the most interesting and rewarding of sociological writers, though one seldom mentioned, and I think even more seldom read, is John Millar, a pupil of Adam Smith and from 1761 Professor of Law in the University of Glasgow. He was a man of liberal mind, what would, I suppose, today be called left-wing. His best known book, and the one which is of importance to us anthropologists, if we are concerned with the history of our thought, is The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks or an Inquiry into the Circumstances which give rise to Influence and Authority in the different Members of Society (1771; 4th Edit. with an introduction by John Craig, Edinburgh, 1806), a book which shows the strong influence of Montesquieu and also of Lord Kames and Adam Smith: the last two and Hume being Millar's friends. The idea of social progress, the child of the Enlightenment, was very much in Millar's mind, and not inappropriately. He aimed, as we all say we try to do, at separating what is general to mankind from what in particular societies is due to particular circumstances. By comparing different societies he sought 'to deduce the causes of different laws, customs, and institutions which, previously, had been remarked merely as isolated and uninformative facts.' (p. XXV). In reconstructing the earlier stages of development from savagery to civilization he used what Mr. Stewart in his Life of Dr. Smith (p.35) called theoretical or conjectural history. Using this comparative method he classified human societies into four types or states: hunters and fishers, pastoralists, agriculturalists, and those engaged in commerce. There was nothing very original in this classification. All writers about social progress of his time had much the same; and it goes back, without the idea of progress, it is true, to Aristotle. Millar did not, however, as some did, suppose that every society of necessity passes through all these stages. He adopted the division as the most convenient for his purposes, which were to bring out the most significant changes which have led to civilization; and to define these as general rules or principles in the light of which particular forms of institutions can be seen to be illustrations of the principles. Deviations from them are to be regarded as due to special and peculiar circumstances. In the course of his study he used such information as was available about what he regarded as simpler peoples: North American Indians, Hottentots, West African Negroes, Tatars, Arabs, the ancient Germans, Greeks, Italians, etc.

Differences of rank and power are everywhere due to sex and age, and also to the need for leadership. But particular systems of law and government have been affected by all sorts of conditions: the fertility of the soil, the nature of its productions, the size of the community, their cultural development, communications, etc. But in spite of these differences the similarity of man's wants and of his faculties has everywhere produced a remarkable uniformity in the several steps of his progression. 'There is thus, in human society, a natural progress from ignorance to knowledge, and from rude to civilized manners, the several stages of which are usually accompanied with peculiar laws and customs. Various accidental causes, indeed, have contributed to accelerate or retard this advancement in different countries.' (p.4).

Among primitive peoples women are treated harshly, little better than slaves, and sexual congress is scarcely more than animal mating. However, in matrilineal and matrilineal societies they have a much higher position (so he thought), e.g. the Lycians, the ancient inhabitants of Attica, some of the North American Indians, and the Indians of the Malabar coast; also where polyandry is practised, e.g. in parts of the Median empire, on the coast of Malabar, and in some of the Iroquois cantons. Woman's condition improves when more attention is paid to the pleasures of sex and where her economic role is more important and valued. This supposedly took place in the pastoral ages. In general it can be said that the domestication of cattle gave rise to a permanent distinction of ranks, some people becoming

richer than others and passing on their possessions to their descendants. The influence and power these people obtained was thus passed to their heirs, so that the distinction of ranks was permanent. Woman's position was again advanced in the agricultural stage, which also gave rise to property in land and hence to an even greater disproportion between the fortune and rank of individuals. Finally, changes in woman's condition arose from the improvement of useful arts and manufactures. These improvements led to a wider society and one in which there was greater inter-communication. Women ceased to be restricted in their activities to the family and home, and they mixed in outside society. 'In this situation, the women became, neither the slaves, nor the idols of the other sex, but the friends and companions.' (p.89). They were now valued for their useful talents and accomplishments; and, with the increase in wealth, women of condition were admired for their agreeable qualities and for the amusement their conversation affords. (He notes that no writer of the Augustan age left a work of imagination in which love is supposed to be productive of any tragical, or very serious effects.) The progress of women is thus part of the general history of society. The book is a great polemic, and a worthy one, in woman's cause.

Age is very important in primitive societies. Children are entirely dependent on their fathers; and also old men are always respected and have authority. 'So inseparately connected are age and authority in early periods, that in the language of rude nations the same word which signifies an old man is generally employed to denote a ruler or magistrate.' (p.114). When families begin to unite in a larger society the father loses some of his authority to representatives of the whole society; and when there are commerce and manufactures the children are no longer to the same extent dependent on him. The family becomes dispersed, the children leaving it to receive instruction and settling afterwards where there is employment. Thus they are emancipated from parental authority. However, when there is polygamy the authority of the head of the family lasts. Children are so numerous that parental affection is lessened; and the dissention among the wives requires a firm hand.

Millar then discusses the authority of a chief over the members of a tribe or village. This arises because tribes are almost continually at war with one another and feel the need for a military leader. This leader is given the respect once given to the father. In the hunting and fishing stage the leader is chosen simply for superior strength, courage, and other personal accomplishments. But in the pastoral stage the influence of a leader depends also on his greater wealth, which makes others dependent on him. 'The authority derived from wealth, is not only greater than that which arises from mere personal accomplishments, but also more stable and permanent. Extraordinary endowments, either of mind or body, can operate only during the life of the possessor, and are seldom continued for any length of time in the same family. But a man usually transmits his fortune to his posterity, and along with it all the means of creating dependence which he enjoyed. Thus the son, who inherits the estate of his father, is enabled to maintain an equal rank, at the same time that he preserves all the influence acquired by the former proprietor, which is daily augmented by the power of habit, and becomes more considerable as it passes from one generation to another'. (p.152). Hence the intense interest pastoral peoples have in their genealogies. Authority is further enhanced in a society with agriculture. The chief, with his superior wealth in cattle and his numerous retainers, acquires a much larger estate than anybody else; and his retainers are increased and, since they live on his land, are still more dependent on him. Also estates are less likely to be destroyed or impaired by accidents than are flocks and herds, 'so that the authority which is founded upon it becomes more permanent, and is apt to receive a continued accumulation of strength by remaining for ages in the same family.' (p.160). The chief is first a military leader; then he begins to exert his authority in other ways, including jurisdiction in both civil and criminal cases. Then he gets a sacred character - for

example, it is said that he is descended from the sun - and he assumes priestly functions, or controls them. Finally, he takes on legislative functions.

Millar has discussed the powers of husband, father, and civil magistrate. He concludes by a discussion of the relation between masters and servants or slaves. He notes that there are but few slaves among the greater part of the savages of America and says that the reason for this is that they have no opportunity of accumulating wealth and cannot therefore maintain servants. Therefore, also, they kill their prisoners. The Tartars, on the other hand, have great flocks and herds and support a number of domestics. Hence they treat their prisoners with moderation. Slavery in the end disappears because in a technically well developed country little profit can be drawn from the labour of a slave who is not trained to manufacture. It is more profitable to pay wages than to maintain slaves.

Millar's book contains some ethnographical and historical errors, perhaps unavoidable at the time he wrote it, but it is in many respects nearer to a modern sociological treatise than any other 18th century book; and I have always been grateful to G.D.H. Cole for bringing it to my notice. We find the same (as in Montesquieu and Ferguson) insistence that in any systematic scholarship one has to separate the general from the particular and whilst accounting for the general by some theoretical formulae (principles or laws) which explain it, at the same time to account for the variations or irregularities by reference to variable circumstances (as we have to do e.g. with the laws of projectiles or falling bodies). One finds also in Millar's book that what chiefly interested him was a study of the development of institutions (progress), a study which for the earlier stages had to be carried out with the aid of what has often been called the comparative method, a method which gives us a schematic typology (stages), each stage having its special features by which it is defined. When he discusses the factors leading to changes in the status of women and of children and of social leaders he never appeals only, or even much at all, to psychology or philosophy but to other social facts. His explanations are sociological, especially economic, e.g. chiefs arise through war; property enables aristocracies and dynasties to persist; prisoners are treated well or otherwise according to their economic value; slaves are maintained only in societies where they produce more than the cost of maintaining them.

This might well be a treatise in modern sociology (elimination of incidents, perturbations, special and peculiar circumstances, and elements, persons, etc.): mass movements, great historical trends, progress in all its 18th century sense. Then his typology of societies, which runs right through our literature - mode of livelihood, economic for those who like the word. Then in relation to this classification he makes an analysis of rank, showing the causes and conditions of prestige and power and character in each type of socio-economic community. On the whole it is a sober assessment, not didactic or dogmatic: a clear and consistent inquiry with the limited aim of discovering the origin and development of class structure. At the time it was written this was, in my opinion, a remarkable achievement.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard.