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#### CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS (1908–2009)

Lévi-Strauss was born in Brussels and raised in France by a family with an Alsatian Jewish background. He took a degree in law and philosophy at the Sorbonne.

After a few years as a teacher in a lycée he obtained a job as part of a French cultural mission to Brazil from 1935 to 1939, lecturing in philosophy at the University of Sao Paulo. A growing interest in anthropology led him to visit the Bororo, Caduveo, Nambikwara, and Tupi-Kawahib peoples. This was survey fieldwork rather than fieldwork based on PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION. His return to France was short in duration, because he was no longer safe after the Nazi invasion. From 1941 to 1948 he was based in New York. During the war, he was affiliated with the New School for Social Research in New York City and also taught at Barnard College. In 1959, he became Professor at the Collège de France, holding this position until retirement.

For 60 years Lévi-Strauss was associated with a body of theory and a kind of practice known as (French) STRUCTURALISM that exercised a powerful influence in France, Britain, and the United States, particularly between 1955 and 1975. Outside anthropology, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Georges Dumézil, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jean Piaget were all described rightly or wrongly

as structuralists. In French anthropology, Pierre Smith, Françoise Héritier, and Philippe Descola were heirs to the tradition and Dan Sperber emerged from within as a critic; in Britain, Edmund Leach and Rodney Needham developed an empirical, grounded version of structuralism; in the United States in the 1970s Marshall Sahlins, formerly a NEO-EVOLUTIONIST, became a fervent defender of structuralism, whereas Marvin Harris became an equally fervent opponent of it.

It would be a good application of structuralist method, were we partially to define structuralism by its differences from other theories. Lévi-Strauss claimed that he avoided evolutionist assumptions about human reason. 'Primitives' might not think the same thoughts that we did but they had the same mental equipment. While he was interested in kinship, myth, and cosmology as human institutions, he possessed little interest in individual actors, specific marriages, particular storytelling events, or day-to-day politics in other cultures. He was particularly skeptical of bodies of theory, such as the FUNCTIONALISM of Bronislaw Malinowski, which explained the existence of institutions by their utility to individuals and societies. Unlike many American members of the CULTURE AND PERSONALITY school and linguistic anthropologists, Lévi-Strauss wished to demonstrate cultural universals rather than cultural differences. However, these universals existed at the level of structure rather than specific content or behavior.

Lévi-Strauss inherited from Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss a preoccupation with exchange/reciprocity and symbolic classification as cultural universals. From Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss founder of structural linguistics, and from his friend, the Russian phonologist Roman Jakobson, he derived his ideas of relational structures based on rules of contrast/differentiation and combination. All these themes first became evident in his first major work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949).

Mauss had described ceremonial exchanges such as KULA in Melanesia and the POTLATCH of the North American northwest coast in *The Gift*, and had further indicated that in archaic societies everything was subject to the rules of reciprocity. Reciprocity was an expression of the social bond that did more than stave off hunger. It was concerned with more than the most practical utility. Reciprocity as a universal imperative is invoked by Lévi-Strauss as an explanation of the incest taboo which he equates with exogamy. The traffic in women for sex and marriage is merely one more important form of ceremonial exchange; indeed it is a hub of exchange activity. Other

theories explaining the taboo, including the genetic risk of inbreeding, avoidance resulting from excessive familiarity, and Freudian repression of Oedipal drives, are all weighed in the balance and found wanting.

In very small scale societies which have 'elementary structures' there are rules which not only prescribe exogamy but restrict the choice of the male and his group to a specified category of women belonging to an appropriate group. The simplest form of this is *direct exchange* involving bilateral cross-cousin marriage (in an ideal case a male marries someone who is simultaneously his mother's brother's daughter and father's sister's daughter). This is sometimes combined with *dual organization*. The group is divided into opposed halves (a division which may be represented in the organization of village space) which exchange services, goods, rituals, and wives. The two moieties may be opposed with respect to certain symbolic properties (one may represent the moon whereas the other represents the sun; one may represent nature and the wild, whereas the other represents culture and domestication). *Indirect exchange* involving matrilineal cross-cousin marriage (a male marries a real or classificatory mother's brother's daughter) is consistent with a more delayed reciprocity. In the simplest form of indirect exchange, Group A gives women to Group B which gives women to Group C which gives women to A (note that these groups may be subdivided). There is a potential for inequality in such a system inasmuch as wife-givers are often deemed superior to wife-takers; the potential conundrum that A might end up superior to itself is avoided by the subdivision of the group. The giver/taker distinction is often reflected in forms of binary symbolic classification. In some lineage-based, small groups, and in modern societies, there are more 'complex' structures, inasmuch as one cannot marry within one's group but there is no specific category of partner specified.

*Elementary Structures* gave rise to many controversies. **Eleanor Leacock** disputed Lévi-Strauss's depiction of women in 'primitive' societies as the objects of exchange. **Gayle Rubin** was less inclined to doubt the conditions that he portrayed but was dismayed by his failure to ask why women were treated in this way.

In 1955, *Tristes tropiques*, an account of his fieldwork experiences in Brazil which was directed toward a general, albeit intellectual readership, made Lévi-Strauss into a celebrity. The book is full of memorable stories: the Caduveo paint their bodies in dualistic designs like our colored playing cards; Bororo dual organization faces collapse when the missionaries insist on altering the plan of the village; the

egalitarian Nambikwara do not need bloody revolutions – when their leader fails, they simply leave him.

*Totemism* (1962) begins with a description of the late nineteenth century theory which amalgamated a number of practices, actual or hypothetical, into a putative primordial form of religion and social organization: totemism. These included clan exogamy, matrilineal descent, and the worship by the clan of a species of plants or animals from which it supposedly descended – they might be ceremonially avoided most of the year, but eaten just once a year after sacrifice.

In fact, individuals, families, and territorial groups might claim special relations with animals or plants. They might or might not be avoided. Exogamy might not be involved. Animals might be individual guardian spirits and whole species might not be involved. Nonetheless, 'totemism' persisted. Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown stressed its function in maintaining group solidarity. Malinowski noted that totems tended to be useful and edible. Others such as **Meyer Fortes** tried to examine symbolic resemblances between clans and their totems.

Elaborating an argument made by Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss reconstituted the totemic phenomenon. Some aboriginal groups in West Australia are divided into two moieties, which intermarry and exchange services. They have totemic names such as Eaglehawk and Crow. If one asks why Group A is like an eaglehawk, and what constitutes the 'crownness' of Group B, one has no answer. However, there is a folktale which says that Eaglehawk is Crow's mother's brother, and expects to receive respect and presents from his sister's son who is also his prospective son-in-law. Crow as a scavenger removes the game which hunters like Eaglehawk kill. In the folktale, Crow eats a wallaby he is supposed to bring to Eaglehawk, and pretends that the hunt failed. Eaglehawk tickles Crow's belly so that he vomits the wallaby's remains and then throws him in the fire till his eyes are red and his plumage is blackened. This is a just-so story about the complementary opposition between hunters and scavengers, senior and junior kin/affines, black and colored/non-black. One might say that the differences between Eaglehawk and Crow conceptually mirror the social differentiation between the two exogamous moieties. Members of A and B eat and utilize neither eaglehawks nor crows (which follow them during the hunt) but they find them *good to think with* if they wish to contemplate their social relationships.

In *The Savage Mind* (1962) Lévi-Strauss explored many relationships of this type. An example might be the astrologer's zodiac which



relates differences in the heavenly bodies to different months of the year and ultimately to differences in human temperament. Lévi-Strauss's mode of analysis was rooted in structural linguistics. The slight difference between a voiced 'b' sound and an unvoiced 'p' sound becomes important only when it's given social recognition and used to distinguish the meaning of lexemes for example 'big' and 'pig,' that can then be combined into meaningful utterances, for example 'The boat is big,' or 'The pig ate its supper.'

The same mode of analysis was applied to myth in a number of early analyses, including the Oedipus cycle, Winnebago myths, and the Asdiwal myths of British Columbia and Alaska. In a tetralogy that began with *The Raw and the Cooked* in 1964 and ended with *The Naked Man* in 1971 Lévi-Strauss examines and compares a few hundred myths from all over the Americas that are more or less related to a myth (M1) about the creation of fire. Myths are broken down into episodes (mythemes). When they are compared, similarities, inversions, additions, and absences can be noted as one myth transforms temporally or spatially into another. One version of the Asdiwal myth tells of a Tsimshian culture hero who is born from a union between a widow and a sacred bird, lives on the land where people forage for berries, and has a liaison with she-bear (the Evening Star) whom he pursues up a ladder to Heaven. After the union with She-Bear fails he has two more marriages on earth, the latter of which produces a son. In both cases there are quarrels following boasts by him about his hunting prowess, first as a killer of mountain game, latterly as a killer of sea lions. Abandoned at sea by angry in-laws from his third marriage, Asdiwal is rescued by Mouse Woman and saved by the very sea lions he hunted. He returns to land after killing his former in-laws, and dies after he goes on a mountain without snowshoes. The myth and its variants are analyzed in terms of oppositions such as foraging/fishing, land game and sea mammals, upstream/downstream, patrilocal residence (the widows at the beginning) and matrilocality, male/female and endogamy/exogamy. Inasmuch as Asdiwal dies on a mountain he is seen as attempting to mediate these oppositions. This is not an explanation of what the myth 'means' to the average Tsimshian (it's a story about a hero's life) so much as an exposition of the formal relation between its contents. Indeed, the average Tsimshian might well be as unaware of these structural oppositions as most people are about the rules of sound systems in languages. This is one reason why Lévi-Strauss talked of the 'unconscious' in culture. It must be noted that he had no interest in supposed universals of 'unconscious' content such as the Jungian

archetypes, because his real subject was the human mind which created structures and their permutations. He compared the episodes/content or events of mythic thought to granules continually re-arranged into new patterns in a child's kaleidoscope.

To conduct such analyses one must first understand local ethnobotany, ethnozoology, diet, habitat, and social organization. In *The Savage Mind* (1962) Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that the folklore and cosmology of indigenous peoples are the products of elaborate knowledge systems which in many ways compare favorably with modern science. The modern scientist does have an advantage because scientific thought is self-reflexive and progressive and scientific method is always specialized to the task at hand. The 'savage mind' at work may be compared to the jack-of-all-trades or *bricoleur*, who has to use a non-specialized toolkit. Pieces that are adapted from one purpose for another (e.g. a bathroom stopper used to prevent oil from leaking out of a car during a wartime parts shortage!) carry historical baggage. The reflexivity of scientific thought involves a power of self-criticism – thought can think about itself. Human thought of all kinds conceals and reveals things and ideas, creates difference and mediates it. Parallel cousins and cross-cousins are 'different' only because culture says they are – a fact that must be hidden for the system to work. On the other hand, having convinced ourselves of the reality of difference, our social and intellectual systems are largely concerned with building bridges across the distinctions we ourselves have created. This paradox is at the core of all of Lévi-Strauss's work, and, if he is to be believed, at the core of human experience.

#### Selected readings

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