

A Lévi-Straussian century

Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1908–2009

The French intellectual twentieth century ended at the precise moment when Claude Lévi-Strauss passed away on 31 October 2009. Not because Lévi-Strauss had won the hollow race to become the ‘most influential’ of a certain generation of French thinkers, nor because, born in 1908, he was the only thinker of his generation to stretch the thin thread of his life long enough to count out a full hundred years, a unit we associate more easily with historical epochs than with individual trajectories. We must understand the word ‘century’ here in the sense that Foucault used it when he predicted that ‘perhaps, one day, this century will be known as Deleuzean’. Contrary to what the English translation suggests, Foucault didn’t mean that this hundred-year period will be recognized as having been marked by the work of Deleuze in the same way that another period is known as Victorian: he meant that a philosophy which at the time was still wheeling around in the frictionless blue sky of metaphysics now had the means to realize itself in the world of politics, arts, sciences and forms of life – in short, the means to transform our practices. We must understand the sentence and the word in French: *un jour peut-être le siècle sera deleuzien*, meaning that one day, perhaps, the *world* will be Deleuzean, in the sense that the secular is opposed to the regular (clergy), actions to prayers, human beings to their theologies. Foucault meant that the philosophical reworking of concepts like difference, repetition, sense, sign, event, structure, play, order and things had come to acquire precise stakes for the transformation of non-philosophical practices.

If Foucault’s claim has any historical purchase, if such a project of transformation holds out any promise, it must number first among its conditions the reworking performed by Lévi-Strauss, over the course of his life, of the word invented by Roman Jakobson in 1929: *structuralism*. This word designated a transformative programme potentially traversing all the domains of knowledge, as well as the arts, a programme which implied nothing less than a change in the very conception of rationality. But it was Lévi-Strauss who managed to expand the paradigm out of its field of origin – linguistics – and demonstrated that it was indeed a truly general way of approaching human life, since it could be applied to all aspects of ‘culture’ (kinship, myth-telling, arts, sexuality, etc.). Structuralism isn’t only a set of techniques to study languages (synchronically rather than diachronically, in terms of systems rather than rules, functioning by oppositions rather than computations, etc.); nor is it simply the hypothesis that all cultural phenomena should be studied as languages (for which the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure coined the term ‘semiology’ at the start of the twentieth century). It is rather the idea that symbolic practices cannot be constituted as scientific objects without introducing new kinds of entities which traditional metaphysics was reluctant to acknowledge, as Saussure’s famous adage, ‘in language there are nothing but differences’, had already indicated.

Structuralism prompted philosophers to develop a new ontology – that is, to redefine what it means to be different and identical, unique or multiple, successive or

contemporary. Structuralism also obliged philosophers to reconsider the very nature of meaning and subjectivity – the former dethroned from its position as an aim of every signifying act, to end up as a mere effect, and the latter displaced from its position as origin, to be analysed as a function. And this task did not merely amount to questioning the internal coherence of the constructions inherited from one particular philosophical tradition: it also had the potential to reorient the practice of a whole range of activities, in history, literary theory, sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and so on.

Whether we think of Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, or even Badiou, and no matter what philosophical resources directly inspired them, they all inherited problems (and often concepts) set up by Lévi-Strauss. More importantly, they also inherited the terrain upon which their daring speculative constructions could be deemed to touch directly on practices, in particular scientific ones. However, while the reputation of all these authors is now well established in philosophical circles, Lévi-Strauss remains comparatively little known and little read. This neglect, regrettably, contributes directly to the increasingly marked tendency to ‘normalize’ these practices and speculations and to confine them anew in somewhat solipsistic dialogue within a philosophical tradition that is once again locked within itself, taking away from them not only their specificity but also a great deal of their intelligibility and interest. It is symptomatic that the English-speaking academic world (which prides itself so much, relative to its French counterpart, in ‘taking seriously’ these subversive thinkers, both

as a source of inspiration and as objects of interpretation, if not veneration) has remained largely silent about Lévi-Strauss, while more and more works are devoted to him in French.

Admittedly, Lévi-Strauss’s work is not easy to digest. The reader must be willing to learn about the marriage arrangements of some obscure Australian tribes, or to follow odd stories of scattered and sometimes extinct Amazonian peoples, in which philosophers, however post-colonial they pretend to



Self-portrait, second trip to Brazil, October–November 1938.
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be, may have trouble recognizing the worthy concerns of their own discipline – be they the foundations of knowledge, the guiding values of humanity, the impenetrable ways of the Revolution or the secret drives of existential tragedy. Lévi-Strauss proposed no small number of new philosophical constructs – take, among many others, the concept of ‘floating signifier’ which has had such a long career from Lacan to Deleuze, Derrida, Badiou, Spivak, Žižek, Laclau... He insisted, however, that such constructs were to be treated as nothing more than ad hoc tools to solve particular anthropological or ethnographic problems, a strategy which did little to win over some of his philosophical colleagues. Others asked familiar questions about the agenda itself: didn’t structuralism rule out history, subjectivity and politics in its account of human life?

More important than these debates, I think, is a more general difficulty, one that applies to the very characterization of what philosophy’s ‘secular’ world should be. It may seem that Lévi-Strauss contents himself with defining this ‘outside’ of philosophy merely as ‘science’, as if the only thing that mattered was the acquisition of some posi-

tive knowledge, with every way of thinking assessed according to its capacity to open us to its sheer outside, to 'objective reality' as such. Lévi-Strauss, who was trained as a philosopher but who was always uncomfortable with any self-contained conceptual play, tends to oppose inward-looking thinkers who dream freely of logical coherence, and anthropologists who confront themselves with demonstrable facts. This attitude raises at least two series of issues. The first is that it obviously relies on a very debatable concept of science, which is not even consistent with the premisses of semiology, for which signs do not refer to an external reality but function by opposing themselves immanently. In the second place, it seems to exclude from the 'world' everything which is not scientific knowledge, such as arts and politics, depoliticizing in the same move the practice of science itself, as if it were possible to take an impartial view over and above the chaotic play of human experience and opinion. It should be recalled that Lévi-Strauss's first published text was on Gracchus Babeuf and the idea of communism, and that he was an active member of the Socialist Party for many years before the Second World War. Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss's lack of confidence in May '68, and his resistance to the tendency to 'ideologize' theoretical problems which was common at that time, seem to confirm the diagnosis: even more than his critic Louis Althusser, Lévi-Strauss has often been dismissed as guilty of scientism.

It was the point of Derrida's deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss (which seems to have had such an impact on its English-speaking readers that it encouraged them to stop reading him at all) to show that these categories of fact, science, positivity, experience (and all the oppositions by which he characterized the efficacy of his move away from the philosophical way of thinking) were themselves entirely determined by the very metaphysical tradition he was trying to escape. Far from being the 'outside' of philosophy, Lévi-Strauss's world would then have been fully anticipated within that which he sought to evade. Rather than follow a laborious detour through the ascetic acquisition of anthropological knowledge, Derrida suggested that we should try to put into play the internal heterogeneity of the metaphysical tradition, the equivocity of its concepts, not so much in order to find a way out, but rather to make it once more capable of invention, of history, of novelty.

Whatever one may think of the merits of deconstruction, it has the unfortunate consequence of limiting another sort of heterogeneity, one that Lévi-Strauss had tried to confront us with, in remarkable ways: the heterogeneity of forms of thought different from 'ours'. It is true that there is an ambiguity in Lévi-Strauss's discourse, but it happens to be the ambiguity of anthropology itself. One only needs to read *The Savage Mind* to realize that Lévi-Strauss doesn't believe in the capacity of the modern Western scientific tradition to enunciate from within itself the conditions of its own operations, as Kant urged philosophers to do. One will only know what it is to know if one is able to recognize that practices apparently very remote from scientific knowledge, like myths and rituals, are in fact determinate variants of it. Anthropology is a very special sort of knowledge: it makes of the diversity of forms of knowledge the critical instrument to characterize both what is distinctive about the kind of knowledge we perceive as obvious (as the relation to some external reality) by clarifying its difference with other knowledges, and what is at stake for all rational subjects of knowledge in this activity. Lévi-Strauss defined anthropology as this kind of knowledge which makes of differences (between forms of knowledge) the unique tool to produce particular truths. I know no other thinker who pushed further than him the concern with *decolonizing thinking*, to evoke an argument defended by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who may be Lévi-Strauss's most creative follower today.

Structuralism defined itself by opposition to evolutionism, according to which human societies and minds could be ordered along a unique series going from the primitive to the civilized: such a schema notoriously justified colonialism as an enterprise of

education, if necessary through extermination. But Lévi-Strauss did not favour any kind of universalism which would claim to possess from within itself the standard of reason (and then ‘charitably’ ascribe it to all human beings). Nor did he accept ‘differentialist’ perspectives, which hypostasize cultures as monads of sorts and, as a consequence, make differences indifferent to one another. His concern was always the same: to make us understand that ‘we’ are not at the centre of anything, not even of our own identity (whether we call it ‘humanity’, ‘reason’ or ‘culture’). *Hierarchy, generality, distinction* are three ways of denying this fact. To which we must oppose: *equality, comparison, transformation*. This is why Lévi-Strauss once wrote that ‘anthropology’ is nothing other than a ‘practice of decentering’.

This point also answers to the objection of Lévi-Strauss’s alleged indifference to politics. He certainly never embraced the somewhat neo-Zhdanovian conception of the social sciences which tries to see in them an instrument of domination or resistance of one group or class over another. But he never separated his scientific endeavour from its sharp critical-political edge. He warned us against a conception of human action as necessarily reducible to the paradigm of history. He saw in the idea whereby human beings make history (without knowing it) a mere ethnocentric projection, inadequate for people who do not share in a certain modern conception of subjectivity. He carried as far as possible the criticism of the idea of progress, as in *Race and History*, while trying to redefine a form of ‘progressivism’ capable of learning some lessons from many centuries of brutal violence, ignorance and sheer stupidity. He refused all forms of humanism which would rely on any determined conception of the human essence (even a negative determination, as in the case of existentialism), suspecting it as a new way of making of one figure of humanity the norm and truth for all other ones. He was able to see the conceptual links between an attempt to constitute humanity as an isolated dominion and the ecological threat with which we are now all too familiar, advocating a ‘generalized humanism’ which would make not any identity the source of all value but rather favour the practice of difference even beyond the boundaries of species. In short, Lévi-Strauss made of the effort to conceive oneself as a possibility among others (an ‘other among others’, as he says in his homage to Rousseau included in *Structural Anthropology*, volume 2) the instrument both of a new kind of knowledge and of a demanding ethical and political attitude.

True, Lévi-Strauss’s work is ambiguous and difficult. But its ambiguity is that of our world itself, and its difficulties have, compared to some others, the merit of being *real*. They also explain why Lévi-Strauss has been at the centre of the French intellectual *siècle* or century. An advocate of the concept of structure (because he saw in it the instrument of a way of thinking which would make of transformations its sole resource), a scientist eager for the empirical diversity of worlds (who did not hesitate to show how the acquisition of knowledge required a willingness to pass through daring speculative constructions), Lévi-Strauss has been at the intersection of all the great movements which agitated the French scene, from his debates with the phenomenologies of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur to the triggering of the various sorts of ‘post-structuralisms’ that dominate the field to this day. Nowhere more than in his texts can we perceive the truth of the general point that a great intellectual event is always something in which an epoch tackles the excess of what it has to think over its available means of thinking. I don’t know whether the next century might one day be recognized as Deleuzian (or Badiouian, or anything else), but if it is, I’m sure that it that it won’t be so without us first realizing that the one which ended so recently has been Lévi-Straussian. It is time to start rereading his work, if we seek to find new ways to allow philosophical constructions to accomplish their real and most fundamental promise: to act upon the world they confront.

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