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Claude Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism

Abstract

This article seeks to explore Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism by interpreting selected works and aspects of his intellectual biography. Lévi-Strauss, a seminal figure in anthropology, is widely regarded as the founder of structuralism. This article examines structuralism through his own writings as well as the texts that influenced his theoretical framework. The bibliography is based on the works he personally selected for the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*.

Key words: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structuralism, Structural Anthropology

Approaching Lévi-Strauss

“It is, I think, absolutely impossible to conceive of meaning without order”
Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*

Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism has profoundly influenced the trajectory of modern anthropology. This paper approaches structuralism through an understanding-oriented perspective, examining Lévi-Strauss's intellectual development in connection with his biography, key texts, and foundational theoretical influences. Rather than offering a critique of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism from a contemporary perspective, this article aims to understand his work through an engagement with his own texts. Rather than focusing solely on abstract theoretical discussions, this study seeks to grasp how his structuralist thought emerged and evolved through personal, historical, and disciplinary intersections.

As in many professions, anthropology has its share of stereotypes. For example, the name Lévi-Strauss has become almost synonymous with “difficulty.”

He is widely considered difficult to read and even more difficult to fully comprehend. At least, this has been my experience, and that of many of my colleagues. In this study, I aim not to critique but to understand Lévi-Strauss, by engaging with a selection of his writings and exploring his intellectual trajectory.

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To facilitate a clearer understanding of Lévi-Strauss, this paper begins with some fundamental conceptual clarifications. First: what is structuralism? Structuralism is an approach that studies objects by applying the concept of structure to the object under investigation. To apply structure means to explore the system that underlies, explains, and gives meaning to observed phenomena. Structuralism, in essence, seeks to explain the surface world through the logic of deeper, often hidden systems—systems built on mental constructions and the innate categories of the human mind.

Anthropology as Praxis: Lévi-Strauss's Early Engagement

After his education, Lévi-Strauss began teaching philosophy. He was also a political activist as a member of the French socialist party. However, after a while, teaching seemed to be a bureaucratic activity, and politics became a disruptive one. He discovered ethnology during this period of his life.

At that time, ethnology was backed by the influence of the Durkheim tradition in France. The researcher who conducted field research was regarded as the assistant of a scientist. It was the sociologist's onus to make a theoretical synthesis of data collected by others. Lévi-Strauss's discovery of **Primitive Society**, published by Robert Lowie in 1919, marked the beginning of his transition to a whole new field. This book is based on the experience of the researcher. According to him, the discipline of anthropology offers a new alliance between thinking and action, a combination of theory and practice. With this interest in ethnology, he accepted the offer of teaching sociology at the University of Sao Paulo. He set out for Brazil with the idea that he could do field work at the weekends with the native peoples living in the suburbs.

Fieldwork as Intellectual Initiation

In the suburbs of Sao Paulo, a society that underwent a major transformation under the influence of the wave of modernization. He went to the border of Paraguay in November 1935 to conduct field research with the indigenous people. His first contact was with the Kaduveo and Bororo communities. He has collected rich data on the art of Kaduveo face painting. He analyzed the connection of this art with the social system in the **Tristes Tropiques**.

He then researched in a Bororo village that remained outside the domain of missionaries at Quejare. And when he returned, he wrote his first anthropological article, **Contribution to the Study of the Social Organization of the Bororo Indians**. His second expedition for field research was in December 1938 with the

Nambikwara communities, who lived a nomadic life at that time of the year. He then explored the Munda and Tupi-Kawahib communities on the Bolivian border.

Although Lévi-Strauss's fieldworks are famous because of the **Tristes Tropiques**, it is not that much important for him. He saw the fieldwork as a crucial stage of anthropology education, because fieldwork is an internal revolution for an anthropologist. The social components of lives are never only known from the outside. The condition that the researcher understands is that it should be assimilated as an internal experience. In this case, it allows a person to experience a shift of center that deeply and permanently changes his/her perspective about cultures and himself/herself. This experience is different from that of an explorer and a tourist. Specifically, the anthropologist plays with his/her position in the world, exceeding his/her limits. He/she is a person who is physically and spiritually worn out due to hunger, fatigue, disruption of acquired habits, and prejudices that he/she has never realized before. Finally, in all the tremors of his/her personal history, the observer finds and uses himself /herself as a means of observation.

Saussurean Linguistics and the Birth of Structure

Lévi-Strauss returned to France in 1939. However, due to World War II, he was forced to go to New York in 1941. So, he was introduced to the American anthropology. The discipline of anthropology in the United States is much older than in France, and it thus tradition, a strong tradition of fieldwork and a massive accumulation of data. There, he began writing **The Family and Social Life of the Nambikwara Indians**, which was to be published in 1948. In the same period, he met with the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, and he came to know about structural linguistics, which would mark a turning point for Lévi-Strauss. In the analysis of kinship relations, he employed the methodology of structural linguistics. So, what is structural linguistics?

Saussure examines the languages synchronically, i.e., at a specific point in time-contrary to the approach that examines the changes in languages diachronically, which was the tradition of the period of his time- and as a self-sufficient and independent system. Understanding a language system means explaining the structure of the current connections across its elements. He makes some distinctions to account for the language system, among which is the distinction between language and speech. Language (*langue*) is the name given to a system. Speech (*parole*) is the concrete use of language and the application of a certain moment. Speech accords with the language system; Language (structure), which is abstract, and the social system controls the concrete and individual speech.

Thus, Saussure distinguishes between the social and the individual, the structural and the random. Linguistics examines the speech to reveal its structure. The elements of a system are not a heap, but a coherent whole. The system is fictional, independent of external facts. What is important in the system is the functions of the elements within the system, not the assets alone.

Language, Kinship, and Structural Logic

Lévi-Strauss completed his thesis on **The Elementary Structures of Kinship** in 1947. Based on structural linguistics, he developed the necessary method to analyze kinship relationships. His work will have an important place in the literature of anthropology as a fundamental piece with the problems and conclusions that he has discussed. According to Lévi-Strauss, society consists of individuals and groups that communicate with each other. In every society, communication occurs on at least three levels: communication of goods and services (economic system); communication of messages (Linguistic system); communication of women (Kinship system).

According to Lévi-Strauss, the rules of kinship and marriage that exist all over the world seem complex and random at first glance. On the other hand, if these rules are random, they can vary for everyone. Moreover, if the same meaninglessness repeats, it is a sign that it is not random. It was my first attempt to seek order behind such a distinct disorder (**Myth and Meaning**), Lévi-Strauss says. Kinship facts, like language facts, are not aware of actors, but they follow objective rules. The elements of a system -such as phonemes in a language- do not have their own meaning; Meaning derives from the position they occupy within the system. Kinship terms are an element of meaning, they acquire meaning, only if they are integrated into systems. So, what is essential is the connection between families that is not family as a singular term.

Lévi-Strauss focuses on **incest**, which is a critical topic of discussion in the literature. Contrary to the general opinion, this prohibition is not a biological or psychological phenomenon and also is not a negative prohibition. It is a positive rule that obliges the people to seek women outside their own kinship network. Thus, the marital bond established with a different family makes the cultural structure -not biological- stand out. The main purpose of marriage prohibitions is to establish a cultural bond between biological families. Incest taboo and the exogamy serve a mainly positive function: Communication and integration with the others. Within the historical and geographical variation, the aims of kinship and marriage rules exceeds a biological organization and provides access to a social organization.

Lévi-Strauss belongs in the Marcel Mauss tradition, which defines exchange and reciprocity as the basis of social life in **The Gift**. According to Levi-Strauss, the value of exchanges is not only in the objects that are exchanged, but also the exchange itself holds social value. It offers a man that unites people together.

This work was harshly criticized, especially within the French academia. What's more, he rejected his Collège de France nomination twice. He began to work in the lectern of “uncivilized peoples' religions” in L'École Pratique des Hautes Études. He changed the lectern's name to “Comparative Religions of Peoples without Writing”. Because of this new task, his study area changed from kinship systems to mythologies.

In 1955, he published the article “The Structure of Myth”. He based his analyses on the myth of Oedipus investigating whether there was some sort of underlying the apparent disorder of the mythical universe. He made the analysis of the Oedipus myth based on the question of whether there was some sort of order behind the apparent disorder of the mythical universe. Each myth is first examined through the events, predicates, and subjects described in itself. Then, each myth is studied within its own mythological universe along with the other myths to which it is linked. The validity of the analysis depends on the establishment of connections between the elements of myths.

Race, History, and the Politics of Structure

In 1952, he published **Race and History** for a series of books entitled “The Race Problem in Modern Science”. The focus of Lévi-Strauss's view of history is based on the critique of Eurocentrism and racism caused by the argument that primitive and civilized inconsistency is caused by the distinction between cumulative and static history.

None of the cultures is static. The societies that are described as static and claimed to be non-historical are those whose history is unknown. Dynamic vs. static culture opposition stems from the researcher's mind. Therefore, whenever we tend to call a certain culture static, we must first question our own ignorance about it. Race and history after the Second World War had a great impact as an anti-racist and ethnocentric work that the world needed.

In 1954, he wrote for the Philosophical Travels series *Terre Humaine*, which was later translated into 30 languages and became Lévi-Strauss's most famous book. This work is regarded as an intellectual autobiography questioning the dominance of the West over the world.

In 1958, he published **Structural Anthropology**. This book was a declaration with the title and ethnology, which is a separate discipline within the humanities and gives way to anthropology. In *Structural Anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss defined anthropology as a conversation between humans.

Totemism Reframed: Thought, Taxonomy, and the 'Savage Mind'

Lévi-Strauss published **Totemism** and **The Savage Mind** in 1962. **Totemism** is a critique of the general opinion that defines totemism as a belief system that identifies people with animals and plants. Defined as such, totemism is used to refer to people in primitive closeness with nature, and it creates an illusion that ignores the cultural forms of these peoples.

Lévi-Strauss explains that totemism, which is believed to be an institution that identifies people and non-human beings, actually functions as a classifying logic. In other words, the totemic operator functions as a logic system that can express social organization through the system of classification of species in nature.

The Savage Mind, by choosing a universal feature of the human mind as a subject, moves away from the traditional ethnology and critically ends the hidden evolutionism in anthropology. Savage mind is nothing more than the natural rules of mind, whereas human mind can only comprehend the external environment with the help of certain regulations. What determines these arrangements is the “universal”, rational laws special to the human mind. Totemism is also the product of this regulation effort. Savage mind corresponds to the thought system in every human mind. In fact, as noted by Lévi-Strauss, savage mind is sometimes more functional in solving problems posed by the environment. This book, brings a philosophical critique to the common belief that puts the human mind at the center and constitutes the primitive human / modern human opposition.

Myth and Music: Structuralism Beyond Language

Mythologiques is a remarkable work on the myths of Native Americans. Music is the model that ensures the integrity of the four volumes. The similarity between myth and music arises from the fact that both are pure cultural forms and that the individual and society take root in sensory life and produce meaning. Both transcend the spoken language in their own ways. Myths of unwritten societies that account for their own past assume the function of history in modern society. Mythological logic works to overcome the contradiction in the binary classification system with a third term.

The Way of the Masks was published in 1975. In this work, he claimed that a mask cannot be interpreted in terms of what it represents or the use of aesthetics

or rituals. Because a mask does not exist on its own, it always requires the presence of other masks to replace it. One should first look into not what the mask represents, but what it transforms - that is, what it chooses not to represent and what it excludes. As far as Lévi-Strauss is concerned, masks can be interpreted factoring in the stylistic differences between the masks of a given society and those of the neighboring societies. According to Lévi-Strauss, a mask, and its origins mythos, describe the inadequacies, jealousies, and claims of superiority in the face of another community.

Look, Listen, Read was published in 1993. This work is about art. Artworks are important in providing evidence that something really happened between people in history. Art is a field where the myths of the Native Americans and the ways of Western science can cross this encounter without causing violence or destruction. Reconsidering **Savage Mind**'s analysis of painting and **Mythologiques**' analysis of music, and Lévi-Strauss compares important works of his aesthetic culture with the art of basketing in North America.

For his 100th birthday, he was asked to create a selection of his works in the Bibliotheque de la Pleiade.

The books on the list created by Lévi-Strauss were:

Tristes Tropiques

Totemism

Savage Mind

“Mythologiques”

The Way of the Masks

The Jealous Potter

The Story of Lynx

Look, Listen, Read

Conclusion : The Search for Unity in Multiplicity

Every attempt to read Lévi-Strauss has led me to a new layer of insight and a renewed set of questions. His texts remain inexhaustible, continuously opening new pathways of meaning with each revisit. This persistent richness is a testimony to the structuralist method he proposed—a way of reading not only texts but also the world itself.

From his application of structural linguistics to kinship systems, to his reframing of mythology and art as systems of meaning, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism offers more than an analytical tool: it proposes a worldview. It asserts that beneath

the infinite diversity of human cultures lies a shared cognitive structure—a universal architecture of the human mind that shapes cultural expression.

Ultimately, structuralism is not just a methodology for decoding culture; it is a philosophical stance that seeks order amid apparent chaos. In a world that constantly moves toward disorder, structuralism insists on the mind's capacity to create meaning through patterned thought. For Lévi-Strauss, structuralism is the art of finding unity in multiplicity, the invariant within variation.

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