On the Anthropology of Levi-Strauss
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For ninety-nine percent of human history, Levi-Strauss once observed, a divided humanity did not know the other modes of life, the other beliefs and the other institutions that Anthropology since the end of the nineteenth century has been called upon to understand. More than any other science or discipline, Anthropology became the self-consciousness of the human species in all its varieties and all its similarities. There developed a line of global thinkers of human cultures—E.B. Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, Franz Boas, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski—of whom, alas, it seems that Levi-Strauss is the last. Levi-Strauss is apparently the last with a pan-human vision, the last to embrace the study of all the cultural expressions of humanity as the only way of knowing what mankind is. More than once he has quoted Rousseau on that score: "When one proposes to study men, one only needs to look at those nearby; but in order to study man, one has to look afar; for it is necessary to observe the differences in order to discover the properties." Hence the title of an influential collection of Levi-Strauss's essays, *The View from Afar* (1988). Levi-Strauss's grand ambition has been to discover the universal laws of human thought underlying the great diversity of cultures known to Anthropology. In the pursuit of that ambition, he developed an ethnographic knowledge of the planet unparalleled by any scholar before and unlikely to be duplicated by anyone again. A master of Native American cultures North and South, he also supported his famous structuralist theories with detailed descriptions of indigenous customs from every other continent, as well as from remote islands of the South Seas and the nearby practices and histories of European societies.

The main inspiration of Levi-Strauss's structuralism was the linguistic theory of that name developed by his friend—and fellow World War II refugee in New York—Roman Jakobson. When adapted to social and cultural facts, however, the strictly linguistic notions were reformulated in the terms of a few general principles. As defined early on by Levi-Strauss, one was that the distinctions and rules by which cultural forms were produced—like the set of sounds that mark differences in meaning in a given language—are largely unconscious repertoires of the people who practice them. English speakers hardly need to think that the difference in sound between our "r" and our "l" makes the difference in meaning between "grass" and "glass;" although in many other languages, such as Japanese, these sounds are not heard as distinct and can have no such function of distinguishing meanings. Likewise on the cultural level, the world is ordered by meaningful contrasts that seem natural to the people who practice them but prove arbitrary in comparison to other peoples' notions of persons and things—as for example, the many peoples who take as "persons" what we consider to be "things": such as stars. winds, cultivated plants or the elephants of Malaya who have their own cities.

Two further primary principles of Levi-Strauss's structuralism are that the elements of culture are not intelligible in isolation but only in their differential relations to other, coexisting elements, and that these relationships form coherent meaningful

systems. Again echoing linguistic notions—especially those of the famous Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure—these principles were applied in early works on kinship and social relations. As against the idea prevalent since Aristotle that the family of parents and children is a natural self-generated entity and the germ of the larger society, Levi-Strauss argued that no human family could exist if there were not first a society. For the development of the incest taboo, in separating human culture from nature, meant that the formation of any given family depends on the prior existence of other families who supply the new husband and wife according to mutually agreed rules of marriage and the exchange of reproductive persons—more particularly the exchange of women by their fathers or brothers. As Levi-Strauss put it, the family presupposes "a number of families who recognize that there exist other bonds than the blood tie, and that the natural process of filiation is carried on only as integrated into the social process of marriage." In his early classic work on *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), Levi-Strauss demonstrated that different rules of marriage set up different relations of reciprocity and sociality among intermarrying groups. In other studies he showed recurrent patterns of appropriate behavior in the relationships of the key kinsmen involved in the family and marriage arrangements. But from there, he was impelled to go on to higher things.

The ultimate original principle of structuralism, that the forms of cultural order reflect general underlying laws of the human mind, has probably been the most elusive and the most consistent motivation of Levi-Strauss's anthropology. This helps account for the overall trajectory of his work: toward the intellect and the purely intellectual expressions of culture, passing more or less in sequence from the study of kinship to the thought systems of preliterate peoples (*Totemism*, 1962; *The Savage Mind*, 1962), and culminating in the epic four volume work on the mythologies of the Native Americas (*Mythologiques*, 1964-1971). For as noted by Philippe Descola, who presently holds the chair at the College de France inaugurated by Levi-Strauss, the dispositions of the mind, when represented in social relations, would be subject to all sorts of historical contingencies as well as the compromises required by the practical functioning of society. Whereas mythical thought, by its disengagement from the constraints of the real, is not only afforded a certain creative liberty but the opportunity of taking mind itself as an object of contemplation. By spinning one narrative from another, producing one myth out of another, the mind reveals the structures and modes of its operations.

While Levi-Strauss's grand ambition of producing a culturally informed science of mind remains a work-in-progress, it has had other important effects on anthropological thought. Perhaps most significantly, what Levi-Strauss demonstrated along the way to a science of mind is that the symbolic schemes inscribed in myth and preliterate thought, although not in themselves simple reflections of the real world, provide the constructs of the particular versions of the real that peoples live by. Just so, mythical narratives encode symbolic relations in multiple registers of cultural order and action: ecological, sociological, spatial, auditory, economic and so forth. Whether redundant or complementary, these codes are convertible, one into another, to form a more or less coherent system of the world. It is coherent because distinctions of one kind, say between men and women, are related to distinctions of another, say between outer and inner space, such that men are to women as outside is to inside or the including to the included. And then, when applied economically and ecologically—as the division of labor by gender in a particular environment—the effect is a specific mode of production:

as for example in the eastern Fiji Islands, where men traditionally fish on the high seas and farm in the deep forest, whereas women net fish in the lagoon close to shore and gather wild products near the village. Moreover, a certain gender difference in ritual values and functions is also entailed, inasmuch as the high sea and deep forest are the haunts of powerful spirits. Levi-Strauss's structuralism is a general theory of symbolic order, with unique powers of explaining how cultures are distinctive in their modes of organization and action. Still, structuralism did not end there.

Levi-Strauss's studies of mythology extended the theoretical scope of structuralism in other significant ways. Following given myths across the entire Western hemisphere, he demonstrated that any such myth, if substantial in relation to itself, is derivative of others to which it stands in a dialectical relation of difference, as a transformation by opposition. It follows that "there never is any original:" the structure is in the whole set of mythical transformations. These permutations, moreover, are sociologically conditioned. It is when myths are taken up by different subgroups of the society, and especially when they cross a tribal or linguistic border, that they are subject to all sorts of inversions in form and content. This concept of a structure as an expanding series of transformations—whose "essence lies in the irreducible fact of translation *by* and *for* opposition"—opened up new dimensions of structuralism, both in space and in time. As a complement to the internal, bounded structures of a society, where like a language everything held together (as Saussure said) and each element had a value in virtue of its differential position in the whole, here were transcultural structures, on the move, whose coherence consisted in an indefinite set of possibilities. Moreover, as opposed to the linguistic model of structure whose systematic character depends on the coexistence of its elements, hence the analysis of a static condition (synchrony), these structures of myth are dynamic if not exactly historical (diachronic). While theory does not tell us the actual course of history it does provide models of the ways cultures change in form—structural dynamics.

[Note: the following paragraphs are not summaries of L-S's concepts, but rather of some work or directions of mine largely inspired by him. Many anthropologists, like me, have been stimulated by one or another aspect or implication of his work without themselves becoming structuralists. Indeed we would be poor (or epigonal) representatives of structuralism, even if our own anthropology has been the better for it. Incidentally I would say that this has been the general legacy of Levi-Strauss. He has been a positive influence even for those who prefer not to praise but to blame him. However, academic interest in Levi-Strauss is presently at a low ebb in the US, in part because the study of Native Americans, his main specialty, has been largely neglected by American anthropologists since WW II; but in a more important part because of a lapse of anthropological interest, both comparative and ethnographic, in the indigenous cultures of the kind Levi-Strauss analyzed. The general view is that these cultures have been largely destroyed by colonization and globalization—although it could be argued that it was the anthropologists who were so colonized that all they could see abroad were exotic versions of capitalism, without recognizing cultural traditions in the ways these societies changed. Perhaps still more important is the bum rap put on Levi-Strauss by a variety of politico-academic dispositions, both left and right, that condemn the notion of structure itself: neo-liberalism, with its celebration of individualism and its inherited hostility

toward collective order in general, government in particular; postmodernism, with its antipathies toward "master narratives" and "essentialized categories" and its proclivities for "contested discourses," "permeable boundaries" and related forms of indeterminacy; and the various emancipatory movements of minority groups for whom the dominant "structures" are the enemy. We live in an anti-structural age.]

Many anthropologists who would not identify themselves as structuralists—including many who condemn and shun the "s-word"—have nevertheless been inspired by one or another aspect or implication of his work. At the risk of distorting the master's legacy, some have taken his ideas in directions he may not have wished to go. For example, the assimilation of "the bourgeois mind"–that is, our own materialistic economic behavior—to "the savage mind" (see Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, 1973). One could argue that our famous economic rationality is only the conscious means of realizing a large underlying system of cultural values of which we are generally unaware. Moreover, these values represent a logic of sensible properties not so different from that Levi-Strauss described for preliterate societies. In *Totemism*, *The Savage Mind* and other works, Levi-Strauss showed that both preliterate systems of knowledge and modern science employed such rational procedures as causality, classification, abstraction, homology and the like. Where they differed rather was in preliterate peoples' use of the sensible distinctions among things, with all their associated properties, to codify knowledge of the world: the way that in the so-called totemism, the differences between one kind of animal and another are used to signify the differences between the groups respectively associated with them. Yet a similar "logic of the concrete" is fundamental to our own economic conduct, although in defining economics as the maximization of returns with the monetary or capital means on hand the economists banish the cultural schemes of persons and things that order material value to an unexamined limbo of what they call "exogenous" or even "irrational" factors. In part the culture of economics remains unconscious because neither are the ordinary participants aware that behind their apparently rational choices—they do not buy hamburger or hot dogs for honored dinner guests—is a whole code of symbolic values that has little to do with nutritional utility but everything to do with the meaningful distinctions between persons, goods and occasions. The economy is ordered by the differences between as lunch and dinner, carved and ground meats, muscle and organs, prepared dishes and sandwiches, familiarity and respect, members and guests, ordinary meals and "special occasions," etc. Nor would all the monetary good sense that we put into buying clothing explain the characteristics of dress that mark distinctions between men and women, holidays and ordinary days, businessmen and policemen, adults and children, people of different regions or ethnic affiliations—think of all the ways that clothes signify. Perhaps we have been too quick to celebrate the "disenchantment of the world" ushered in by the retreat of spiritualism and the growth of scientific naturalism since the 17th century. Rather what happened was the enchantment of Western society by the world: by the imagined values of the material rather than the spiritual. We live in a material world enchanted by the symbolically constituted "utility" of gold, oil, pinot noir grapes, outdoor barbecues, Mercedes cars, heirloom tomatoes, blue jeans, cashmere sweaters, hamburgers from McDonalds and purses from Gucci. Levi-Strauss did not go that far, but

structuralism has something to say about an economy of monetary values that is actually embedded in a greater cultural order of meaningful values.

Finally, one finds more than one suggestion in Levi-Strauss's works that since anthropologists are of the same intellectual nature as the peoples they study, they have possibilities of knowing the cultures of others that are in some respects more powerful than the ways natural scientists know physical objects. The more one learns about the composition of rocks, the less they are like anything in human experience. Unlike the way rocks will always appear to us, science shows there are spaces between and within the molecules, and beyond that, at the level of quantum mechanics our knowledge defies all common sense of space and time. But if natural science starts off with the experientially familiar and ends in the humanly remote, anthropology works the other way around. One might begin with something distant or even obnoxious to us, say cannibalism in the Fiji Islands, and yet end by determining it to be "logical." In 1929, the anthropologist, A.M. Hocart recounted the formal speech of a Fijian chief presenting a reward to the carpenter who had built his fine canoe. The chief apologized that he could not offer the carpenter a "cooked man" or a "raw woman," for Christianity, he said, "spoils our feasts." The "cooked man" refers to an enemy cannibal victim, the "raw woman" would be a virgin daughter offered as a wife. The anthropological question immediately posed is why the woman would be equivalent in value to the cannibal victim? The answer in simple is that they both have the same finality, which is the beneficial reproduction of the society: the woman directly by bearing children, the cannibal victim as a sacrifice whose consumption in conjunction with the god procures divine benefits for the society, including human and agricultural fertility. One could also now understand why in some parts of Fiji a fine war club is a required betrothal gift, in effect compensating the family for the future loss of their daughter by the future gain of an enemy victim. Fijian cannibalism is thus beginning to seem "logical" But then consider that "logic" is something that goes on within *us*. Pardoning the pun, a custom that began as strange and remote has been assimilated and internalized—that is, as our own good sense. Since cultures are symbolically constituted, and since we too are symbolizing beings, we have the privilege of knowing others by reproducing the very ways they are organized in the operations of our own mind. Unconscious as the structures may be, we might even understand ourselves this way.