

CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS

I. BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

- a) born **1908** in Brussels, Jewish intellectual, studied with Mauss.
- b) intellectual influences:
geology
psychoanalysis
Marxism
- c) to **Brazil** in 1934-1939
travels in Brazil over a year, altered view of primitive people: eventually produced ***Tristes Tropiques*** in **1955**.
- d) New School in **NYC** during **war**; influenced by **structural linguistics**
also influenced by **Boas**
- e) 1949 returned to France - published 1st major work - ***Elementary Structures...***
Academic affiliation with university of Paris

II. INTRODUCTION TO HIS THINKING: GENERAL APPROACHES.

a) ***TRISTES TROPIQUES***

In *Tristes Tropiques* two scenarios are set against each other:

1. The Europe of WW II, which L-S sees as decadent and destructive-- he is its product and, as a Jew, its victim.
2. "Primitive" "pre-literate" societies like those in Amazonian Brazil, which are being eradicated by the sprawling decadence of "civilization" or "progress."
According to Susan Sontag: the subject of *Tristes Tropiques* is the "final and irrevocable destruction of preliterate peoples taking place throughout the world today." (p195)
Sontag describes his attitude as a "heroic and complex modern pessimism."

In *Tristes Tropiques* he is trying to orient himself -- he travels to the New World in search of an elemental society and "returns only with ashes."
The book ends with his withdrawal from action to contemplation.

- b) **PLATONIC ORIENTATION** - pure form imperfectly manifests itself in matter.
 - structure is real / events contingent
 - L-S looks for **universals**, which **exist at the level of structure**, not at the level of fact.

- And yet, Levi-Strauss is an **empiricist**. He searches for pure form, not through contemplation, but through a painstaking exploration of manifest content in all its detail.

C) **COMMON DESIGNS** in culture are imposed by

- The **structure of mind and senses**
- Our **common biological experience** (sex, eating, death, birth)
- The **universal necessities of social life**

d) The **PLURALITY OF CULTURES IS ILLUSORY**; it's a plurality of **metaphors** which say the same thing.

The apparently endless variety of cultures has been built up on common patterns, like variations on a musical theme. These patterns are imposed by the structures of the mind and senses and by the universal necessities of social life; they are usually unconscious, buried under surface variation. The content out of which these cultural variations are built is contingent, fortuitously offered by historical accident and environmental circumstance.

d) His **focus is on design, pattern, integration in culture**

- Aims to get at **structure of mind**- that which imposes order on flux
- Structures are **laws** - they shape the **formation** of cultural content **unconsciously** [the visible explained by the hidden]
- Those laws **function through symbolic activity**, which is the foundation of all social and cultural life.
- I-s Says **basic logic is binary**: it works through **contrasts**; a thing only has meaning in contrast to others in a set [this shows the influence of linguistics]. Meaning exists in relations - content is meaningless.
- Binary logic creates a necessity for **mediation**
- Cultural artifacts (from hand-axes to village plans to myths) are **objectified thought**.

III. KINSHIP - ELEMENTARY STRUCTURES OF KINSHIP 1949

a) Influence of Mauss

- The **gift - exchange is a strict and universal pattern** which must have its basis in human nature.
- Gifts are **vehicles for relationships**; in other words, the gift expresses and creates the relationship. Giving is self-assertion; receiving is recognition of partnership; This is the **foundation of social life**.
- Note that **exchange has a binary logic**: gifts between A and B → duality, thinking in oppositions.

- Reciprocity, exchange, marriage, **communication of all kinds: may be understood in terms of exchange.**
- In **kinship** the gift is **women, exchanged** among groups of men. "Women are the ultimate gift."

b) Incest and Exogamy

- L-S thinks that **exogamy is the result of the incest taboo** (many argue that this is probably wrong; there are cases when one may have sex with a relative whom one isn't allowed to marry; and one sometimes can't marry someone who is no biological relation).
- In the **incest taboo** L-S sees the **nature → culture transition**
- He says the incest taboo has intellectual and emotional fascination that **resonates through all human activity.**
- **elementary** structures (**Mechanical Models**) and **complex** structures (**Statistical Models**)
- **Alliance Theory**
- The **primal problem** is how to get women in place of one's own; kinship and descent are ways of regulating this problem.
- **Elementary systems** (term is a deliberate echo of Durkheim): these are alliance systems that specify whom you should marry.
- There are two types of elementary system:
 1. **Direct exchange:** wife givers are wife takers [few left- marginal hunters and gatherers in India, Amazon]
 2. **Indirect exchange:** your wife-givers aren't your wife-takers [mostly in SE ; e.g. highland Burma.] This is a bigger gamble but delivers greater rewards in terms of social integration. (A sends women to B, B to C, C to D, D to A) ("marrying in a circle")

d) Dual Organization

- looks at societies with **moiety systems** (article in 1958 in homage to Josselin de Jong (1886-1964));
- extends to general cases -- **us vs. them**
- **culture vs. nature**
- dual organization seldom exists in pure form without **mediating (third) term**
- wife-giver – ego – wife-taker

IV. SYMBOLIC CLASSIFICATION

a) *Totemism* (1962)

- He uses Durkheim and Mauss' argument from *Primitive Classification*: totemism **puts nature into relation to mankind using natural categories (signs) to stand for social categories (signified).**
- But L-S argues that the identification of a specific totem with a social group is not the important point; what important is that totemism creates a **parallel system of contrasts.**

b) ***The Savage Mind*** (1962)

- focuses on "**primitive mentality**;" primitive in sense of **elementary**.
- **classification has an intrinsic value** in that it reduces perceptual chaos.
- "Primitive" thought is **not essentially different from ours**, but uses **different materials** (here he is criticizing Levy-Bruhl's idea that primitives exhibit "pre-logical mentality").
- He calls primitive thought the ***science of the concrete***, as opposed to modern science which thinks in abstract terms.
- The science of the concrete "**uses nature to think by.**" In other words, it draws its codes from its experience of nature, not from an abstract symbolic code, as mathematics does. Concepts are encoded in artifacts ("objectified thought") rather than a system of writing.
- Concrete thought is not purposely or overtly organized- but is a **systematized body of knowledge** nonetheless.
- He describes concrete thinking as ***bricolage***: which takes "found" events/items and fits them into a pre-existing structure. In other words, it reinterprets an item as a sign for something else (examples: an old kitchen sink is used for a flower box; an exhaust pipe is repaired with tin cans and wire; light bulbs are used for eyes in a mask.)
- Culture has infinite variety because its ***content is infinitely variable***; nevertheless, the **underlying laws remain invariable**. The unconscious underlying structures are **empty**.
- Thus he **minimizes the affective dimension of symbols**; emphasizes their cognitive function.

V MYTH

L-S goes on to study of myth

- He considers myth to be the unfettered "**playground of the mind**," most revealing of shared unconscious structures. (comparable to Freud's approach to the interpretation of dreams)
- uses musical structure as vehicle for discussing myth -music, like myth, is diachronic and irreversible, yet gives experience of timelessness; the similarity is in the listening
- ***Mythologiques***: Introduction to a Science of Mythology, in 4 volumes. he carefully works through a sequence of 813 myths from native America, analyzing them as transformations of each other
- 1964 *The Raw and the Cooked*
- 1966 *From Honey to Ashes*
- 1968 *Origin of Table Manners*
- 1971 *L'Homme Nu (Naked Man)*

•His **method** is also exemplified in two articles, "The Structural Study of Myth" (1958), and "**The Story of Asdiwal.**" (The chapter on "Harelips and Twins" in **Myth and Meaning** also gives you a taste of this method.)

- compare versions of myth (Transformations)
- compare total sets of myths to get underlying mythic structure

To sum up: content itself is meaningless, and meaning is usually unconscious. Meaning inheres in a system of relations; any given thing is meaningful only in context, in terms of its contrasts with other things with which it forms a set. In fact, content is simply the material through which these contrasts are expressed, and out of which systems of multiple contrasts are built into edifices of cultural structure. Like the denizen of Plato's cave, Levi-Strauss has spent his long productive life working his way through these illusions -- illusions of cultural diversity -- in order to reach a vision of pure (that is, empty) form. With a kind of religiosity Levi-Strauss raises this position to a personal ethic, aspiring to subdue his individual subjectivity and become "the insubstantial place or space where anonymous thought can develop, stand back from itself, find and fulfill its true tendencies and achieve organization..." (*The Jealous Potter* 1981:625)