

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

Claude Lévi-Strauss

28 November 1908 – 30 October 2009

Elected Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy 1966*

by

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Claude Lévi-Strauss was a major figure in anthropology. In 1959 he was appointed to the Chair of Social Anthropology at the Collège de France, a position he held, with considerable intellectual flourish, for twenty-three years. In a lifetime of over a century, he remained productive into his nineties, propounding a form of analysis that became popularly known as ‘structuralism’. His publications included major works on the foundations of kinship, on systems of complex social classification and on the logic of myth. Elected to the Académie française, Lévi-Strauss eventually became Dean of the French Academy.

* Biographical Memoirs are not commissioned for Corresponding Fellows of the British Academy, but it was thought appropriate to mark the tenth anniversary of the death of Claude Lévi-Strauss in this way.

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CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

When Claude Lévi-Strauss was elected to the British Academy in July 1966 he was recognised and acclaimed as the leading anthropologist in France. His reputation was based on a global recognition that extended well beyond anthropology. Born on 28 November 1908, he lived to be over 100 and continued writing well into his nineties. He was enormously prolific, writing some sixteen books and numerous papers that were, even by French standards, remarkably varied. He was a public figure who was frequently interviewed for his engaging opinions on diverse subjects and his academic career was indeed stellar. When he died on 30 October 2009, he had become Dean of the Académie française and its oldest member.

Lévi-Strauss came from a distinguished artistic family that originated from Alsace. During World War I he lived with his maternal grandfather who was the rabbi of the Versailles synagogue. After the war and the return with his family to Paris, his father, Raymond, saw that he was thoroughly steeped in the arts, especially in opera and classical music. For a time, he took lessons in violin. He studied first at the Lycée Janson-de-Sailly and then at the Lycée Condorcet and began a study of Law before being admitted to the Sorbonne to study philosophy, placed third in his agrégation in 1931. None of this early education signalled a career in anthropology.

A turning point in his life was an invitation from Célestin Bouglé, the then Director of the École Normale Supérieure, to join the French mission to Brazil. From 1935 to 1938 he became Professor of Sociology at the University of São Paulo, during which time he organised various expeditions to the Mato Grosso and the Amazon. In 1939, he resigned his position to be able to conduct more extended research among the Nambikwara and other populations of Brazil's interior. Unlike British anthropologists of his generation, Lévi-Strauss carried out his investigations, not as a single fieldworker attempting, over an extended period of residence within a community, to master a language for essential communication, but as a member of a team with multiple goals and with relatively little local language skills.

On his return to France, Lévi-Strauss was mobilised to the frontline but was then released because of his Jewish heritage. For a time thereafter he taught in Montpellier in the south of France but in 1941 managed to flee to the United States where he took up a position at the New School of Research. At the New School, he met the linguist Roman Jakobson, whose theories of structural analysis in linguistics had a significant influence on him. In 1942 he became one of the founding members of the École Libre des Hautes Études (The Free School of Advanced Study) which was a university in exile of outstanding French intellectuals. He stayed on in the United States until 1947, serving as the cultural attaché to the French Embassy in Washington.

When he returned to France, Lévi-Strauss' academic career involved a succession of distinguished appointments. He submitted, defended and was awarded his doctoral degree in 1948. He became assistant director at the Musée de l'Homme from 1949 to

1950; then director of anthropological studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1950 to 1974. In 1959, he was elected to the Chair of Social Anthropology at the Collège de France, which he held from 1959 to 1982. In 1973 he became a member of the Académie française and in the same year received the Erasmus prize. In 2009, at the age of 100, he became Dean of the Académie. Throughout his career, he produced an array of notable publications but as he grew older he could not but decry the sad destruction of the earth and its diversity, a theme he had already signalled in his early writings. Lévi-Strauss died on 30 October 2009.

Foundational work: 1945–62

Lévi-Strauss' opus is daunting, remarkably varied and extends well beyond any simple labels. His career can best be charted by a consideration of the major works in this formidable opus, each of which offered a distinct contribution to anthropology.

Lévi-Strauss' first publication in 1948 was a short monograph, *La Vie familiale et sociale des Indiens Nambikwara*, that compiled his ethnographic investigations on one of the tribal groups, the Nambikwara, on whom he had concentrated his attention while in Brazil.

His first major publication was his thesis, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, which appeared in 1949. This is a massive work conceived on a grand scale and executed with considerable flair across a range of issues. The study's broad ambitions are unmistakable: its title invokes Durkheim's *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, locating it directly within the French sociological tradition; its dedication to Lewis Henry Morgan, the founder of comparative kinship studies, situates the work within an American tradition of anthropology while its substantial focus on addressing issues in Radcliffe-Brown's research places it squarely in the British social anthropology tradition. *Elementary Structures* is certainly the work that established Lévi-Strauss' reputation as a major anthropological figure.

Lévi-Strauss initiates his work as a study of universals with an extended discussion of the transition from nature to culture and of the 'problem of incest' recalling previous approaches including, in particular, Durkheim's long disquisition on incest in the first volume of the *L'Année Sociologique* (1898). At its core, however, is an application of Marcel Mauss' ideas of reciprocity and exchange, as developed in his *Essai sur le don* (1925; translation: *The Gift*) intelligently applied to the structuring of different forms of marriage. Lévi-Strauss begins with an interpretation of the incest prohibition as a positive rule to marry out and proceeds to define cross-cousin marriage as an 'elementary' structure of exchange, drawing a crucial distinction between systems of 'restricted exchange' requiring immediate reciprocity and systems of

‘generalised exchange’ that depend on an extended and thereby delayed reciprocity.

Lévi-Strauss begins his analysis with Australian marriage systems based on the work of Radcliffe-Brown. Most Australian systems, of which the Kariera and Aranda are good examples, are characterised by restricted exchange. A significant change, however, occurs at the northern end of Australia with the Murngin whose marriage is supposedly based on exclusive matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. This marriage system thus constitutes a structural transformation from restricted to generalised exchange. From Australia, Lévi-Strauss directs his analysis to Asia, focusing first on generalised exchange among societies in mainland Southeast Asia such as the Katchin, Lahker, Kuki and various Naga groups of Assam, then proceeding to forms of generalised exchange among the Gilyak of Siberia before considering the possibility of restricted exchange in ancient China and, more briefly, similar possibilities in India.

In his conclusion, Lévi-Strauss identifies an axis of generalised exchange extending from Burma to eastern Siberia with a variety of mixed systems in-between and forms of restricted exchange in China. For him, ‘matrilineal marriage represents the most lucid and fruitful of the simple forms of reciprocity’ (*Elementary Structures*, 1969, 451). Finally, after trumpeting the distinction between restricted and generalised exchange and tracing the distribution of these forms of marriage in Australia, Asia and elsewhere, Lévi-Strauss goes on to suggest a transition from elementary forms to complex forms, which, as it happens, constitute the majority of the world’s systems of kinship and marriage.

It is this supposed transition that is highly questionable. (Lévi-Strauss relies on the different senses of ‘elementary’ as both logically simple and as prior in development.) There is, however, nothing simple about most of the terminological systems he describes and the exchange practices they require: they are sophisticated and elaborate and this applies especially as he advances his argument ever more speculatively into Asia. The book in fact deals with relatively few of the world’s kinship systems, many of which could also be considered ‘elementary’. Perhaps most interestingly is the fact that in this book and during the rest of his career Lévi-Strauss made no similar, serious incursion into the study of the variety of Brazilian systems of kinship and marriage.

One of the first and most significant early responses to *Elementary Structures* appeared in Edmund Leach’s long essay, ‘The structural implications of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage’ (1951; reprint 1961). In his forthright fashion, Leach wrote:

In the course of a long, thorough, rapid journey through the ethnography of all Australia and most of mainland Asia, Lévi-Strauss scatters in profusion analytical suggestions of the greatest brilliance. But too often these ideas are misapplied, either because of weakness of ethnographic detail, or because the author is in too much of a hurry to get on to bigger and more exciting things. (1961, 77)

In the case of the Katchin, who were Leach's special focus of analysis, Lévi-Strauss is accused of 'inexcusable carelessness'. Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss' 'wholly original theoretical suggestions ... are of the utmost importance for a proper understanding of the Katchin situation' (1961, 78). Leach defends Lévi-Strauss' use of models as essential for comparative analysis but argues that a model is an interpretive vehicle that should not be confused with ethnographic reality. This in brief can be taken to epitomise what became a repeated British response to Lévi-Strauss' methods.

Another substantial response to Lévi-Strauss' treatise came from J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong, the professor of anthropology at Leiden University who held an ongoing seminar on Lévi-Strauss' ideas in 1950–1. The seminar, which was attended by Rodney Needham, who had recently finished his DPhil at Oxford, resulted in a long exegesis and critique of *Elementary Structures* entitled *Lévi-Strauss' Theory on Kinship and Marriage* (1952; reprint 1977).

Josselin de Jong, his students and colleagues had since the mid-1930s been engaged in developing their own distinctive ideas about marriage alliance or what they referred to as 'circulating connubium'. In his inaugural address, 'The Malay Archipelago as an ethnographic field of study' (1935), Josselin de Jong postulated a connubial triad of bride-giving clans linked in ceremonial exchange requiring each partner to provide 'male' or 'female' goods in opposite directions and with wife-givers taking precedence over wife-takers. Underlying these clan relations was supposed to be a combination of double unilineal descent coupled with a thorough-going dual cosmology.

In his dissertation, *Sociale Stuctuurtypen in de Grootte Oost* (1935; translation: *Types of Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia*, 1968), F. A. E. van Wouden, who was Josselin de Jong's principal student, recognised that: (1) cross-cousin marriage is the logical expression of a systematic communication of women among larger descent groups; (2) the 'lineality' of the descent groups is theoretically immaterial to forms of connubium; (3) 'ordinary' cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) marriage—what Lévi-Strauss later labelled 'restricted exchange'—and 'exclusive' cross-cousin (MBD) marriage—what Lévi-Strauss labelled 'generalized exchange'—represented two opposed systems of affinal relationships between groups; (4) exclusive marriage with the FZD would make a systematic ordering of affinal relationships between groups impossible; and (5) an integral system of affinal relationships based on exclusive cross-cousin marriage would number at least three clans but could also be composed of any larger number of clans linked in a 'closed chain of marriage connexions'.

Whereas Mauss' idea of reciprocity expounded in the *The Gift* was critical for Lévi-Strauss, a key source for the 'Leiden School' was Durkheim and Mauss' essay on primitive classification, 'De quelques formes primitives de classification' (1903; translation: *Primitive Classification*, 1963). Directed marriage, particularly exclusive cross-cousin marriage, was the social basis for the establishment of coherent systems of

dual and tripartite classification. A concordance of social and symbolic systems in the form of local dual cosmologies was regarded as the critical feature of these connubial exchanges.

In *Elementary Structures*, Lévi-Strauss had skirted the Indonesian archipelago in his transition from Australia to mainland Asia. He was completely unaware of the work of the Leiden School—whose importance he later indirectly acknowledged by offering his paper ‘Do dual organizations exist’ in recognition of ‘the daring and fruitfulness of Professor J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong’s theoretical ideas’ (1956, 99; 1967, 128).

The key linking figure in this equation was Rodney Needham who was critically important in interpreting Lévi-Strauss and the Leiden School to a wider English-speaking audience and in trying to reconcile these two distinctive approaches, especially in making available through English translations the sources of their ideas. His translations of Durkheim and Mauss’ *Primitive Classification*, Van Wouden’s *Types of Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia* and Lévi-Strauss’ *Totemism* and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, in particular, were directed to these ends.

Like Leach, Needham was wary of the imprecision of many of Lévi-Strauss’ propositions and analyses. He insisted that advances in the field came from the quality of one’s analytic concepts. For Needham, the distinction between ‘preference’ and ‘prescription’ was crucial: prescription is defined categorically by a society’s terminological system. Lévi-Strauss frequently used the term ‘preferred’ in reference to those marriage systems, for which there is an obligation to marry a particular category of cousin. For Needham, all these systems were ‘prescriptive’ whereas the term ‘preferred’ was reserved for strategic, selective and therefore optional forms of directed marriage. Restricted exchange based on bilateral cross-cousin marriage in Needham’s terminology became symmetric prescriptive alliance; while generalised exchange based on matrilateral cross-cousin marriage became asymmetric prescriptive alliance.

Equally important for Needham is the recognition of levels. At different levels of conceptualisation and practice, systems can be both prescriptive and preferential. In an analysis of a ‘Murngin type’ society, the Wik-Mungkin, Needham argued that the terminology as a whole is symmetric, but at the level of exchanging groups there is a preference for the matrilateral cousin.¹

¹The Wik-Mungkin case was Needham’s chief analytic venture (1963) into the study of Australian kinship but its importance prompted recurrent assessment (see Needham, 1971, xlix–lii). The combination of symmetry and asymmetry is of common occurrence in other marriage systems, as for example the Atoni Pah Meto of Timor who have a symmetric terminology but regularly contract strategic marriages asymmetrically (Fox, 1999).

A key study was *Structure and Sentiment* (1962) in which Needham encapsulated his early interpretation of *Elementary Structures*. The essay is also an extended examination of the matrilineal marriage system of the Purum of Manipur presented in ‘Leiden mode’, analysing the Purum terminology, alliance cycles and dyadic symbolic classification. In the end, Needham analysed more than a dozen other instances of what he defined as prescriptive alliance

However, in the Preface to the revised edition of his *Elementary Structures* (French, 1967; English translation, 1969), Lévi-Strauss made it clear that he rejected Needham’s interpretation of his work, insisting that the distinction between prescription and preference was a matter of degree and *Elementary Structures* was intended to embrace both forms of marriage. As he himself points out, accepting Needham’s understanding would render Leach’s critique a valid assessment. Leach’s view of *Elementary Structures*, which Lévi-Strauss quotes, was wincingly to the point: ‘Since the “elementary structures” which he discusses are decidedly unusual they seem to provide a rather flimsy base for a “general theory”.’ Leach’s conclusion was that Lévi-Strauss’ ambitious attempt at a universal theory delivered in a magisterial manner was ‘a splendid failure’.²

By whatever interpretation it is judged, *Les Structures élémentaires* was a major comparative effort and established Lévi-Strauss immediately in the front ranks of contemporary anthropologists.

Compared with the technical demands of his *Elementary Structures*, Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques*, published in 1955 (English translation: *Tristes Tropiques*, 1967), was an immediately accessible literary work—a personal account of Lévi-Strauss’ discovery of anthropology as an intellectual discipline and his anthropological efforts to begin to understand several Brazilian Indian societies—the Nambikwara, Tupi-Kawahib, Cadiveo and Bororo—whom he encountered during his various expeditions into the interior of Brazil.

Particularly revealing is his account of his disillusionment with philosophy and how the study of geology, psychoanalysis and Marxism—what Lévi-Strauss called his “three mistresses”—all ‘showed that understanding consists in the reduction of one kind of reality to another’ (1967, 61). This quest for the structure beyond the structure—the pattern behind immediate empirical evidence—is a defining feature of Lévi-Strauss’ methodology. A striking analogy that he used to explain this quest came in a reply to David Maybury-Lewis’ (1960) criticism of his analysis of dual organisations. In his response, ‘On manipulated sociological models’ (1960), Lévi-Strauss castigates ‘the naturalistic misconceptions which have so long pervaded the British school’ in

²Leach (1965, 20), quoted in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Preface to the Second Edition, 1969, p. xxxi.

which ‘social structure is like a kind of jig-saw puzzle, and everything is achieved when one has discovered how the pieces fit together’. He then goes on to advance an analogy to hint at his own deeper methodological ambitions.

But, if the pieces have been arbitrarily cut, there is no structure at all. On the other hand, if, as is sometimes done, the pieces were automatically cut in different shapes by a mechanical saw, the movements of which are regularly modified by a cam-shaft, the structure of the puzzle exists, not at the empirical level (since there are many ways of recognising the pieces which fit together): its key lies in the mathematical formula expressing the shape of the cams and their speed of rotation; something very remote from the puzzle as it appears to the player, although it “explains” the puzzle in the one and only intelligible way. (1960, 52)

Equally revealing, in his *Tristes Tropiques*, is his explanation of what a comparative social understanding requires. In his words, all human societies ‘choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas which it should be possible to reconstitute. For this one must make an inventory of the customs that have been observed ... [and] with all this one could eventually establish a sort of periodic chart of chemical elements, analogous to that devised by Mendeleir’ (1967, 160). From the beginning, Lévi-Strauss’ methodology was elemental, combinatorial, naturalistic and, above all, cerebral.

Anthropologie structurale (1958; English translation: *Structural Anthropology*, 1963), which, when it appeared, was taken as a manifesto of a new intellectual approach to the study of society, consists of seventeen key essays that can be considered to epitomise Lévi-Strauss’ ‘structuralist’ programme. This collection includes papers originally published between 1945 and 1956 and, if read in retrospect, can be seen to set out the foundations for much of his later, more sophisticated investigations.

In ‘Structural analysis in linguistics and in anthropology’ (originally dating from 1945), for example, Lévi-Strauss reveals the source of his idea of structural analysis and the basis of the binarism he would notably promote. Written at the time of his close association with the linguist Roman Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss makes the grandiose assertion that ‘structural linguistics will certainly play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics...has played for the physical sciences’. Quoting N. Trubetzkoy, ‘the illustrious founder of structural linguistics’, Lévi-Strauss identifies ‘four basic operations’ that Trubetzkoy set for structural linguistics: 1) a shift from conscious linguistic phenomena to unconscious infrastructure; 2) analysis based on relations between terms, rather than as individual entities; 3) the treatment of these relations as a system; and 4) the aim to discover general laws by either induction or deduction (1963, 41). On the basis of these criteria, Lévi-Strauss draws an analogy between the phoneme and basic kinship terms and then, in an

analysis that is recognisably and remarkably his own, he goes on to illustrate these ‘distinctive features’ in what he defines as the ‘atom of kinship’ using simple valency markers (+/-) to structure his oppositions.

In ‘The structural study of myth’ (published originally in 1955), he proposes an analytic stance, which he would carry forward in his later mythological analyses, arguing that myth must be ‘treated as an orchestra score’. His use of valency markers (+/-) continues but these markers are now applied to specific binary categories (gods/men; fibres/sinews, etc) that serve as the specific concrete operators in his analysis.

Another crucially important Russian influence was the master work by Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958), which Lévi-Strauss encountered in English translation soon after it appeared and responded to in ‘L’analyse morphologique des contes Russes’ (1960) in an effort to distinguish his structuralism from Russian formalism.³

These early articles, possibly as bold and provocative as any of his later more extended analyses, are fundamental to understanding his subsequent development.⁴ Structuralism is offered as a technique for tracing the transformation of relations among symbolic entities. As such, it is concerned with meaning as a relational concept. However, for a methodology that claims to be universal, it must ultimately be replicable. As critics have frequently noted, Lévi-Strauss’ scintillating forays in analysis reflect an intellectual virtuosity that is difficult to repeat.

Continuing work: 1962–91

Le Totémisme aujourd’hui (1962; English translation: *Totemism*, 1964) and *La Pensée sauvage* (1962; English translation: *The Savage Mind*, 1968) can be considered together. Both were published in the same year and were directed to an examination of the logic of complex classification. In *Totemism*, Lévi-Strauss endeavours to dispel a categorical illusion in anthropology—the misconception that certain relations linking individuals, groups and their particular animal or vegetable species emblems constitute some unique form of classificatory arrangement. In attacking such conceptual distortions, he engages in an extended commentary on the diverse ethnographic

³ It was Lévi-Strauss who recommended Propp’s work to Roland Barthes, a gesture which is credited with giving rise to Barthes’ notion of ‘narrativity’.

⁴ Lévi-Strauss’ opus is a complex web of initial papers followed by multiple reconsiderations. For example, Lévi-Strauss gave further consideration to his ‘atom of kinship’ in a paper, ‘Reflexions sur l’atome de parenté’, published in *L’Homme* in 1973 (included in his *Structural Anthropology II*) and later in another paper, ‘Discussion sur l’atome de parenté’, in *Paroles données* (1984). As his opus grew, Lévi-Strauss increasingly became his own chief interlocutor.

approaches of generations of 'Anglo-Saxon' anthropology from Fraser, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, Boas, Lowie and Kroeber, to Stanner, Strehlow, Elkin, Firth, Fortes and even Evans-Pritchard. For a work that some might say involved 'beating a dead horse', this book is an intellectual tour de force. Lévi-Strauss even manages to enlist both Rousseau and Comte in support of his basic argument.

La Pensée sauvage resumes the argument begun in *Totemism*. (Key chapters are 'The logic of totemic classification' and 'Totem and caste'.) A profusion of detailed ethnographic examples of systems of complex classification, drawn from around the world, is stunningly arrayed to support his argument that 'the savage mind' is intellectually and sophisticatedly engaged with understanding the world: it distinguishes, analyses, and classifies, making use of specific 'concrete' operators whose logic is productive and transformative. In Lévi-Strauss' words: 'The savage mind totalizes' (p. 245). His efforts at interpretation constitute a 'science of the concrete' and are ultimately intended to 'legitimate the principles of savage thought' (p. 269). The final chapter of the volume takes issue with Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960) by asking whether the savage mind also engages in dialectic reasoning as well as analytic reasoning.

In all Lévi-Strauss' work, there is a considerable degree of intellectual play. His French can be elusive and often his allusions and plays on words do not carry over well into English. A striking example of this occurs on the cover of the French edition of *La Pensée sauvage* which is illustrated with a large coloured drawing of a 'wild pansy' (*pansée sauvage*).

Lévi-Strauss' mythological researches occupied most of his life. His first myth analyses date from the mid-1950s; the beginnings of his extended research on South American mythology date from the early 1960s and these researches were extended through the mythologies of Americas to the Northwest Coast, whose split-representational art had been of special interest to him from the mid-1940s. The result was his grand *Mythologiques* quartet—*Le Cru et la cuit* (1964; translated as *The Raw and the Cooked*, 1970); *Du Miel aux cendres* (1966; *From Honey to Ashes*, 1973); *L'Origine des Manières de Table* (1968; *The Origin of Table Manners*, 1978); and *L'Homme nu* (1971; *The Naked Man*, 1981)—plus three *petits mythologiques*—*La Voie des masques* (1975; *The Way of the Masks*, 1982); *La Potière jalousie* (1985; *The Jealous Potter*, 1988); and *Histoire de lynx* (1991; *The Story of Lynx*, 1995). Together these books constitute an enormous intellectual construction representing an almost obsessive research effort spanning half a century.

Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* (given the English designation: *The Science of Mythology*) can best be regarded as orchestral creation that takes as its score all of the Amerindian mythologies of South and North America. Volume I, *The Raw and the Cooked*, is the overture to this grand symphony. It begins with the examination of a

Bororo myth (M 1) on ‘the origin of water’ and then goes on to examine an aria of Gé myths on ‘the origin of fire’; it carries on, with a further chorus, to M 137. Still focused on South America, Volume II, *From Honey to Ashes*, proceeds to M 353; Volume III, *The Origin of Table Manners*, ventures into North America and carries its myth analysis to M 528; while, finally, Volume IV, *The Naked Man*, moves through a host of North American myths, particularly from the Northwest coast, before returning to a final Apinayé myth, M 813, on ‘the putrefied man’. This numbering does not give an adequate idea of the full extent of the myths that Lévi-Strauss actually analyses.

Many of the myths under consideration have numerous alternative versions: M 682 has alternate versions ‘a’ to ‘e’, as do M 687 and M 752. The intricacy of this analysis is enormous and demanding since it does not follow a linear progression. Lévi-Strauss regularly shifts his attention to myths that he has previously considered in earlier volumes. His technical analysis retains his basic valences (+/-) but expands to include notions of ‘conjunction’, ‘disjunction’, ‘identity’, ‘difference’ and, his most frequently used opposition, that of ‘inversion’. In addition to the recurrent binary operators such as male/female, night/day, sun/moon, many of Lévi-Strauss’ specific concrete operators are as startling as the myths from which they derive: raw/cooked, boiled/rotten, foetus/penis, hummingbird/woodpecker. Throughout the *Mythologiques*, fire, and with it cooking, is the transformative means that marks the transition from nature to culture. Besides the myths themselves, the most engaging feature of Lévi-Strauss’ continuing presentation is the detailed ethnographical and ecological commentary that accompanies his myth analysis.

After the appearance of the first volume of the *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss postponed any attempt to explain his work until the end of his efforts. The final volume, however, leaves much unexplained. He argues tentatively that his work was only possible because all the myths of the Americas constitute a single myth told and retold over millennia. What one is to make of the work as a theoretical whole is by no means clear.

Lévi-Strauss’ *Mythologiques* is his masterwork and the culminating effort of a long intellectual trajectory. Although he continued to produce important work along with, and after, his *Mythologiques*,⁵ this daunting and exuberant opus is a monument that may well entice future interpretation or simply be left undeciphered and possibly ignored.

⁵He published a second volume of *Anthropologie structurale* II (1973; English translation: *Structural Anthropology* II, 1977). Another work, *Le Regard éloigné* (1983; English translation: *A View from Afar*, 1985), offers retrospective reflections on his work beginning with a return to his earlier study, *Race et histoire* (1952).

Lévi-Strauss was a public figure who never ceased to explain himself and to offer commentary on his work in newspapers, op-ed articles and particularly in recorded interviews at different stages in his career. Two best-known interviews are George Charbonnier's *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* (1961; English 1969), which were recorded in 1959 and are concerned more with his methods, and Didier Eribon's *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* (1988; English 1991), which were recorded decades later and provide reminiscences of his involvement with major intellectual figures of his era.

Of his British contemporaries, Edmund Leach remained the most sympathetic to Lévi-Strauss' ideas, writing a short book, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* for the Modern Masters series (1970).⁶ Sensibly and selectively directed to Lévi-Strauss' methods of analysis of myth and elementary kin relations, this is a readable and largely positive rendering of Lévi-Strauss' contribution to social anthropology. By contrast Rodney Needham's assessment, 'Anthropology's Pope', originally published anonymously in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1968) in the aftermath of his falling out with Lévi-Strauss, is less than flattering. Written as a review of a volume of the *Association of Social Anthropologists* offered as critical homage to Lévi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* (Leach, 1968),⁷ Needham's assessment allows him to survey his colleagues' understandings. Particularly pertinent is the 'Introduction' by Leach and papers by Kenelm Burridge, Mary Douglas, Peter Worsley and Nur Yalman, all of whom express varying degrees of questioning admiration and outright scepticism. Mary Douglas captures this sentiment with the observation: 'whenever anthropologists apply structural analysis to myth they extract not only a different but a lesser

⁶Commentary on Lévi-Strauss's work by his French colleagues, former students, and successors is considerable and notable. One important critical assessment is that by Maurice Godelier: *Claude Lévi-Strauss: a Critical Study of His Thought* (2018). Also worth mentioning is Michel Izard's *Lévi-Strauss* (2004). Perhaps most important because of its scope and the remarkable number of contributors is the two-volume tribute offered to Lévi-Strauss on his 60th birthday: Jean Pouillon and Pierre Maranda (eds.), *Échanges et communications: Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss* (1970). Substantial biographies are also available: E. Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss* (2015; English translation, 2018); P. Wilcken, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (2010).

⁷The French equivalent of this work is *La fonction symbolique* edited by Michel Izard and Pierre Smith (1979) and dedicated to Lévi-Strauss, which includes fourteen papers by distinguished anthropologists, mainly French colleagues closely associated with Lévi-Strauss. It is, however, of interest that the two most prominent figures in anthropology in Paris, Lévi-Strauss and Louis Dumont, whose work overlapped significantly, barely acknowledged each other. Lévi-Strauss cited Louis Dumont as a 'competent colleague' in the Preface to the 2nd edition of his *Elementary Structures* and Dumont offered his analysis on Kariera kinship to the Pouillon and Maranda volume for Lévi-Strauss (1970, 1983) without ever referring to Lévi-Strauss' earlier work on Kariera marriage systems.

meaning.’ In his conclusion, Needham quotes Leach: ‘Lévi-Strauss often manages to give me ideas even when I don’t know what he is saying’ but Needham counters this attitude, characteristically, by arguing that ‘scholars ought rather to demand the more sober, inconspicuous, and enduring accomplishments of clarity, exactitude and validity.’

Lévi-Strauss’ work is the most extensive, intellectually versatile and subtly sophisticated of any anthropologist who has contributed to the discipline of anthropology. For this reason, it may be far too early to venture an assessment of his achievement. It can be said, however, that all his varied studies highlighted the central value of ethnography and his influence, particularly in France, contributed to the continuing pursuit of high-quality ethnographic research within the field of anthropology.

In late November 1962, I travelled from Oxford to Paris to hear Lévi-Strauss lecture. He was then at the height of his recognition with the publication that year of *La Pensée sauvage*. His ‘structuralism’ attracted enormous attention. After two previous failed attempts at appointment, he had been elected to the Collège de France and his lectures were given in one of the Collège’s large lecture halls. I arrived early and was able to find a seat but by the time Lévi-Strauss began, the huge lecture hall was packed with students sitting in the aisles, on the windowsills and standing in the back.

His lecture was his introduction to the *Mythologiques*—the beginnings of the initial volume in the series, *Le Cru et le fruit*, replete with savage pigs, cunning jaguars and the origin of fire. The presentation was intense and spellbinding, though I hardly understood what he was doing or attempting to do. When the lecture was over, in foreigner fashion, I tried asking some of the French students who had been sitting with me if they had grasped what Lévi-Strauss had been presenting but I could find no one who claimed to have understood. It hardly seemed to matter. He had captivated his audience and his following lecture was just as crowded.

To this day, I remember those lectures for their ambience and impact. I can hardly imagine anyone else giving a series of lectures like that—barely intelligible to most of the audience—and yet able to maintain by force of presentation rapt attention and the apparent conviction that what was being expounded was indeed profound and relevant.

Lévi-Strauss clearly had the capacity to enthrall. He generated an aura of wisdom with a delphic intelligibility. He was a great mythologist—the great mythographer! He partook of what he studied and made himself part of his own mythology. This is why *Tristes Tropiques* and the various volumes of interviews with him are so engaging. Mythology and autobiography merged, allowing him at times to explain pre-literate cultures by reference to himself.

If Lévi-Strauss was the great mythologist, he was also the great tempter. He posed for anthropology a goal that is probably all but unattainable. If it had been attainable,

it would doubtlessly have transformed anthropology into an entirely different field. Nonetheless throughout his career, Lévi-Strauss continued to offer the temptation—the search for a code, formula, schema that existed behind human phenomena as they presented themselves.

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