Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009)

The apotheosis of heroic anthropology

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Claude Lévi-Strauss died on 30 October 2009. He lived to be a hundred years old and is widely recognized as ‘the father of modern anthropology’. Here, Albert Doja assesses his influence on the discipline and beyond. [Ed.]

The centrality of Claude Lévi-Strauss in the evolution of 20th-century thought shows how he marked the very meaning of the last century and what he might have promised for 21st-century anthropology. Centenary celebrations and obituaries appeared in a number of places, as many anthropologists have written and will continue to write about his life, works, legacy, and his immense contributions to anthropology. His corpus of work is far-reaching and comprehensive in scope, encompassing methodology, philosophy, history, humanism, mythology, linguistics, aesthetics, cognition and reasoning. However, his work is often misunderstood and his continuing relevance for contemporary theory must be acknowledged and accounted for. This is in my view the best way to commemorate his legacy to anthropology.

Anthropology today concerns itself with questions of migration, disease, famine, poverty, feminism, reflexivity, corruption, globalism, ethnic conflicts, civil wars, human rights, cultural activism, fundamentalism, terrorism, and many other related themes. An attempt to restore Lévi-Strauss to a central position can hardly prove immediately relevant to all of these social and political issues. Yet it is possible to show that structural anthropology may innovatively account for much more than the dynamics of social systems and the praxis of competitive and strategic practices.

Structural anthropology

The epistemological issues of anthropological knowledge and the ethical conception of the anthropologist’s work are consistently present throughout Lévi-Strauss’s work, in its ontological (nature of man and society), aetiological (manifestation of man and society) and salvational (return to the means, or the absence of means, to alleviate these evils) dimensions. Clearly, from the first volume of his Structural anthropology (1958), through his second collection (1973) and his ‘view from afar’ (1983) to his monumental Pléiade edition (2008), it is Lévi-Strauss’s skill and talent to have been able to establish the theoretical foundations of a revolutionary contribution, both scientific and humanist, to general anthropology.

He first produced the high social theory of The elementary structures of kinship (1967 [1949]), describing the passage from nature to culture and revealing the foundations of human society. He then moved to the high science of Mythologiques (1964, 1966, 1968, 1971), explored the operation of the Savage mind (1962a), and revealed the foundations of human cognition. He produced innovative variations on his ‘small mythologiques’ (1985, 1991), on the Way of masks (1979), and exposed hidden aesthetics of the arts (1993), but he also produced the heroic quest of Tristes Tropiques (1955), precisely accounting for anthropology as both a science and a humanist discipline.

ture, history and agency and above all his brand of structural- 

ture. These are undoubtedly key issues in understanding Lévi-Strauss’s thought, and the rise of structuralism is his- 

torically inseparable from the increased prestige of anthro-

In the very different intellectual and political context of our time, what comes to the fore in rereading The savage mind, for example, is not so much the analysis of the logic of classificatory systems, but remarks on the place of affect in social relations, and the ethical dimension of Lévi-Strauss’s thought. Arguably, his structural anthropology is, at its core, an epistemology that has already produced an original approach to ethics.

Despite his conceits and idiosyncrasies, his rather cranky set of interests and obsessions, Lévi-Strauss has proved to be an enduring figure in the history of social theory and anthro-

Cultural Epistemologies

At Lévi-Strauss’s instigation, the anthropological approach came to comprise three stages — ethnography, ethnology, anthropology — articulated through the dual relationship of methodology and subject of analysis, proceeding from case studies to the description of general laws. With this passage from the particular to the general, a process of synthesis for- merly restricted to sociology, Lévi-Strauss established the legitimacy of a theoretical anthropology as distinct from and complementary to ethnography as theoretical physics is dis- tinct from and complementary to experimental physics. In addition, in his attempt to overcome the conflict between individualism and holism, he showed that sociology, in its study of aggregates of individuals using ‘statistical models’, and anthropology, in its study of the coherence of social structures using ‘mechanical models’ (Lévi-Strauss 1958; 311-313), entertain the same type of relationship with the internal structure of atoms and molecules.

Lévi-Strauss’s early works do not merely construct the first step of a structural study of kinship. What is interesting about Elementary structures of kinship (1949) is that this contribution to an extremely specialized branch of anthro-

pology is accompanied by a more general contribution to
social theory. The elementary types of alliance offered a first sample of the organizing principles of culture and their capacity to generate a finite number of coherent forms. On that basis, as Scubla (1998) has argued, the vocation of anthropology would seem to be to draw up a systematic inventory of all structurally stable social forms.

By the time he embarked on the four volumes of Mythologiques in the 1960s, Lévi-Strauss’s interest had come to focus on sets of relations, the model for which Scubla (1998) has argued, the vocation of anthropology would seem to be to draw up a systematic inventory of all structurally stable social forms. In addition, the basic circuits and scaffolding of semantic fractals in web architecture provide a ‘representation theory’ unifying distinct semantic models, which can be shown to correspond to the singularity theory in mathematics and to the semiotics of narrative and mythological structures as described by Lévi-Strauss (Marrais 2008). Ultimately, software modelling of a given myth issued from the oral literature of a given culture, and the simulation of the corresponding myth transformations as described by Lévi-Strauss responding to articles by Albert Doja, including one that appeared in Anthropology Today (Doja 2006c).

ated Lévi-Straussian ideas that nourished anthropology for so long, like kinship, taxonomy or transformational analysis, are still ‘good to think’ and continue to resonate as ‘thinking things’ (Connor 2010) for contemporary anthropo-

ologists. As others have pointed out, it is not too much of a stretch to apply the label of Lévi-Strauss’s ‘bricoleur’ to much of cultural anthropology today. Many anthropologists use multi-sited, collaborative and otherwise innovative tech-

niques – drawing on what is available, making tools where there were none before, and generally thinking creatively in methodological terms (Leinaweaver 2010). In partic-

ular, collaborative work is being forged, bricoleur-fashion, among scholars coming from different perspectives, train-

ings and backgrounds. For Lévi-Strauss, as he developed the opposed ideal-

types of the bricoleur and the engineer, bricoleage involved an ideal-
typical configuration of acting (practice), knowing (epistemology) and underlying world view (metaphysics). As various forms of collective bricoleage are explored, depending on the type of interaction and the nature of the conven-

tions employed, the bricoleur’s legitimacy is now being recognized even in organization and management theory (Duymedjian and Rüling 2010) or in nursing research, education and practice (Warne and McAndrew 2009). Not only can bricoleage-based arrangements be embedded in an organizational or nursing context as a way of understanding working arrangements that trigger the need to devise new techniques – and feel experience, but we can also move beyond research methods as merely procedures to qualitative methodolo-

gies that respect the complexities of the lived world. More than anything else, Lévi-Strauss will be remembered for prompting many researchers to generate more imaginative hypotheses, which can then be tested through empirical research. But this in itself suggests that the impact of struc-

tural anthropology is not limited to the remarkable achieve-

ments that established its initial legitimacy. Among many initiatives, we need to pay tribute to the pro-

ject of some scholars to recuperate these procedures, without however merely implementing Lévi-Strauss’s method, in applying the dynamic aspect of structuralism and its trans-

formational perspective to other socio-cultural phenomena, like ritual to which Lévi-Strauss seemed refractory, or social organization, where his analysis is generally seen as tinged with functionalism (Desveaux 2001). In another departure, a reading of The elementary structures of kinship as a political treatise reinvigorates the analysis of Lévi-Strauss’s oeuvre by focusing on the political implications of his intellectual project (Asch 2005). This perspective effectively counters the narrow-minded analyses of the feminist critique (e.g. Butler 2004), which focus on his supposed misogynist objectification of women, his alleged homophobic valorization of heterosexual marriage against other forms of alliance, or his claimed essen-
tialist reproduction of transmissible racial purity (see Strong 2002; Fassin 2009). Lévi-Strauss’s theory provides concep-
tual tools to perceive, analyse and name the logics of how gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes, a product of the social relations of sexuality that transform males and females into social beings. What Lévi-Strauss called ‘exchange of women’ is a seductive and powerful concept in that from the start it places the oppression of women within social systems rather than in biology, while his view of the origins of society in the incest taboo leads to a fundamentally anti-liberal understanding of the inescapability of social relationships. It is Lévi-Strauss’s merit to have laid the ground for understanding the most important transformations of gender, the conversion of female labour into male wealth, the con-

version of female lives into marriage alliances, the con-

tribution of marriage to political power, and so on. It is at Lévi-Strauss’s instigation, indeed, that traditional concerns of anthropology and social science have been reworked to include the implications of gender in the evolution of social strati-

fication and the origin of the state. Obviously, Lévi-

Strauss’s classic intervention explored fundamental theo-

retical and analytical issues of vital interest to the study of society. He clearly demonstrated how gender and sexuality are deeply implicated in the study and practice of kinship, while he provided a unique, counter-hegemonic alterna-

tive to conventional narratives in Western political thought. Social exclusion and antagonism cannot be explained simply in terms of the assumption that society emerged out of a structurally unbreakable rule of heterogeneity (Lévi-Strauss described the incest taboo as rendering structurally impos-

sible the closure of society through self-identity). However, it was through his interpretation of dual organizations that he accounted for both social exclusion and social antagonism on the basis of a social difference theory (Marchant 2008). In addition, although vague on ‘fictive’ kinship forms oth-

er than affinal relations, Lévi-Strauss’s alliance theory leads us out of the quandary into which Schneider’s critique (1984) drew the anthropology of kinship. Lévi-Strauss’s emphasis on the intended construction of kinship makes it possible to consider other forms of ‘artificial kinship’ as being conceptually central to alliance theory (Leyton 2007). In this case, not only are ritual and mimetic forms of kinship emancipated from the traditional anthropological treatment that treats their cultural expressions as non-cognitive or antiscientific – but rather be seen as an alliance practice resting on converged indi-

vidual power interests and ultimately offering a significant perspective for critical social research. Research on kinship became controversial in the 1970s and 1980s following belated recognition of the biocentrism of Western assumptions underlying its central premises. Notwithstanding the vagaries of anthropological interest in the study of kinship, Lévi-Strauss’s singular concept of ‘house’ and ‘house societies’, developed in his last lectures (1984), has been taken up very productively in later anthropo-

logical studies (Carsten and Hughes-Jones 1995, Joyce and Gillespie 2000). In recent years the debate about house societies has fostered a renewed interest in kinship studies and several examples of house societies have been proposed and thoroughly studied by historians, anthropologists and archaeologists (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2006). Arguably, a better understanding of the role of the house is gained when it is seen as an expression of the socio-cosmic whole and the hierarchical system of ideas and values attached to social relations in certain societies (Hardenberg 2007), or when the centrality of the house as an ideological form is assumed through the association between hosting and social worth, an association that may well be fundamental to house societies in general (Sissons 2010). While the ideas he developed generally in his kinship studies continue to be addressed in some depth by the scholar-

ly community (Godelier 2004), over the last two decades, research exploring how kinship is thought, enacted and made meaningful has become a priority among scholars focusing on new and old reproductive technologies and the intensification and complex interconnectivity of local and global processes as they relate to cross-border migrations, or migrant domestic and sex workers. These studies demonstra-

te growing scholarly interest in how social relations have be-

come ever more geographically dispersed, impersonal,

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mediated by and implicated in broader political-economic or capitalist processes, as well as a deepening concern for how intimate and personal relations, especially those linked to reproductive labour, adoption, and domestic units, have become more explicitly commodified and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, presenting new ethnographic challenges and opportunities (Constable 2009).

The fundamental question of these and other complex interconnections between intimate and broader political processes is certainly not purely rhetorical, for example whether it is ‘house societies’ or broader settings that employ the ‘language of kinship’ to talk about political and economic interests, as Lévi-Strauss claims, or whether in fact it is Lévi-Strauss who employs the ‘language of kinship’ to talk about relations which a variety of societies may phrase in the ‘language of the house’ or broader political processes.

The more important issue is that in such global systems and processes it is above all women who, skilfully manipulated, play the role of power levers in both ritualized and organized violence. Scholars have argued for decades about the relationship between biological sex and organized violence, but in recent years research has brought new understanding of the rapidity with which gendered roles and ideas about masculinity and femininity can change in times of war, and the role of militarization in constructing and enforcing the meaning of manhood and womanhood (see also Doja 2008c). Especially in the post-Cold War period, ‘new wars’ (Kaldor 1999) have mobilized gender in multiple ways, and peace-building is often managed by external humanitarian organizations that inadvertently essentialize ideas of men as perpetrators of violence and women as victims (Moran 2010).

Anthropologists today claim to be uninterested in grand narratives, and to be more explicitly concerned with local particularities and historically specific manifestations of cultural practices. Very few are prepared to think of cultures and societies simply as structured combinations of elements, and as has often been pointed out, this tendency to confer more agency to ‘structures’ than to humans is one of the principal legacies of the anthropological practice of ‘thinking like structures’. The public view of anthropology to ‘extend humanism to the measure of humanity’ that is embedded ‘in the ways of thought and life’ (Stoczkowski 2008). The private version seems fatalist and resigned, seeing humanity as doomed in the face of demographic explosion and Western ethnocentric humanism. Salvation therefore becomes a matter of resigned personal adaptation to the imperfections of the world, taking the form of a Buddhist or stoic detachment from it. The public view is more optimistic and even voluntarist, offering hope that the increasing trend towards globalization and the destruction of diversity will be stemmed by an opposing project of collective salvation in the form of a return to the essential properties of man and society.

Lévi-Strauss was arguably justified in believing that his two texts on race were expressions of a similar, if evolving, project of critical analysis of an increasingly pervasive racism in the West. He may even have developed ‘private’ and ‘public’ versions of his beliefs (Stoczkowski 2008). The private version seems fatalist and resigned, seeing humanity as doomed in the face of demographic explosion and Western ethnocentric humanism. Salvation therefore becomes a matter of resigned personal adaptation to the imperfections of the world, taking the form of a Buddhist or stoic detachment from it. The public view is more optimistic and even voluntarist, offering hope that the increasing trend towards globalization and the destruction of diversity will be stemmed by an opposing project of collective salvation in the form of a return to the essential properties of man and society. In Lévi-Strauss’s vision, the anthropologist is seen as the conscience and consciousness of the West, the ‘witness’ and ambivalent mediator of cultural diversity and cultures radically different from our own, destroyed by the very locality from which he could not have been extricated himself. That is why, ‘above all in gloomy times’, the task of anthropology must consist in arousing a ‘permanent possibility of humanity’ that is embedded ‘in the ways of thought and life’ of non-Western societies. Lévi-Strauss thus urges anthropology to ‘extend humanism to the measure of humanity’ (1973: 44). Rather than being racist, such a ‘generalized’ humanism integrates all human cultures, and anthropology becomes the instrument of this ‘new’ humanism in its redemptive mission (Doja 2008b).

**Anthropological futures**

The return to Lévi-Strauss’s thermal analysis of history and its provocative distinction between ‘historical temperatures’ in his model of ‘cold’ and ‘hot’ societies (Charbonnier 1961: 37-48) is now being advocated as a heuristic rather than taxonomic distinction between ‘cultural eras’. If its continued utility can be argued as a workable methodology for anthropological investiga-


tion, correspondingly, the constant distinctions between structure and event, and action and agency, can similarly be regarded more as analytical conventions than as conditions of cultural and social reality. This may be all the more important in guarding against academic ‘ways of seeing’ becoming reified and congealed, for we can move forward to make more of the need for analytical fluidity and theoretical hybridity. One could read this continuous reconsideration and revision as indicative of another example of Fischer’s (2009) ‘anthropological futures’, in which the potential symbiotic ‘bricolage’ of seemingly contradictory approaches becomes important.

As social and political institutions, events and movements become increasingly complex, Lévi-Strauss’s theory can offer critical new perspectives for the analysis of power, politics and social action and, importantly, help to develop political solutions. Indeed, a key advantage of structural analysis is that the categories of analysis, as discussed by Lévi-Strauss, allow for an in-depth analysis of how thoughts can develop at the individual level and be transformed into action on a collective level. This is critical to understanding the underlying motivations of members of political movements, who seek to overcome difficult individual circumstances by transcending negative social and political circumstances, not least through violence.

Actually, a more closely-argued and clearly-defined theoretical framework could be designed using a careful combination of Lévi-Straussian structural analysis, cognitive commitments, borderland epistemology and the politics of practice and agency. Though this is a topic for further examination at another time, I would argue that such an attempt could provide another instance in which our theoretical understanding of the world can be made to progress, in the context of a general revival of the kind of vigorous theoretical debate that tended to disappear from the field in the 1980s.

In particular, a critical understanding of the interplay of ideology and culture as political instruments of hegemony and power, which would be especially suited to revealing a new and unsuspected meaning involved in unified visions of the integration of knowledge, could point toward some neglected but potentially vigorous developments in current social and anthropological theory that may not only present new empirical material and substantive findings, but also generate novel conceptual and theoretical syntheses to open rich research avenues.

More than anything else, it can be argued that the new morphodynamic epistemological project of the structural paradigm in current anthropology might go well beyond the general discourse in social science which speaks authoritatively about identity shifting, hybridity, fluidity, liquidity and the like, but nevertheless without any conclusive certainty, nor sufficient precision to distinguish clearly how identity changes occur in the first instance. Social identities may be as ambivalent and fluid as symbols, myths, sensory qualities and arts seemed once to be, before the advent of Lévi-Strauss’s theory. For example, it is the parallel between the narrative structure of hypermedia and the structure of mythical narratives described by Lévi-Strauss that has offered a new perspective for the understanding and manipulation of hypermedia logic structures, the resources related to the temporality and spatiality of narratives mobilized to form a coherent whole, and their own alternative meanings of producing meaning (Nascimento 2008). Hence, in order to achieve greater precision and rigour in contemporary anthropological analysis, and acknowledge what the structural approach can offer to critical political and historical approaches.

Our understanding of ‘reflexivity’ may be strengthened if we consider that it is not so much a question of ambiguous or paradoxical human conditions, but rather the result of a ‘transformational twist’ at the crossings of boundary conditions. Arguably, a canonically informed concept of border-crossing and agency may warn against allowing facile ideas such as ‘at borders, two sides equal one hybrid’, which replace analysis and so neglect the very real power of the dominant majority to advance ideological and political projects.

The theoretical project inspired by the canonical formula can show that structural anthropology is also intimately concerned with processes of social conflict, change, praxis and agency – a neglected but essential aspect of Lévi-Strauss’s theory. The generative virtues of the so-called ‘double twist’ of the canonical transformation in Lévi-Strauss’s structural study of myth, which imply two operating conditions internal to canonical formalization (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 252-253), are now being considered and made comprehensible as an anticipated formalization of catastrophe models in new mathematics and morphodynamics (Petitot 1988, Scubla 1998, Maranda 2001). I believe they could reasonably stand for the notions of development and global change as understood in contemporary social science, for the lack of which Lévi-Strauss has been vehemently but unduly criticized. That a transformational twist of this kind can also account for the processes of social conflict, change, praxis and agency might seem at first sight as an unusual if not provocative statement.

Yet, the very idea of canonical relation requires a third operating condition, external to canonical formalization, which in the study of myth is expressed as the necessity of the crossing of a spatiotemporal boundary, defined in territorial, ecological, linguistic, cultural, social or whatever terms, but which is always a boundary condition. Lévi-Strauss claims that the catastrophist operation that requires a boundary condition of this kind shows that a series of variations inherent in the mythic events given in formalization cannot be produced without going through myths belonging to another people, which are in a relation of inverse transformation with the former. Ultimately, as I have shown elsewhere, the requirement of a boundary condition in canonical formalization can anticipate the politics of an ideological agency and discursive practice (Doja 2009), for the lack of which structural analysis has been undeservedly dismissed.

Fundamentally, although the majority of commentators, be they admirers or critics, retained from the structural analysis of myth only its capacity to disclose stable, common and probably universal frameworks, Lévi-Strauss preferred to look for rules that would ideally make it possible to generate, starting from an unspecified myth of reference, the finite or infinite whole of all other real or possible myths. If we agree with this epistemological insight as a final innovative direction, I argue that we may establish a more sophisticated approach, following structural procedures of transformational analysis and formalization.

It may not hitherto have been expressed so directly, but this means that we may be correct in asserting that we can in theory derive from an empirical situation of identity construction, social change, ethnic identification or social conflict, transcended in the canonical way, the possibly hidden reality of an external boundary, borderland existence or border-crossing movement. This reality would reveal itself elsewhere (Doja 2009) in the form of an ideologically or politically instrumental agency.

It will necessarily be organized around a specific identity element or social hierarchy associated with the value of one identity moment, human agency and social action, but having inverse propositional characteristics to that moment, course of action and agency. And vice versa: new identity constructions and social changes can be anticipated as a result of the mediating logical operation of a boundary condition, and we can set off in their search and their appreciation.