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Review article

Celebrations of Lévi-Strauss's heroic legacy

GODELIER, MAURICE. *Claude Lévi-Strauss: a critical study of his thought.* xx, 540 pp., table, figs, bibliogr. London: Verso, 2018. £29.99 (paper)

LÉVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE; foreword by Maurice Olender; trans. Jane Marie Todd. *Anthropology confronts the problems of the modern world.* xii, 129 pp. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2013. £15.00 (cloth)

LÉVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE; foreword by Maurice Olender; trans. Jane Marie Todd. *We are all cannibals and other essays.* viii, 159 pp., bibliogr. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2016. £20.00 (cloth)

LOYER, EMMANUELLE; trans. Ninon Vinsonneau & Jonathan Magidoff. *Lévi-Strauss: a biography.* xlvi, 709 pp., illus., bibliogr. Cambridge: Polity, 2018. £35.00 (paper)

For a period, Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis had a powerful influence on British and American anthropologists, offering a way out of functionalism and empiricism. Today, there seems to exist a misrepresentation and misrecognition of his standing, especially in contemporary North American anthropology. Lévi-Strauss may be read in the context of the history of anthropology, but he is usually dismissed, ironically for the very reason he must be praised, namely

his insistence on scientific rigour, simply because this concept has become somewhat alien to postmodern anthropologists. What seems most dramatically critical and even short-sighted is that many anthropologists see Lévi-Strauss as out of date, unfashionable, and he is simply ignored in a discipline that had long embraced postmodernism. For some, he is just another 'dead white man', as I found when I offered to teach a course on him at Harvard.

Lévi-Strauss was often described as apolitical, sometimes even characterized as reactionary, and he was certainly not an activist. However, throughout his life and in his work, he devoted himself to fighting the social ills of racism, the destructive effects of colonial expansion, the great massacre of cultures, the extermination of populations, and the ecological disasters of environmental destruction. The question of what role anthropological research must take in the face of the colossal phenomenon of Western colonialism was at the centre of his work long before the postcolonial, postmodern, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist critical turns in the social sciences and the humanities. Later in life, he rebelled again with an unprecedented virulence against those politically correct postmodernist approaches that 'overcloud the moral faculty of a feeling of revolt in front of the crime committed by the West' against Native American cultures (Lévi-Strauss 2001a: 441).

Not only the epistemological issues of anthropological knowledge, but also the ethical conception of the anthropologist's work are consistently present throughout Lévi-Strauss's oeuvre, in its ontological, aetiological, and salvational dimensions. In his view, anthropology was a lone heroic quest against blindness and blandness, in which the anthropologist aptly could be hailed as a 'hero of our time' (cf. Hayes & Hayes 1970; Sontag 1963). Actually, Lévi-Strauss dealt with both the nature and the denaturation of humanity and society,

trying to return to the means, or showing the absence of a means, to alleviate these evils.

It should be acknowledged that Lévi-Strauss established the theoretical foundations of a revolutionary contribution, both scientific and humanistic, to general anthropology. This contribution is also far-reaching and may represent the most compelling challenge to the future of anthropology in the twenty-first century (Doja 2008b; 2010). Little of recent topical, ethical, methodological or epistemological interest escaped his notice, understanding, and engagement. His ambition was to provide a new epistemology and a new ethics, involving a set of novel assumptions and procedures for the acquisition of knowledge, a new approach to methodology, and a new global awareness. No wonder, then, that given the continuous celebrations of the great man after his death in 2009, we have also been presented with pompous celebrations of two grandiloquent narratives of his work and life. These massive biographical tomes, characterized as 'Left Bank versus Right Bank books' (Harkin 2019: 88–9), have been recently acclaimed as essential contributions to the understanding of Lévi-Strauss and his legacy. However, to better grasp the evolution of his thinking over the years, I also review below two recent translations of his collected essays/lectures into English.

The grand account

Maurice Godelier's *Lévi-Strauss* was awarded the Martine-Aublet Prize and was acclaimed in the French press as a 'masterful study', 'unparalleled to date', the 'first' to present the most methodical 'inventory' of Lévi-Strauss's publications, giving a clear and profound panoptic vision, 'as has rarely been done', of all the 'worlds' he had explored. Although the book primarily offers a detailed rereading of Lévi-Strauss's analysis of kinship and myth, Godelier presents it as forming a 'long braid with five interlacing strands' (p. xvi), paralleling the great man's intertwined fields of study: kinship, myths and mythical thought, art, the principles and methods of structural analysis, and reflections on the human condition and the future of humanity.

Godelier's intention is to offer within a single account and in a didactic way a grand narrative for Lévi-Strauss's intellectual journey, providing a point-by-point assessment of his major publications on these themes. His explicit aim is to set them within the scientific context in which they first appeared, including Lévi-Strauss's comparative approach and the examples he used. Godelier contextualizes Lévi-Strauss's writings 'with who and what they opposed or agreed with', thus demonstrating the tremendous power of his revolutionary theoretical scope, but above all he intended to explain where he himself might 'stand today on a number of issues that Lévi-Strauss had addressed' (p. 224).

Often little-known or recent texts are important and, if these are considered, Godelier is faced with a Lévi-Strauss more progressive than imagined, especially on issues of family and kinship. Prominent feminist critics believed that Lévi-Strauss, by attributing the universal condition of objectification of women to an underlying cognitive mechanism possessed by all humans, was guilty of naturalizing what is clearly a cultural practice. In his critical account, Godelier seems to accept Lévi-Strauss's general framework of the emergence of symbolic thought, the incest taboo and its various extensions, and a social structure based on principles of reciprocity and alliance. Nevertheless, he reproduces the same well-known and outdated line of feminist criticism, incorrectly insisting that Lévi-Strauss, because of the exclusive emphasis on the exchange of women between groups of men, attributed agency only to men. Thus he seems to ignore Lévi-Strauss's conceptualization of women, namely that 'if women in general represent a certain category of signs, destined to a certain kind of communication, each woman preserves a particular value arising from her talent' (1967: 569), which amounts to a recognition of women's agency as a general feature of human sociality. If we are to take Lévi-Strauss seriously, we must agree that in his theory 'women are assumed to be not merely exchange objects linked in a formal power structure but also subjects in history and everyday social life' (Doja 2008a: 59).

Godelier's sequential approach reveals the extent to which Lévi-Strauss highlighted the universal structures of the human mind, particularly in his analysis of totemism and American mythology, well before the development of cognitive research on these issues. Godelier is good at outlining these cognitive structures and the way in which Lévi-Strauss used them in his analyses of the convertibility and mediation of codes and axes, and in his analysis of the combinatorial permutations by inversion or symmetrization of mythical structures (*armatures*), but this account nevertheless does not enrich or clarify our understanding of the cognitive foundations of such operations (cf. Berger 2015: 229). Lévi-Strauss's famous statement about the myths that 'think each other (*se pensent*) in people's minds without their being aware of the fact' (1964: 20) is quoted at length by Godelier and interpreted obtusely as being literal:

Lévi-Strauss's formulas are superb and provocative, but they, literally, make no sense. Myths are thought expressed in different languages, but they are not thinking subjects. They can neither operate 'in men's minds' nor reflect upon themselves. A physicist may as well say that the waves and particles that make up light are operating in his mind and reflecting upon themselves there (p. 434).

As an acute, subtle thinker, Godelier must know that the algorithmic formality of myths demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss is something that exists independently of individual human minds. Indeed, a simple algorithm can produce complex autonomous systems that reproduce human conditions, and one might read Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* as a sort of Turing test of the corpus of Amerindian mythology (cf. Harkin 2019: 95). Godelier might also be aware that in quantum mechanics waves and particles operate with a 'spooky action at a distance' as contemporary physicists put it (after Einstein 1971: 158). Indeed, they parallel mythical structures in Lévi-Strauss's sense, by reflecting actually upon each other, not in the anthropologist's or physicist's mind, but like myths, in their own quantum entanglement (cf. Doja 2018).

Godelier also condemns Lévi-Strauss by quoting some of his odder comments in footnotes and interviews (see p. 486), but also by considering as strained the interpolation of Western musical structure and Amerindian myth, which is key to his structural analysis of myth. Oddly enough, *Tristes tropiques*, which for many scholars provides the best understanding of Lévi-Strauss and his thought (see Doja 2008c), is completely omitted in this book (see Harkin 2019: 92). Other important writings that Godelier overlooks are the UNESCO essays of 1952 and 1971 on the politics of race, as well as two works reviewed below, his Japanese lectures given in the 1980s and the Italian chronicles of the 1990s, in which heroic anthropology explicitly confronted the global issues of the contemporary world.

However clear and rigorous he might seem in his overview of Lévi-Strauss's work, Godelier seemingly challenges its theoretical power, while attempting to overcome perplexing difficulties and contradictions in what is actually a simple exercise of 'text explanation' (Maggioli 2013). He analyses the movement and content of this imposing oeuvre, showing its unity and fine architecture, but also claims to assess its limits and 'intentional omissions' (see Chevallier 2013), the potential developments, dead ends, and occasional deceptions. It is worth noting that Godelier was Lévi-Strauss's student and protégé at the Collège de France in the 1960s and was deeply influenced by him. Later, however, he became estranged and maintained a critical, often tense relationship with his master, thus his book seems a scholarly and erudite *summa* not of Lévi-Strauss's work but of two modes of thoughts looking at each other in a mirror, suggesting that Godelier is contraposing his own theories to those of his former mentor.

While he points to 'some flaws and limits' of Lévi-Strauss's work that 'were not always his fault but were often the effect of the era' (p. 232), these critiques can be seen as reflecting Godelier's own theories on the prohibition of incest, the historicity of societies, and the foundations of human thought. However, as I will

discuss below, on these issues as on others, Lévi-Strauss never lost his acute analytical sense. Additionally, Godelier's criticisms of him are already well known and do not provide any new insight, and even less a critical study of Lévi-Strauss's thought, as the English translation is subtitled. He does nothing but rejoin the now classical Marxist criticism of the so-called limited role of history in Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis (see Berger 2015: 245). The very way in which Godelier claims to be paying homage to Lévi-Strauss only reveals his own Marxist trajectory (see Skalski 2013), and as a still-practising Marxist, he certainly thinks that his former mentor ought 'to do more than speaking before a Japanese audience who must have been delighted by his words' (p. 488). Godelier's account of the founder of structural anthropology's scientific work thus explicitly comes up against Lévi-Strauss's life and personality, to which another biography is devoted.

The grand biography

Emmanuelle Loyer's *Lévi-Strauss* was awarded both the Martine-Aublet and the Femina-Essay Prizes. It was acclaimed as a 'monumental', 'definitive biography' (Keck 2016: 909) and a 'fascinating marvel of intelligence' (Roudinesco 2015). Other biographies are sometimes mentioned, but they are undervalued, going unnoticed in France simply because they were written by a Swiss essayist (Bertholet 2003) or an Australian writer (Wilcken 2010), or they are seen as just too closely reiterating what Lévi-Strauss had worked out about himself (see Collinot 2017: 249–50; Keck 2016: 910).

This new book is like earlier biographies in its very well-drawn intellectual portrait of Lévi-Strauss, but in terms of a synthesis that is again already familiar (see also Chaubet 2016). Conversely, the great difference that distinguishes Loyer's tome from earlier biographies is that she was able to take advantage of previously inaccessible data, namely Lévi-Strauss's professional archives entrusted in 2007 to the National Library of France, and part of his private archives that are now published. These include the detailed correspondence with his parents, and with Roman Jakobson, his intellectual and structural alter ego. Loyer's biography brings to our attention an important corpus of new information, which offers a vivid and intimate portrait of 'the new founding father of French anthropology' in an account that presents itself, not without some irony, as 'an anthropological study of anthropologists' (p. 376).

The problem plainly posed by Loyer is that of the 'biographical dyad' between work and life (p. 414). She resolves it through the mediation of a primitive and reductive sociologism that aims at making Lévi-Strauss a perfect '*Homo academicus bourdieusiensis*' (Collinot 2017: 255). In other words, Lévi-Strauss's life is easily and completely explained by Bourdieu's sociology, which offers simplistic, yet definitive explanations.

Social determinism is supposed to have shaped his private life and professional career, with both subjected to the inflexible rules of the scientific field, where every actor is symbolically compelled to fight against others for the supreme good of academic recognition.

Loyer's reference to Bourdieu comes at the start of Lévi-Strauss's political itinerary, when she suggests that his activism was that of a 'phantom *normalien*' at the margins of the École Normale (p. 57), which he observed from a distance through the emblematic figure of Jean-Paul Sartre. It seems that Bourdieu used Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology to criticize the *normalien* philosophy incarnated by Sartre, although paradoxically Bourdieu used Sartre's conception of practice to oppose Lévi-Strauss's formal models (see Keck 2016). Loyer nevertheless mixes Bourdieu's sociologism with an affection for Bruno Latour's socio-anthropology on scholarly practices, as well as with a great zest for Philippe Descola's works towards the ontological turn in anthropology. Her aim is to observe Lévi-Strauss through the objects and documents he manipulated, and to avoid the 'naturalist' error of wishing to enter the mind of a man who never stopped trying to rid himself of his own subjectivity.

The 'quasi-anecdotes' of Lévi-Strauss's life are then intertwined with 'quasi-historical approaches' and 'quasi-approaches of anthropological epistemology or aesthetics' (Campion 2015). One is surprised to discover that Lévi-Strauss converted his symbolic capital into economic capital (unless it was the other way around) and to learn that his project intersected with 'becoming again the non-moderns that we have never ceased to be' (p. 577). The crossover winks to Bourdieu and Latour are surprising as they saw each other as opponents and considered their theories to be incompatible. Yet Loyer's references here are understandable, at least in the way she uses Bourdieu, in the sense that it is not personal but business as usual. Indeed, her 'loyalty to Bourdieu is undoubtedly sincere, but an allegiance to Latour is also called for, since he was scientific director at Sciences-Po', where Loyer is still employed as a regular reader (Collinot 2017: 255).

Additionally, incursions into 'The worlds of Lévi-Strauss', as the introduction is titled, imbue the narrative with a great vivacity and animate it thanks to a striking variety of details. Loyer strives to give life to Lévi-Strauss's work through delineating his desire to cross the boundaries between the Old and New Worlds, between humanity and the rest of nature, between matter and life, between intelligence and sensitivity. He never abolished but multiplied, virtualized, and modelled them like a 'hologram of the mind that thinks itself through the world and of which he was one of the crossing points' (Keck 2016: 911). The equivalent can only be found in the modes of thought and practices of 'animistic' societies, where the mind, far from being the privilege of individuals, is everywhere in nature. The

biography's implicit reference to Descola is certainly significant, but also seems to suggest clientelism, since he is Lévi-Strauss's successor and the ontological turn is much of the moment. No wonder that Loyer would frantically expect the popular admirers of Lévi-Strauss to welcome her 'grand biography' of their idol. In short, Loyer is a cultural historian working to commission, 'otherwise [she] would never have embarked on this project', as she admitted in her interview to *Libération* (Levisalles 2015). She is mindful of her era, and her book is in effect 'the authorized biography of Lévi-Strauss' (Harkin 2019: 98).

It seems that in Loyer's *Lévi-Strauss* the explanations play a decorative role, intended to give a scholarly lustre to a narrative whose main purpose is to tell the story of a life punctuated by sexual relations and gastronomic routines in order to make the biography as pleasant as possible. While Lévi-Strauss argued that sexuality and food are the two invariants that humanity seeks to regulate through kinship systems and table manners, it seems naïve to explain his theories through a vulgar analysis of his own relationships with women and food. Lévi-Strauss was known for his great reserve, and it is inconceivable that he might have engaged in any crude confidences. Nevertheless, most of Loyer's biographical venture is based on both a game of language and some petty crispy anecdotes that do not seek to reveal the different facets of a 'man of taste' (Keck 2016: 922), but instead appear to be a dogged, bad-taste sensationalism expressed through clichés whose common denominators are excess, inauthenticity, triviality, and 'kitsch' (Collinot 2017: 256–7).

Indeed, Loyer's text is not devoid of some pleasures of macaronic writing. There was a time when the abuse of Latin and Ancient Greek was seen as bad taste, but Loyer's kitchen Latin and Greek come again from Bourdieu's sociology. Her resources are varied, with a very pronounced taste for English in the French original and a singular handling of French that is lost in the English translation, both of which seem to denote a lexical poverty and a certain rhetorical jargon far removed from the technical language of the social sciences. Apparently Loyer strives to produce a kind of '*Japanese biography*' (p. 6), in reference to the centripetal philosophy of the subject that Lévi-Strauss identified as Japanese, where the self 'appears to be not an original given but a result toward which one moves with no certainty of reaching it' (p. 25). Yet, in this case as in others, Lévi-Strauss himself would probably express himself better than any of his many commentators.

The view from afar on modernity

In fact, Lévi-Strauss's peculiar 'view from afar' has queried contemporary issues that remain astonishingly timely and topical. After his 1952 and 1971 UNESCO essays on racism, his lectures at

the Ishizaka Foundation in 1986 were admittedly a third, theretofore unpublished, exposition of his view on the contemporary world. In these lectures, now published as *Anthropology confronts the problems of the modern world* (hereafter AC), he addressed the major themes of his anthropology, including the very contemporary questions posed by the advent of new biomedical reproductive technologies; the model of Western economic development compared to other conceptions of society studied by anthropology; and the crisis that Western knowledge was beginning to experience in terms of its authority.¹ In the early 1950s, he also had addressed media events with lucidity, and he revisited this theme through a series of chronicles written in the 1990s for the Italian daily *La Repubblica*, now collected in *We are all cannibals and other essays*. He metamorphosed here into a remarkable chronicler, commenting on the news and on the great questions that agitate our time.

These two texts offer a telling portrait of the intellectual captivation and curiosity of a pivotal figure in the history of anthropology, and they bring out the deep structure of his thought, which inspired the body of his work on kinship, classification, mythology, the human condition, and structural methodology. They reveal Lévi-Strauss as a falsely modest yet nonetheless enthusiastic free thinker who dared to formulate dazzling propositions. Instead of providing what has been irreverently claimed to be 'scant guidance' to the alleged 'problems that can be blamed on our expulsion from Eden' (Kuper 2013), he converted the theoretical and methodological insights of structural anthropology into events for thought, making them a concern for all.

In these texts, Lévi-Strauss offers unusual reflections on contemporary topics that all show how the Far East and the West, the 'primitive' and the modern, the old and the new, the distant and the near, the sacred and the profane illuminate each other. With an impressive precision, he sows disquiet into the confused categories of barbarism and civilization, whose obscure intertwining he never stopped exploring. These texts reveal how the thought of Others from other places enriches us much more profoundly than blinkered thinking could ever do.

We see clearly in these collections how the crucial problems of globalization, overpopulation, environmental degradation, and the proliferation of material and immaterial flows became Lévi-Strauss's main preoccupations, as did 'the affinities between the various ideological explosions and the development of different forms of fundamentalism' (AC, p. x). He had long and forcibly denounced the ravages of technological progress and the expansion of a model of civilization that is still destroying both human societies and natural environments. If anything, the range of his concern widened from all cultures to all living species. The world is endangered, he was increasingly

convinced, by a rapidly expanding and increasingly culturally uniform human population that is mindlessly driving other species to extinction. By shifting his attention from the historical moment of his cultural encounter in the Brazilian field to contemporary ecological and political debates, Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis as a method and scientific contribution became a vibrant environmental advocacy before the concept was even invented. It is not sufficiently understood that Lévi-Strauss was a profoundly ecological thinker. His critique of a 'corrupt' humanism that places 'Man' above other living beings is now more relevant than ever.

Any reader of Lévi-Strauss's *Anthropology confronts the problems of the modern world* and *We are all cannibals* may be struck today by the fulgurant prescience of his ideas and positions, which remain exemplary. Even contemporary highbrow ideas such as the creation of a ritual and symbolic atmosphere to address climate change as part of the Paris COP21 negotiations (Latour 2015); the Holocene resurgence of a multi-species model countering the proliferation of polluted forms of life in the Anthropocene 'plantation' (Tsing 2015); or the accelerated change of global modernity in terms of 'overheating' (Eriksen 2016) parallel his insights, which are often thought in these authors' minds, at best, as Lévi-Strauss would have put it, without their being aware of the fact.

Lévi-Strauss insisted on the necessity for the advent of a new generalized humanism that was open and multipolar, democratic and contemporary, because 'nothing human can be alien to humankind' (AC, p. 36). Concerned with the perception of ourselves as prisoners of a self-centred gaze, he redefined anthropology as a discipline devoted to the study of human experience in all its social, institutional, and symbolic dimensions.

Lévi-Strauss built his 'view from afar' not only on the insight that 'no portion of humanity could aspire to understand itself except with reference to others' (AC, p. 33), but also on the very distance that separates anthropological observers from the societies they observe. Anthropologists must adopt a perspective that places them outside their own cultural tradition without ceasing to be inside it, while trying to enter into the most intimate essence of the observed culture that will always remain inaccessible to them. Similarly, 'to know and understand one's own culture, it is necessary to regard it from the point of view of another' (AC, p. 30). In other words, Lévi-Strauss constructed a doubly distant view, removed both from other cultures and from one's own culture. Finally, he argued that what is constitutive of the object and the very method of anthropology is a 'technique of displacement (*dépaysement*)' (AC, p. 31),² where distanciation, disorientation, estrangement, defamiliarization, and alienation do not lend enchantment to the view but put in question the dogmas taken for granted in the contemporary Western world.

He confessed that his *The view from afar (Le regard éloigné)* (Lévi-Strauss 1983) was inspired by Zeami's Noh actor, who 'to judge his performance must learn to see himself as if he were the spectator' (AC, p. 31). Lévi-Strauss turned his view from afar to the Amazon, to Japan, and to the contemporary problems of our society not only to scrutinize cultural differences, but also to subsume relations between civilizations and distance himself critically from the deleterious effects of Western ideologies and technologies. In *We are all cannibals* and *Anthropology confronts the problems of the modern world*, he weaves a mesmerizing set of patterns and transformations, constructing a system of invariant differences and analogies between different histories, social practices, and mythologies. We are 'stimulated by Lévi-Strauss's attempt to have us see one another each through the other's eyes' (Strathern 2018: 314), and we might be moved in turn to contemplate how much our common mental structures bring us closer to peoples whom we tend to see as radically different. The musings on Japan and the Italian chronicles are probably the place where Lévi-Strauss carried this concept of a view from afar to its utmost. Rather than a physical distance, he apprehended the universal character of patterns that trace the curvature of space and time. Prescient here as elsewhere, his essays 'invite us to celebrate the architecture of mind, empowering facts not only for the pleasure of thinking' (Kristeva 2016), but also for thinking about social transformations. At points these facts have the effect of suggesting that human reality is always an emergent realization of the massively constructed, but logically possible, inversions along a multiplicity of concrete dimensions. The perspectives so framed and manipulated produce occasionally startling coincidences that demonstrate the astuteness of employing the structural method.

The future of heroic anthropology

Much understanding of the structural method comes from the reinterpretations or misinterpretations offered by poststructuralists, notoriously Derrida and his imposturous critique of Lévi-Strauss on the place of writing (see Doja 2006a). Recently, several scholars have argued that structuralism as it is popularly imagined is a retrospective invention by poststructuralists which has come to be substituted for the real thing (cf. Doja 2008b; Henaff 2011; Wiseman 2009). Such reconceptualizations of structure and structuralism cannot and should not obscure Lévi-Strauss's more decisive notions of differential imbalance and transformation.

It could also be claimed that Lévi-Strauss mapped, within anthropology, the philosophical parameters of an increasing preoccupation with the issues of contextualization and reflexivity in the face of the declining coherence of metanarrative theory, as well as with issues of political concern and engagement in

the postcolonial era (Doja 2006b). He used structural arguments coherently and correctly to analyse the cultural order and its transient character by means of entropy and irreversibility, as well as, unsurprisingly, to examine deconstruction, or rather 'dissolution' (in his own words), and self-reflexivity. More important than the identification of bounded cultural difference was his idea that differential imbalance indicates a tension between cultures. This is less praise for difference than a belief that transformations prevail over identity, structure, or the cultural system, all of which are based on morphodynamic and morphogenetic transformations.

Thanks to Lévi-Strauss's notion of transformation, the conception of structure decisively moved away from the binary logic of the linguistic model of differential elements, to which it is too often and obstinately reduced, in order to become a combinatorial analysis of these morphogenetic dynamics. Precisely, in his conceptualization of the generative engine of myths based on their own transformations, he staked the strongest claim to structural analysis as a scientific method that could be applied objectively, and which could reveal a level of reality encoded in the myths themselves. Far from being a pseudo-mathematical mystification, as many Anglo-American anthropologists learnt it (Harkin 2019: 94), his structural method did actually originate in mathematics and it has gone on to be well received by modern scholars seeking to study culture and society by formal means (e.g. Santucci, Doja & Capocchi 2020).

It could be argued that some aspects of Lévi-Strauss's theory, in particular the requirement of a boundary condition in his structural analysis of myths, could be advanced as a workable methodology to help us build innovative anthropological approaches to agency and politics by contextualizing them within history, culture, and society. Boundary condition here refers to the empirical evidence from outside the realm of the myths being analysed, which Lévi-Strauss carefully identified in each case as crossing a boundary, whether defined in geographical, linguistic, cultural, social, or other terms. Boundary condition is also a formal mathematical concept, which Lévi-Strauss used in his canonical formalization to account for the morphogenetic and morphodynamic transformation of myths across the boundaries existing between one people and another. I have argued elsewhere that the concept of boundary condition could be expanded to account for particular cultural ideologies that might be discursively activated and amplified to act as a hidden agency of instrumental politics in actual sociocultural situations (Doja 2018).

Morphodynamic analyses of the empirical evidence about actual instances of women's agency, about family structures and fertility rates, about mass rapes in ethnic conflicts, or about identity transformations in the European context provide some illustrative examples

of an instrumental agency of hidden politics, revealing the workings of the ideologies of gender, familism, honor and blood, and identity building respectively (Doja 2008a; 2010; 2019). This is what I call 'cultural activism', which I define as a driving force external to a sociocultural situation and which may be thought, aptly in the case of family structures and fertility rates, as a kind of 'sociocultural viagra' to change or perpetuate the system (Doja 2010: 361–2). Arguably, the morphodynamic formalization of cultural activism allows us to identify instrumental ideologies and to anticipate changes in a given sociocultural system.

We may read the two recent biographies of Lévi-Strauss, as he himself might have put it, as analogous to Parisian fashion, which changes every five years and already has had its five-year rotation, while bearing in mind that the conceptual aspects of his later writings suggest a novel, anthropologically informed approach that could account for the structural dynamics of change and conflict while revealing the hidden aspects of ideological agencies and political projects in the contemporary world.

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NOTES

¹ See also Lévi-Strauss's (2001b) lecture at the Japan Productivity Centre in 1983.

² The English translation 'technique of making strange' is oddly inadequate.

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