

The Prophet of Anthropology

Marino Niola

Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples, Italy

Diogenes
2015, Vol. 60(2) 93–102
Copyright © ICPHS 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192114568272
dio.sagepub.com



[H]eteroclite; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus beneath them all.

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

I

Rousseau's revolution, preshaping and initiating the ethnological revolution, consists of refusing forced identifications, whether of a culture with that culture, or of an individual member of a culture with a character or social function that this same culture tries to impose on him. In both cases, the culture or the individual claims the right to free identification, which can only realize itself *beyond* man with all that is alive and, consequently, suffers [...]. Then, freed from an antagonism which philosophy alone sought to stimulate, the self and the other recover their unity. (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 39–40)

This claim regarding the supreme sensitivity of Rousseau's work contains, in radically condensed form, the same themes and deep currents that flow through the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, helping justify the extraordinary popularity of an anthropologist elevated long ago onto the Olympus of twentieth-century *maîtres à penser* for transforming our understanding of the other within and without all of us, through his conscientious critique of Western humanism and its hidden vices.

No other anthropologist has exerted such a far-reaching influence outside of his own discipline. The impact of his work embraces a wide range of subjects, extending from ethnology to linguistics, philosophy to history, psychology to literary criticism, semiotics to sociology, religious studies to psychoanalysis, art to contemporary music. And in all these fields Lévi-Strauss' work has fallen like a nourishing rain, giving them fresh vitality. The publication in 1949 of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* was hailed by Simone de Beauvoir as a milestone in the evolution of human consciousness. *The Raw and the Cooked*, the first of six volumes dedicated to the study of myth, was even set to music by the Italian composer Luciano Berio, who inserted recited passages from the text into his *Sinfonia*. The reciprocal influence that linked Lévi-Strauss to the world of the Surrealists or *surréalistes* is well-known. The great anthropologist always acknowledged having learned not to fear stark or shocking juxtapositions from the likes of André Breton, Max Ernst, Michel Leiris, and

Corresponding author:

Marino Niola, Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples, Via Suor Orsola, 10, 80125 Napoli, Italy.
Email: moroniola@tin.it

Marcel Duchamp, as well as how to recognize the similarities in seemingly very disparate things, such as nature in culture or vice versa. To seek, that is, the source of meaning in our differences, from an ‘unusual angle’ (*un istraforo di prospettiva*)¹ or, in Wittgenstein’s words, a ‘perspicuous representation’ (*übersichtliche Darstellung*) – a ‘way of seeing’ capable of revealing unexpected family resemblances. Such was the case in the last few lines of *Tristes Tropiques*, which concludes with that knowing look – a Rousseauian wink – exchanged with a cat, which earned Lévi-Strauss many calls for ‘discipline’ from the *cabale des dévots* of both God and the Self.

Such wide-ranging influence is the result of many factors: the design and broad scope of his anthropological project; its theoretical and philosophical implications; an exquisite, inexhaustible erudition, which allowed him to connect diverse fields of humanistic and scientific knowledge; and, finally, a wonderful prose style, which reverberated with a wealth of literary references and was in no way limited by the rhetorical confines of academic convention.

With the arrival of this classical moralist grappling with the state of our global crisis – as the author of *Tristes Tropiques* has recently been called – anthropology transcended its own borders and became a sort of philosophical wager to resolve the question of the traditional opposition between nature and culture. In so doing, he sailed out far beyond the Pillars of Hercules of the human sciences, held firmly in place by the inviolable categorical chains of the individual subject and its transcendence. At the same time, it was the very theoretical prominence of masterpieces like *The Savage Mind* or *Structural Anthropology* that encouraged the *déplacement* of debate onto more purely philosophical terrain – as Lévi-Strauss himself frequently lamented – and resulted in the bracketing of the anthropological nature of such questions. It is no coincidence that, in contrast with authors like Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, or Margaret Mead, Lévi-Strauss did not become famous for having described distant or exotic worlds, but rather for the more general implications of his thought. This transcendence of his field was not always kind to the French anthropologist, for it habitually exposed him to (often ideologically motivated) philosophical criticism of his work. It is not surprising, then, that the works in which he subjects himself to exegesis are more widely read and debated than those in which he confronts the great questions of anthropology. Nor that the most lively polemics aroused by his theoretical ideas concerned structuralism, naturalism, or anti-historicism: all debates on a very broad, general level. And yet, it is precisely in this great breadth that the fascination and *enjeu* of Lévi-Strauss’ theoretical project resides. In the tradition of his great role models – Rousseau, Freud, and Marx – the professor from the Collège de France always refused to accept the dichotomy between the psychic singularity of the human race and the panoply of its diverse cultures, seeking to reconcile this incredible cultural diversity with the limits of the mind, like the two sides of the same coin.

Books like *Tristes Tropiques*, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, or *Look, Listen, Read* were born of this inimitable *mélange*, the product of an unorthodox talent that knew no boundaries. A talent that always led Lévi-Strauss to think big without getting lost in the type of pure abstraction that speaks of Man with a capital M, yet losing sight of men themselves in flesh and blood. Nor, at the same time, missing the forest amid the many trees of the particular and the local.

Any anthropology worthy of the title cannot, in fact, limit itself to an actuarial table or mere ethnographic description of habits, customs, and traditions. It must assemble everything that makes societies different together with everything that makes humans alike, *tous parents tous différents*. Those elements that allow us to refer to all members of the species with the same name, ‘man’, without getting lost in a sea of irrelevant and ultimately meaningless specificities. Anthropology must thus systematically articulate the differences that derive from historical, social, or environmental factors with the invariants that stem from the functions of human thought. In other words, the constructions of culture – language, mythology, matrimony, art, technology – do not develop on their own, or respond simply to particular social motives; rather, they obey universal rules based

on the workings of the brain that determine its relationship with external reality. This decidedly anti-empiricist position, coming in an era where theories like cultural relativism in anthropology and behaviorism in psychology dominated the human sciences, earned Lévi-Strauss varied and frequently conflicting labels: idealism, anti-historicism, anti-humanism.²

II

Roland Barthes wrote that the principal objections and resistances to Lévi-Strauss' ideas derived primarily from his notion of history (Barthes, 1964: 1972). But in reality, the great provocation of Lévi-Strauss lay less in an anti-historicism *tout court* than in the rigorous coherence of his method, which he applied to every type of social phenomena.

The French anthropologist was neither the first nor the only thinker to highlight the structural character of social phenomena, but his originality lay in taking this character seriously and steadfastly drawing out its logical consequences. It is natural that a research agenda of this type fostered discussion and polemics, if for no other reason than the fact that it called into question certain categories dear to Western humanism, not the least of which were those of 'man' and 'humanity' themselves.

In a famous passage from *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss declared 'I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 247). But the knowledge of otherness, which is the primary mission of ethnology, is only the first step on a voyage in search of invariants that allow us first to re-absorb 'particular humanities into a general one', and ultimately to pursue 'the reintegration of culture in nature and finally of life within the whole of its physico-chemical conditions' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 247). The real target of Lévi-Strauss' polemic is thus humanism itself, 'corrupted at birth by taking self-interest as its principle and its notion', which bases the rights of man on the unique and privileged status of a particular living species, that of mankind, rather than seeing that status as a specific case of rights that belong to all species: 'We started by cutting man off from nature and establishing him in an absolute reign. We believed ourselves to have thus erased his most unassailable characteristic: that he is first a living being' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 41). More than a profession of anti-humanism, this is a frontal attack on its most anthropocentric form, on the humanistic metaphysics of the self. To this unbearably spoiled *enfant gâté* of the human sciences, Lévi-Strauss – who in this regard frequently placed his own thought in the lineage of Rousseau – contrasted 'a conception of man which places the other before the self, and [...] a conception of mankind which places life before men' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 37).³ In this sense it has been observed that Lévi-Strauss contributed to deconstructing 'the Judeo-Christian and Cartesian conviction according to which man is the only creature to have been created in God's image' (Fontenay, 2008: 77).

If one were able to ask an American Indian to define a myth, there is a good chance they would answer: '[A] story of the time before men and animals became distinct beings' (Lévi-Strauss and Éribon, 1991: 139). This definition seems to be greatly profound, Lévi-Strauss said in his interview with Didier Éribon, because 'despite the ink spilled by the Judeo-Christian tradition to conceal it, no situation seems more tragic, more offensive to heart and mind, than that of a humanity co-existing and sharing the joys of a planet with other living species yet being unable to communicate with them' (Lévi-Strauss and Éribon, 1991: 139). This hints at the pessimism within the author of *Tristes Tropiques*; confronted by the Promethean notion of a man who subjugates nature, he replaces it with a tragic vision of man and nature equally mutilated, each artificially separated from their other half.

This de-centering of the subject reflects the idea of a non-instrumentalized relationship with the natural world in which, to paraphrase Adorno, nature is not merely an object (*Gegenstand*)

but rather a partner (*Gegenspieler*). Already by the early 1950s Lévi-Strauss, demonstrating a sensitivity toward ecology that largely anticipated contemporary environmental movements, proclaimed the dangers of a narcissistically anthropocentric, and thus ethnocentric, humanism, which neglected the rights of the living in the name of an abstract idea of life, making man the sole master of the planet, and his own reproduction the ultimate goal of nature. In this sense Michel Maffesoli believed it possible to compare Lévi-Strauss' denunciation of the despoiling of the world with the Heideggerian criticism of the devastation of the earth by metaphysics, and the notion of a *pensée sauvage* to that of the *Schritt zurück*, or 'step back'. If the philosophy that constituted the subject of Lévi-Strauss' polemic is a *matheîn*, an intelligence that disregards the *patheîn*, or all that reflects a sensitive conception of the world, this intelligence takes the form of a philosophical apparatus that consists of 'not taking seriously the physical, underestimating the material, disdain[ing] the body' (Maffesoli, 2008: 81). The savage mind – which cannot be reduced to a residue or remnant of the so-called primitive mentality, but is a form of thinking still well alive among our contemporary selves – operates at the level of our perceptive faculties, managing nevertheless 'on this sole basis [...] to elaborate a vision of the world lacking neither consistency nor logic. And one that is more effective than we believe it to be' (Lévi-Strauss and Éribon, 1991: 111).

For Derrida, the very birth of anthropology was made possible by the de-centering of the subject, which had its origins 'at the moment when European culture – and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts – had been *dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference' (Derrida, 1978: 356). The critique of ethnocentrism, which was, and remains, the *conditio sine qua non* of anthropology, was – for the author of *Writing and Difference* – contemporaneous or even simultaneous with the destruction of the history of metaphysics.

In his famous essay on Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss established a direct relationship between the identification with others, especially 'the most "other" of all others, [the] animal', and the 'refusal of all that can make the self "acceptable"' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 39). Refusal, that is, of the makeshift transcendence that would remain deeply ingrained in humanism. In a highly polemical passage of *The Naked Man*, the author would in fact admonish the philosophers, and particularly the existentialists, for having inverted their perspective, creating an epistemological perversion, in the construction of a 'refuge for the pathetic treasure of personal identity. And, as the two possibilities are mutually exclusive, they prefer a subject without rationality to rationality without a subject' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 687).⁴ In this idea of a rationality without a subject one sees the shadow of that 'Kantianism without a transcendental subject' attributed to Lévi-Strauss by Paul Ricoeur regarding his analysis of myth, in which the French anthropologist put forward the most radical iteration of his ideas about the agreement that exists between culture and thought, the spirit and the world (Ricoeur, 1974: 52).⁵ Nothing illustrates objectivized thought better than mythology, wrote Lévi-Strauss in the *Overture to The Raw and the Cooked*, where, revealing the Kantian scope of his thought, he argued that the subject of his research were the 'conditions in which systems of truths become mutually convertible and therefore simultaneously acceptable to several different subjects', and that 'the pattern of those conditions takes on the character of an autonomous object, independent of any subject' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983b: 11). The decisive epistemological question was thus not the way in which men create myths but, rather, the way in which myths create themselves in men, and without their knowledge.

III

Fundamentally, I'm a common-sense Kantian, and at the same time, perhaps, a born structuralist. My mother told me a story once: when I was still too little to walk and far from knowing how to read, I called

out from my stroller one day that the first three letters of the butcher's and baker's signs must mean 'bou,' as they were the same in the two cases. Even at that ages I was looking for invariants! (Lévi-Strauss and Éribon, 1991: 108)

In describing this episode from his early infancy, Claude Lévi-Strauss reveals in Proustian fashion the genesis of his structuralism as a particular type of sensitivity to the encounter between primary and secondary qualities. Lévi-Strauss himself recognized that he had borrowed from Kant the idea that the mind has certain constraints which it imposes upon a permanently impenetrable reality, on which it can otherwise maintain no firm grasp. Ultimately the material that anthropology goes so far to seek – whether objects, beliefs, customs, or institutions – is only thought made concrete, tools for understanding how the human mind functions. This mind is reflected through myth, which is a magnifying glass for the human spirit.

Myths, as the father of structural anthropology repeatedly argued, 'signify the mind that evolves them by making use of the world of which it is itself a part. Thus there is simultaneous production of myths themselves, by the mind that generates them and, by the myths, of an image of the world which is already inherent in the structure of the mind' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983b: 341). Mythology thus becomes a sort of mirror that reflects the workings of the human mind, through stories, images, and concrete symbols that vary from culture to culture, and connects different orders of reality to establish relationships of meaning. If there is something that myth ultimately signifies, it is nothing less than signification itself. Lévi-Strauss reserved his most trenchant response to those philosophers who accused him of having abolished the significance of myths, reducing their study to the syntax of a discourse that didn't actually say anything, for the final pages of *The Naked Man*. Mythologies, he argued, do not hide any metaphysical or ideological truth; they do teach us, however, a number of things about the society that holds them, and also offer us access to certain operational modalities of the mind, so stable over time and recurring in space as to be considered essential. As he concluded, with supreme *sprezzatura*: 'In all these respects, far from abolishing meaning, my analysis of the myths of a handful of American tribes has extracted more meaning from them than is to be found in the platitudes and common places of those philosophers – with the exception of Plutarch – who have commented on mythology during the last 2,500 years' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 639).⁶

In his eyes, philosophy, 'imbued with a mysticism that is rarely openly admitted and more often concealed under the appellation of humanism' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 645–646), was incapable of understanding mythology, which from the philosophical perspective seemed like a game involving translation without the original text; a text which did not, in its analysis or its own mythic production, even exist – since myth, like music, exists only as a variation on another myth belonging to a different time or culture. Myth never speaks by itself, but always with or against others; it is always the result of a process of continual adaptation and re-adaptation, of perpetual re-writing that remakes it in the image of the group that sustains it. The place of a myth is thus not within one language or culture, but rather in the space between them. It is thus on a diacritical threshold that mythographic function is most at home, in a difference that unites that which is distinct. If it is true that no two myths are alike, and that each myth tries to say the opposite of what another myth expresses on the same subject, it is nevertheless equally true that 'taken as a whole, they all come to the same thing and, as Goethe says about plants: "their chorus points to a hidden law"' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 693).

Arguments like this, in which man seems to vanish, dissolving in a game of abstract mechanisms, earned their author accusations of idealism and anti-humanism. As I've argued, these accusations were largely dictated by a heavily ideological – and occasionally simply superficial – reading of his thought, whereas Lévi-Strauss, contrary to many of his critics, demonstrated an

extremely sophisticated understanding of the feedback between ideas and the world. In the end, as he frequently stated, recognizing that the mind is part of the world means admitting that, through its efforts to connect with the world, the mind carries out operations that are not so different in nature from those that have been unfolding in the world since the dawn of time.

IV

These operations are from the outset abstractions, a sort of structural analysis that governs the perception of sensory data, even the most concrete, such as that of visual perception and the hearing of language. Visual perception works on things ‘that are not things’, but rather binary oppositions, just as the hearing of language works not on sounds but on distinctive traits. It is not a matter of data, but of the products of cerebral codification, a structural analysis inscribed in the sensory organs, according to Lévi-Strauss, and carried out by the intellect: ‘[By] following procedures that have been criticized as being too intellectual,’ structural analysis, ‘which some critics dismiss as a gratuitous and decadent game, can only appear in the mind because its model is already present in the body’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 692). Put in this way, his answers to the accusations of idealism would actually seem to slide toward the opposite extreme, and lead culture back toward a sort of biological determinism. Thus, in a particularly provocative passage of *The Naked Man*, Lévi-Strauss endowed structural linguistics (the true epistemological paradigm for his anthropology) with a ‘natural and objective’ state; a state that would later be revealed by the discovery of the genetic code, the universal language common to all forms of life, whose echoes serve as model for all articulate language. The great anthropologist maintained that in both cases a finite number of discontinuous entities – chemicals or phonemes, words in a language or triades of nucleotides – arranged themselves in combinations of increasing complexity, giving meaning or a specific chemical substance, up to the phrases that life ‘writes’ in molecular form as DNA. His conclusion was that ‘when Nature, several thousand million years ago, was looking for a model, she borrowed in advance, and without hesitation, from the human sciences: this is the model which, for us, is associated with the names of Trubetskoy and Jakobson’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 685). As Dan Sperber rightly observed, in this regard Lévi-Strauss’ work was destined to outlast structuralism because it lent itself to a scientific re-reading different from that intended by the author himself, ‘a reading that illuminates and is illuminated by the light of the great questions that mark the path of the human sciences’ (Sperber, 2008: 71).⁷

In fact, accusing Lévi-Strauss of reducing culture to a form of biological determinism is too simplistic, as demonstrated by his attack on Edward Wilson, the prophet of socio-biology who claimed to explain human institutions as mechanisms for the preservation of individual genetic patrimony, in *The View from Afar*. Against the biological reductionism of what he called a *soi-disant* science, Lévi-Strauss held up the logic of culture, values, and history, which exercise ‘a selection pressure that is much more lively, and whose effects are felt much sooner, than the slow motion of biological evolution’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 39). As he wrote in the 1940s:

Each human society conditions its own physical perpetuation by a complex body of rules [...] or simply by the more or less systematic application of moral, social, economic, and esthetic standards. [...] Men have *made* themselves to no less an extent than they have made the races of their domestic animals, the only difference being that the process has been less conscious or voluntary. (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a: 353)

The response to these accusations can be found throughout Lévi-Strauss’ work, demonstrating how, when faced with the great questions of anthropology, he always endowed the history of man and

society with that creative temporality that he seemed to deny them in his more self-reflective writings, where the author's polemic style gave his ideas a radical flavor that augmented the force of their impact. In fairness to his critics, the real theoretical stakes at play in works like the *Mythologiques* are often hidden. 'It is not surprising, then', the author of *Totemism* concluded, 'that the philosophers do not feel themselves to be involved; they are not involved, in fact, because the scope of the undertaking is beyond their apprehension, whereas, being more directly concerned, semiologists may be interested in the form and anthropologists in the content' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 693).

In reality, even the most abstract and apparently atemporal mental constructions – like the logical contrasts that govern human thought – only acquire their full meaning through constant, humble, even philological attention to the innumerable dimensions of history. Lévi-Strauss, beginning with a 1948 text appropriately titled *Ethnologie et histoire*, maintained a clear distinction between history, which he always assigned extraordinary importance, and the philosophy of history *à la Sartre*, a pseudo-history that, in every variation – lay or confessional, evolutionary or historicist – constituted an effort to suppress the problems raised by cultural diversity even while pretending to fully recognize them. Lévi-Strauss was, furthermore, always very precise in his subject and the target of his attacks. As, for example, in the fiery barbs he aimed at the Sartre of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in the final chapter of *The Savage Mind*: 'In the final chapter there is no critique of history [...]. I have too much respect for it [...]. I simply tried to react, or at least I rebelled against a trend [...] in contemporary French philosophy' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963b: 648). This philosophy of history – which seemed to Lévi-Strauss to share the same nature as myth – derived from a biblical faith in its future fulfillment and ended up secularizing its eschatological model, which became a theory of progress (Löwith, 1949). The original sin of this philosophy, which turns the classical concept of *istorein* toward the future, does not consist of its distancing from the Biblical-Christian vision, but 'rather in the preservation of pretenses that were only valid on their own terrain; that is, the terrain of faith' (Rossi, 1963: 18).⁸ In this sense Lévi-Strauss did not limit himself to rejecting the accusation of anti-historicism but, more importantly, asserted anthropology's own particular mode of interrogating historical materials, with that attention to the minute details of everyday life that made ethnologists the 'rag-pickers' of history, those who rustle through its detritus. Which is precisely what the Braudels and the other disciples of the Blochs and Febvres did, in magisterial fashion: a tangible sign that the historians of the *Annales* school, representatives of what in the 1960s was still called the *nouvelle histoire*, had in the meantime learned from ethnology and found new subjects, new perspectives, and new temporal registers.

Ultimately, the Lévi-Straussian critique of the humanistic conceptions of history shed light on the ideological nature of all conceptions of the unfolding of history that – on the basis of symmetrical notions like those of tradition or progress – reflect the ruptures, breaks, and catastrophes that mark historical processes in terms of continual, linear development. Lévi-Strauss' polemic forbade all teleological, and thus theological, views of history. In this sense the author of *Tristes Tropiques* was as far from historicism as from functionalist naturalism and anti-historicism: 'A functionalist may be far from a structuralist, as is clearly shown by the example of Malinowski' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a: 290).

Far from a classical type of anti-historicism, that is from a specific moment in the history of metaphysics, Lévi-Strauss looks rather more like a historical reductivist who must, 'in accordance with a gesture which was also Rousseau's and Husserl's, [...] "set aside all the facts" at the moment when he wishes to recapture the specificity of a structure' (Derrida, 1978: 368–369). He thus did justice to a concept, Derrida wrote, that was always complicit with a teleological, eschatological metaphysics – that is, paradoxically, with that philosophy of presence against which history was believed to stand in opposition.

V

The great appeal of Lévi-Strauss' thought lies in the constant contact between his affectionate care for historic specificity and for the naturalistic examination of societies through the study of culture and institutions, all part of his ambitious philosophical agenda. His anthropology avoids all determinism, whether biological or historical, thus unifying perspectives of otherwise difficult compatibility, like perception and intellect, quantity and quality, concrete and abstract. And above all, nature and culture, the most classical of anthropological themes both before and after Lévi-Strauss, the foundation of philosophical inquiry in the West since before Plato, in the form of the contrast between *physis*, on the one hand, and *nomos* and *techne*, on the other. Lévi-Strauss felt the need to return to that conflict as a methodologically useful tool, as in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, *The Savage Mind*, and the four volumes of the *Mythologiques*, and at the same time he clearly perceived the impossibility of accepting them, opening the way, in fact, for the deconstruction of these concepts whose truth value he had called into question (Derrida, 1978: 357). He even managed to foresee, predict even, the breakdown of the distinction between the human and natural sciences: not only because the former cannot do without the latter, but the converse as well. The hard sciences, in fact, were destined sooner or later to reintegrate culture into nature, and 'life within the whole of its physico-chemical conditions' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 247).

Analyzing particular phenomena – such as the myths of the American Indians, marriage among the Australian aborigines, the everyday life of the Indios, table manners, mass tourism, the sculpture of the Iroquois, the paintings of Poussin, the consumerist religion of Santa Claus, the poetry of Baudelaire, or the music of Wagner – always revealed something universally human, the general principle that hides in the most specific detail, marrying the rigor of scientific analysis with the sensitivity and imagination of the writer. It is not by accident that *Tristes Tropiques* – a true bestseller, which has sold millions of copies around the world – has become one of the great books of our time, the last coming of age story. A book where the travel narrative and the logic behind the choice to adopt the métier of the anthropologist go well beyond an aestheticized, preening confessionnal *à la* Chatwin, making anthropology itself a symptom of Western remorse that seeks to find in other civilizations the limits of its own. A method of *dépaysement* that allows the observer to recognize himself and obtain, 'from a *self* who reveals himself as *another* to the *I* who uses him, an evaluation which will become an integral part of the observation of other selves' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 36). He thus submitted himself to the test described in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, which consists of examining one's own identity, one's own customs, one's own beliefs, through the eyes of the other. But, above all, Lévi-Strauss taught us to seek the other within ourselves, and not only in exotic paradises or infernos that, with their reassuring distance, relieve us of the dramatic urgency of our relationship with otherness that waves of immigration and globalization have engendered.

Sixty years ago, when the First World was still cradled safely in its own illusions of magnificent and progressive destinies – the *magnifique sorti e progressive* of Leopardi's *La Ginestra* – Lévi-Strauss devoted a few visionary pages of *Tristes Tropiques* to prophetically envision the danger of religious fundamentalism that, beginning with Islam, would end up infecting the Christian West. This, and the other great questions of our present day – from the overpopulation of the earth to the aporia of cultural relativism, from the dangerous re-flowering of identitarian mythologies to the return of local sectarianism, to the concept of genetic modification that once again calls into question the boundary between nature and culture – can all be found in the work of Lévi-Strauss. In an always provocative, anticipatory form that represents the precious heritage of the last of the *maîtres à penser* in our time.

Translated from the Italian by Richard R. Nybakken

Notes

1. The phrase in question comes from a passage in Emanuele Tesauro's *Il canocchiale aristotelico* on metaphor, which Tesauro compared to a telescope: a way of seeing that makes that which is far seem near – or that which is familiar seem foreign – a concept similar to Lévi-Strauss' *regard éloigné*, or 'view from afar' (Tesauro, 1995: 480).
2. Dan Sperber has described Lévi-Strauss as a precursor of cognitivism, especially once the cognitivists realized that mental structures revealed themselves not only in laboratory experiments but also in social phenomena (2008: 70). Indeed, in one passage from *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss described the anthropologist's task as 'to contribute to a better knowledge of objectified thought and its mechanisms' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983b: 13).
3. In an interview with Didier Éribon, Lévi-Strauss stated that 'a well-ordered humanism does not begin with itself. By setting mankind apart from the rest of creation, Western humanism has deprived it of a safeguard. The moment man knows no limit to his power, he sets about destroying himself' (Lévi-Strauss and Éribon, 1991: 162).
4. In another passage, he hints at the idea of the self as that of a non-person, with a meaning not far from that which the same concept possesses in the work of Émile Benveniste (1973): 'The solidity of the self, the major preoccupation of the whole of Western philosophy, does not withstand persistent application to the same object, which comes to pervade it through and through and to imbue it with an experiential awareness of its own unreality. For the only remnant of reality to which it still dares to lay claim is that of being a "singularity", in the sense in which astronomers use the term: a point in space and a moment in time, relative to each other, and in which there have occurred, are occurring or will occur events whose density (itself in turn relative to other events, no less real but more widely dispersed) makes possible its approximate definition, always remembering of course that this nodal point of past, present and probable events does not exist as a substratum, but only in the sense that phenomena are occurring in it [...]' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 625–626). In this sense Lévi-Strauss also seems to approach the Foucault of *The Order of Things*, who speaks of man as a figure in between two modes of being in language: 'As the archaeology of our thoughts easily shows, man is an invention of a recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end' (Foucault, 1994: 387).
5. An earlier version of the French original appeared under the title 'Symbolique et temporalité' in Ricoeur (1963). Italian scholars have made several important contributions regarding the theoretical-epistemological implications of these themes in Lévi-Strauss' thought and work: I will limit myself here to citing those of Eco (1968) and Moravia (1969), as well as the lucid reflections of Caruso (1967). In a more specifically anthropological context, see Buttitta (1970), as well as Remotti (1971). See also Angioni (1973) and Solinas (1973). Lévi-Strauss also particularly informs the work of D'Onofrio: I will limit myself to citing D'Onofrio (1995, 2000). More recently, see Remotti (2008); Fabietti (2008); and Cirese (2008).
6. Criticizing philosophers' disinterest in the questions posed by ethnography and ethnology, and the anthropological issues they raise, Lévi-Strauss levied a double-edged accusation: charging them not only of spreading disinformation but also of bad faith: 'Without being fully conscious of this reaction, they hold it against me that the extra meaning I distil from the myths is not the meaning they would have liked to find there. They refuse to recognize and to accept the fact of their deafness to the great anonymous voice whose utterance comes from the beginning of time and the depths of the mind, so intolerable is it for them that this utterance should convey something quite different from what they had decided in advance should be its message' (Lévi-Strauss 1990: 640).
7. See also Sperber (1985: 64–94).
8. See also Niola (1974).

References

- Angioni G (1973) Miti e metamiti. In Cirese AM (ed) *Folklore e antropologia tra storicismo e marxismo*. Palermo: Palumbo, pp. 113–137.
- Barthes R (1964) Les sciences humaines et l'oeuvre de Lévi-Strauss. *Annales* 6: 1085–1086.
- Barthes R (1972) The Structuralist Activity. In Id., *Critical Essays*, transl. R Howard. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 213–220.

- Benveniste É (1973) *Problems of General Linguistics*. Miami: University of Miami Press.
- Buttitta A (1970) Diacronia/Sincronia, Natura/Cultura. *Uomo e Cultura* 5/6: 7–25, now in Id. (1996) *Dei segni e dei miti: una introduzione alla antropologia simbolica*. Palermo: Sellerio.
- Caruso P (1967) Introduzione. In Lévi-Strauss C, *Razza e storia e altri studi di antropologia*, ed. P Caruso, transl. P Caruso and G Neri. Turin: Einaudi, pp. 7–43.
- Cirese AM (2008) *Altri sé: per una antropologia delle invarianze*. Palermo: Sellerio.
- Derrida J (1978) Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences. In Id., *Writing and Difference*, transl. A Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 351–370.
- D’Onofrio S (1995) L’atome de parenté spirituelle. In Héritier-Augé F and Copet-Rougier É (eds) *La Parenté spirituelle*. Paris: Archives Contemporaines, pp. 82–132.
- D’Onofrio S (2000) Autour de la Règle. In Jamard J-L, Terray E and Xanthakou M (eds) *Ensubstances: textes pour Françoise Héritier*. Paris: Fayard, pp. 253–268.
- Eco U (1968) *La struttura assente*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Fabietti U (2008) Claude Lévi-Strauss nel centenario della nascita. In Kaltenbacher W (ed) *Claude Lévi-Strauss nel centenario della nascita*. Naples: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, pp. 11–33.
- Fontenay É de (2008) Lévi-Strauss, Rousseau et les ‘droits du vivant’. *Le Magazine Littéraire* 475: 76–78.
- Foucault M (1994) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1963a) *Structural Anthropology*, transl. C Jacobson and B Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1963b) Réponses à quelques questions. *Esprit* 322: 628–653.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1966) *The Savage Mind*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1983a) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Founder of the Sciences of Man. In Id., *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2, transl. M Layton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 33–43.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1983b) *The Raw and the Cooked*, transl. J and D Weightman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1990) *The Naked Man*, transl. J and D Weightman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1992) *The View from Afar*, transl. J Neugroschel and Ph Hoss. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lévi-Strauss C and Éribon D (1991) *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, transl. P Wissing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Löwith K (1949) *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Maffesoli M (2008) Martin Heidegger et Claude Lévi-Strauss: la connivence impensée. *Le Magazine Littéraire* 475: 80–81.
- Moravia S (1969) *La ragione nascosta: scienza e filosofia nel pensiero di Claude Lévi-Strauss*. Florence: Sansoni.
- Niola M (1974) Alcune osservazioni sul concetto di storia nell’etnologia di Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Annali dell’Università di Lecce. Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, VI (1971–73).
- Remotti F (1971) *Lévi-Strauss: struttura e storia*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Remotti F (2008) *Contro natura: una lettera al Papa*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Ricoeur P (1963) Symbolique et temporalité. *Archivio di Filosofia*, xxxiii, 1–2 (*Ermeneutica e tradizione*): 5–31, 32–41.
- Ricoeur P (1974) Structure and Hermeneutics. In Id., *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. D Ihde, transl. W Domingo et al. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 27–61.
- Rossi P (1963) Prefazione. In Löwith K, *Significato e fine della storia: i presupposti teologici della filosofia della storia*. Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, pp. 9–18.
- Sperber D (1985) *On Anthropological Knowledge: Three Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sperber D (2008) Une pensée à l’orée des sciences cognitives. *Le Magazine Littéraire* 475: 70–71.
- Solinas PG (1973) Lévi-Strauss, le strutture della parentela e le posizioni marxiste. In Cirese AM (ed) *Folklore e antropologia tra storicismo e marxismo*. Palermo: Palumbo, pp. 79–111
- Tesauro E (1995) Il cannochiale aristotelico [1670]. In Dooley B (ed) *Italy and the Baroque: Selected Readings*. New York: Garland, pp. 460–486.