

Introduction Before and after structuralism

Claude Lévi-Strauss can be regarded as one of the major intellectual figures of the twentieth century. An anthropologist by profession, author of works whose technical complexity would seem to exclude all but a small group of initiates, everything about Lévi-Strauss would seem to confine him to the more esoteric spheres of academic exchange. And yet his reputation extends far beyond his original area of specialization. In France, by the end of the twentieth century, he had assumed the status of the elder of the tribe, a respected sage, a ‘living national treasure’.¹ Repeatedly, surveys of the French intellectual scene have designated him as France’s leading thinker, and he has been the subject of countless interviews.²

Born in Brussels in 1908, Lévi-Strauss’s original training was in philosophy, but like a number of his contemporaries he quickly became disillusioned with the subject and decided to concentrate on ethnology. After a year in secondary education he was offered a teaching post in sociology at the University of São Paulo, which enabled him to undertake a series of fieldwork expeditions into the Brazilian interior. His contacts with the indigenous inhabitants were vividly described in *Tristes tropiques* (1955), an autobiography which has since become a best-seller and ensured his wider celebrity. The crucial experience, however, was the period spent teaching in New York during the war, when he met most of the leading American anthropologists of the day, and began what was to be a lifelong friendship and collaboration with the Russian phonologist Roman Jakobson. Decisively, Jakobson introduced him to the methods of structural linguistics, which he would go on to apply in his pioneering work on kinship structures and mythology. After the war Lévi-Strauss remained in the United States as the French cultural attaché in New York, returning to France at the end

¹ Cathérine Clément, in *Magazine Littéraire* 311 (June 1993), 22.

² See, for example, the poll of students, intellectuals and politicians published in the journal *Lire* in April 1981, cited in David Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Bearer of Ashes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 1; Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984), p. 281; *Homo academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 261–3. More recently, a survey of contemporary French intellectuals in *Le Nouvel Observateur* places Lévi-Strauss at the head of the different thinkers reviewed, before both Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida (*Le Nouvel Observateur* 1508 (30 September – 6 October 1993), 4).

2 Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years

of the 1940s. In 1950 he was appointed to the chair in comparative religions at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, and in 1960 took up the chair in social anthropology at the prestigious Collège de France. In 1973 he was elected to the Académie française.³

For many, the most important contribution Lévi-Strauss has made to contemporary thought has been his theory of *structuralism*. Lévi-Strauss believed that linguistics, following the ground-breaking work of Ferdinand de Saussure earlier in the century, had been the only discipline within the so-called human sciences to have achieved a level of analytical consistency comparable to that of the natural sciences. His ambition was to introduce a similar degree of rigour into his own discipline, anthropology. Taking inspiration from Saussure's anticipation of a *semiology*, or science of signs, of which language would be only one particular instantiation, he argued for the *symbolic* nature of social institutions. The collective constructs that mediate relationships between the different members of a community are symbolic to the extent that their construction is a matter of arbitrary convention and that they together form a system in many ways independent of the lower levels of social infrastructure. If one accepts this definition of society, then it follows that the same methods of analysis developed in structural linguistics are applicable to different aspects of social life.

Lévi-Strauss's version of structuralism has been immensely influential, not only in anthropology, but in a range of other disciplines, from history and psychoanalysis to philosophy and literary studies. The phenomenon of structuralism, as it developed in France in the 1960s in particular, captured the attention of the Parisian intelligentsia and set the terms of intellectual debate for the entire decade. With its combination of science and humanism, structuralism was seen as the logical successor to existentialism, the philosophical movement which, under the charismatic leadership of Jean-Paul Sartre, had dominated French intellectual life since the war. What is often ignored is the extent to which Lévi-Strauss's original formulation of structuralism was embedded in problems specific to anthropology, not simply problems of anthropological theory, but more generally problems of definition – definition of the nature and scope of anthropology and its relationship with the other human sciences. By comparison with Britain or the USA, the emergence of anthropology as a separate and autonomous discipline was a relatively late occurrence in France. Systematic fieldwork was begun only in the 1930s, and for a long time the discipline lacked a strong theoretical framework. On the institutional plane, anthropology was normally viewed as a subdiscipline of sociology, itself a relative newcomer and far from being firmly established in the traditional university curriculum. Various reasons are given for the late development of anthropology in France. The first

³ For a more detailed account of Lévi-Strauss's biography, see Marcel Hénaff's chronology in *Magazine Littéraire* 311 (June 1993), 16–21. To date, there has been no standard biography of Lévi-Strauss.

and perhaps most significant is the continuing influence of Durkheimian sociology, with its highly developed programme of research and well-defined rules of methodology. Though the initial impetus given to French ethnology owed much to the efforts of Durkheim and especially his nephew and collaborator, Marcel Mauss, the reverse side of such distinguished origins was subordination to the theoretical programme of the school, allowing little scope for independent development. As for fieldwork, one of the crucial defining features of the discipline, its late appearance in France is frequently attributed to the disappearance of many of its most promising candidates during the First World War.⁴

Whatever the different reasons for the late emergence of anthropology in France, Lévi-Strauss was clearly an instrumental figure, both in facilitating and completing that emergence. Viewed in chronological sequence, his career follows almost symmetrically the different phases of professionalization and institutionalization of the discipline. In the 1930s he was part of the first generation of French ethnologists to undertake fieldwork. In the 1950s and 1960s the academic positions he occupied, first at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, later at the Collège de France, reflected the growing importance of anthropology as a key discipline within the new human sciences. While it would be wrong to discount the important contributions of other prominent ethnologists of the same generation – Bastide, Dumont, Griaule or Leiris are the names that spring most immediately to mind – it is Lévi-Strauss who provides the most consistent and comprehensive programme for French anthropology in the years following the war. Through Lévi-Strauss, what in France had been termed *ethnologie* became *anthropologie*, not simply another of the human sciences, but *the* human science *par excellence*. Thanks to Lévi-Strauss, and despite the qualified and at times hostile reception of structuralism, a discipline that had suffered from a distinct lack of theorization became arguably the most theoretical of the human sciences.

The purpose of this book is not to reopen one or another chapter of the structuralist debate in France, which has for the most part been discussed, documented and finally assimilated into standard accounts of contemporary French thought.⁵ Nor is it concerned with the more circumscribed and specialized

⁴ See Paul Mercier, *Histoire de l'anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966); Victor Karady, 'Prehistory of French Sociology' in Charles C. Lemert (ed.), *French Sociology. Rupture and Renewal since 1968* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 33–47 and 'Le Problème de la légitimité dans l'organisation historique de l'ethnologie française', *Revue française de sociologie* 23.1 (January–March 1982), 17–35; Jean Jamin, 'L'Anthropologie française' in Pierre Bonte and Michel Izard (eds.) *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), pp. 289–95.

⁵ In particular, see Vincent Descombes, *Le Même et l'autre. Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979); *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding (Cambridge University Press, 1980); see also François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme, I: Le Champ du signe, 1945–1966; II: Le Chant du cygne, 1967 à nos jours* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991 and 1992); *History of Structuralism*, 2 vols., trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

4 Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years

question of structural theory in anthropology and the social sciences.⁶ Instead, its intention is to focus on the formative period of Lévi-Strauss's career, a period of approximately twenty years, from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, when he is establishing the foundations of his theoretical work, but at the same time, and often inseparably, articulating a more general programme for French anthropology. The approach of the following chapters will be to concentrate on what the author considers to be some of the defining texts of this 'first' period of Lévi-Strauss's career, from the early fieldwork monographs to *Totemism* and *The Savage Mind*.⁷ By the time of publication of these last two works, in 1962, the main outline of Lévi-Strauss's programme for anthropology has been delineated; following the appearance of the *Mythologiques* cycle in 1964, it could be said that he is practising a form of 'normal science' within the parameters of that programme.⁸ From this perspective, the texts of the pre-1964 period are qualitatively more diverse, and arguably more interesting, than those of the second period, in that they represent an extended work of construction, the construction of what to all intents and purposes one could term a *paradigm*, a set of premises and practices, concepts and values adequate to the new anthropology. The following study will be looking at five areas of paradigm construction in Lévi-Strauss's work:

- The institutional and interdisciplinary context. In his earlier work, Lévi-Strauss's declarations on the place of anthropology in the human sciences are not pronounced in a disciplinary or institutional vacuum: the terrain is, to say the least, an overdetermined one, requiring a systematic definition of the nature, methods and objectives of anthropology in order to establish its specificity within the present configuration of disciplines in the university. This extended work of definition, and Lévi-Strauss's various attempts to situate anthropology in relation to adjacent disciplines in the human sciences,

⁶ See, for example, Alan Jenkins, *The Social Theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Simon Clarke, *The Foundations of Structuralism. A Critique of Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Movement* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981); Marcel Hénaff, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Belfond, 1991); *Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Making of Structural Anthropology*, trans. Mary Baker (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁷ This approach will not exclude reference to later texts that might give retrospective insight on this or that aspect of Lévi-Strauss's thought. Most important in this respect are the different interviews Lévi-Strauss has given since the late 1950s, notably the conversations with Didier Eribon (1988), which are an invaluable source of information on the background to his intellectual development.

⁸ As Gary Roth remarks, 'Commentators and critics of Lévi-Strauss alike have agreed that his ideas exhibit a remarkable consistency from beginning to end. This, no doubt, is due (at least in part) to the fact that he had already completed his intellectual evolution by the time his ideas were exposed to widespread and close scrutiny. Certainly by 1964 and the publication of his first volume on myths, this was true.' ('Claude Lévi-Strauss in Retrospect', *Dialectical Anthropology* 18 (1993), 52).

is the subject of chapter 1. It emerges that there is a systematic exclusion on Lévi-Strauss's part of anthropology's closest disciplinary neighbour, sociology, the effect of which is to place anthropology at the centre of the human and social sciences. As a general theory of culture, it becomes the indispensable reference point for all discourse on human society. However, Lévi-Strauss's strategic promotion of anthropology is not without its ambiguities, as it appears that there is a certain tension in his text between the claims to scientific interest of his discipline and the desire to preserve its force as a radical form of cultural critique.

- As has been noted, the development of French anthropology owes much to the activities of the Durkheimian school earlier in the century. An important aspect of Lévi-Strauss's early work is how he comes to terms with the past of his discipline, in short, how he is able to assimilate but also transform the Durkheimian tradition. Chapter 2 looks at his mediation of the work of Marcel Mauss, whose model of exchange is the starting point of his theory of kinship. We examine how Lévi-Strauss's theory of reciprocity attempts to give a philosophical foundation to the sociological model provided by Mauss, and how, more generally, there is an attempt to unify the different modes of social interaction, including exchange, under the category of communication. Finally, there is an analysis of one of Lévi-Strauss's rare excursions into political anthropology, where he uses the model of exchange to examine relations of power and authority in so-called primitive societies.
- While Lévi-Strauss's early work was concerned principally with problems of social organization, culminating in 1949 in the monumental *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, his election to the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in 1950 carried with it a change of specialization, from kinship studies to the anthropology of religions. Chapter 3 looks at the detail of this transition, how Lévi-Strauss's negotiation of his new area of research involves both the strategic delimitation of a domain susceptible to objective analysis and the development of a method adequate to such analysis. In the seminal *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, published in 1950, we see that the ambivalent homage paid to the father of French anthropology is the pretext for a more personal exploration of the field of structural anthropology, the different statements on the symbolic nature of social institutions preparing the ground for the programmatic texts of the 1950s. We also look at the early texts on magic and shamanism, which articulate some of the central premises of Lévi-Strauss's anthropology: the effectiveness of symbolic representation; the essential rationalism of native thought. In our commentary on

6 Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years

‘The Structural Study of Myth’, taken as a working example of structural analysis, it is argued that Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation of the nature and function of myth cannot be understood with reference to the linguistic model alone, and needs to be read in the context of the ambient science and technology of the period, as exemplified in disciplines such as information theory and cybernetics.

- For Lévi-Strauss, the first goal of anthropology, as a human science, is objectivity, the discovery of structural constants that would be independent of the contingent observer and his or her particular categories, values or beliefs. He is resistant to the idea of a possible *application* of anthropological knowledge, the subordination of its research mission to narrowly utilitarian ends, as can be the case in other branches of the social sciences. At the same time, the influence of structuralism in France cannot be reduced simply to the effect of its theoretical content. An integral part of Lévi-Strauss’s programme for anthropology is his concern with its *missions*, how anthropology as a human science speaks to the moral consciousness of modern humanity. This articulation of a new humanism, as it was called, does not necessarily mean a separation of the scientific and the ideological, as some commentators have suggested.⁹ In chapter 4 we look at the different components of the new humanism, and show how the values Lévi-Strauss advances in his work are in each case continuous and consistent with his theory. In particular, we examine how the humanist claims of social or structural anthropology effectively challenge the position of philosophy as the traditional source of humanistic discourse in France. Lévi-Strauss’s construction of a specific genealogy for his discipline, and his designation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as its founding father, would be part of this strategic decentering of philosophy.
- A common distinction made between the natural sciences and the human and social sciences is that in the first it is normally possible to dissociate items of objective knowledge from the individuals or groups responsible for their construction. A particular advance in scientific knowledge might attach the name of an individual or group of individuals to a law, theorem or model of interpretation, but once absorbed into the current paradigm of the discipline in question, these constructs will take on a quasi-autonomous existence in relation to their creator or creators. In the human and social sciences, by

⁹ David Pace argues that there is a division or ‘split’ in Lévi-Strauss’s thought and personality between ‘the narrow and austere scientist’ and ‘the speculative and passionate philosopher’ (*Claude Lévi-Strauss*, p. 17). This is, in my opinion, too dualistic an evaluation of both his ‘character’ and his work.

contrast, such dissociation is more problematic, there being much more of a tendency to retain and emphasize the link between a ‘thinker’ and a ‘corpus’ of thought, even where certain concepts or models derived from that corpus might have become more or less integrated into the deep structure of a discipline. This tendency towards the biographical, that is, the maintenance of an *articulation* between ‘life’ and ‘thought’, is perhaps even more marked in the case of individuals recognized as the founders of particular disciplines or movements. In this case, there is the additional complication of discipleship, the interpersonal field which forms around an individual and a doctrine and which works to ensure their continuation. The same problem of association is clearly present in the case of Lévi-Strauss. Though in his attempt to construct a coherent paradigm for his discipline, Lévi-Strauss’s manifest desire was that structuralist method should become in a sense detached from his person, that it should, by analogy with the natural sciences, acquire a truth and self-evidence independent of its instance of enunciation, the reality is that it has become inseparable from the name and persona of Lévi-Strauss. This has partly to do with the ideological component of structuralism, noted above, but the picture is further complicated by the fact that at a critical stage in his career, Lévi-Strauss published what is essentially an autobiographical text, *Tristes tropiques*. It will be seen in chapter 5 – and this may be the paradox of a certain kind of autobiography – that in the case of Lévi-Strauss, the incidence of the ‘personal’ on the development of a discipline can be both slight and considerable, that the definition of a discipline can in some senses be inseparable from a process of self-definition. This essential implication of the theoretical, the ideological and the biographical is examined through the example of a number of curious statements or confessions, made in *Tristes tropiques* and in subsequent interviews: the author’s description of his ‘neo-lithic’ mind, comparable to the semi-nomadic existence of his ethnographic subjects; his composition of a play, ‘The Apotheosis of Augustus’, at a critical point in his fieldwork experience; his confessed distaste for fieldwork; his comments on his deficient memory; and his professed lack of a normal sense of personal identity.

One of the most significant points to emerge from the following study will be the high degree of *continuity* between the different areas of analysis detailed above, their overall coherence. This is not the projected coherence of the commentator anxious to impose a degree of order on his or her subject of study; rather, it is internal to Lévi-Strauss’s work itself, the result of a *willed* coherence that permeates every part of his thought and his writing. As we shall be seeing,

Lévi-Strauss is a systematic thinker. The example of his earlier texts is that of a constructor, establishing in sequence, step by step, the different conceptual cells or building blocks that will make up the edifice of structuralist theory. At the same time, we will discover that this is not a purely epistemological enterprise. The close articulation of the epistemological and the ethical in Lévi-Strauss's work, the manner in which he articulates his life and his work, means that this work – this *life-work* – possesses an aesthetic unity that transcends the narrowly scientific programme of structuralism. Indeed, in the course of our analysis it will become apparent that the paradigm of structuralism cannot simply be equated with the field of structuralist theory, and that it amounts to something altogether more complex.¹⁰

Before we begin, however, a word on language.

There is an episode in Lévi-Strauss's professional biography which is perhaps not always given the attention it deserves. This is the period he spent in North America during the Second World War, and for a few years following the war, a period that covers the larger part of the 1940s.¹¹ On the one hand, his initial departure to the United States in 1941 was a necessary one – given his Jewish background, to have remained in France at this point would almost certainly have meant deportation and death. On the other hand, this enforced exile is presented as a particularly fortunate twist of fate, as the teaching position Lévi-Strauss was given at the New School for Social Research in New York was the occasion of the decisive meeting with Jakobson in 1942. One may speculate on what the history of structuralism might have been had this meeting not taken place, indeed, whether structuralism itself would have taken place at all. From the point of view of the history of French anthropology, the picture is a little more nuanced. The introduction to Jakobson was certainly a key moment, but no less important, perhaps, was Lévi-Strauss's personal contact, during his stay in the United States, with many of the prominent figures of American anthropology: Boas, Benedict, Kroeber, Linton, Lowie.¹² Added to this were the countless hours spent in the New York Public Library, quietly sifting and assimilating

¹⁰ It is not my intention in this book to deal with the question of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetics. This represents a whole area of study in itself, and has already been the object of an important monograph by José G. Merquior (*L'Esthétique de Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975)).

¹¹ On the importance of Lévi-Strauss's North American experience, see Anne Cohen-Solal, 'Claude Lévi-Strauss aux Etats-Unis', in *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, special issue of *Critique* 50.620–1 (January–February 1999), 13–25.

¹² *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. Paula Wissing (University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 35–9; *De Près et de loin* (Paris: Plon, 1988), pp. 54–60. Page references for Lévi-Strauss's major works will henceforth be given in the main text, with titles abbreviated in accordance with the list of abbreviations provided on pages ix–x. In each case the reference for the original French text follows that of the English translation. I have provided my own translations for texts for which there is no available English translation.

the mass of ethnographic documentation deposited there. On Lévi-Strauss's own admission, what he knows of anthropology, he learnt during this period (*CLS2*, 43; *PL*, 65).

It is one of the ironies of the history of the reception of Lévi-Strauss's work in anthropology that he has sometimes been reproached by his French colleagues for his undue attachment to the 'Anglo-Saxon' tradition, while his English-speaking colleagues have criticized his 'French' penchant for speculation, abstraction and generalization, a rationalism that can be economical in its treatment of observed fact. Leaving aside these conventional and mutually constraining stereotypes of the 'French' and the 'Anglo-Saxon', what is interesting about the North American episode is that it is not simply a professional apprenticeship, but also and inseparably a cultural and linguistic experience. While the fieldwork expeditions of the 1930s may have provided Lévi-Strauss with his first experience of radical displacement, it could be said that the North American experience represents a second stage of defamiliarization, a form of participant observation of much longer duration and much deeper implication. This second initiation, as it were, required a linguistic competence that had been singularly lacking in his fieldwork experience – this very French academic suddenly found himself having to speak, teach, read and write in English. It is the last of these activities, writing, that particularly concerns us here, as it is a fact not frequently commented upon that a number of Lévi-Strauss's important early texts were originally written in English. The monograph on the Nambikwara Indians was first written in English in 1941, several years before its appearance in French, as part of Lévi-Strauss's doctoral thesis, in 1948.¹³ Even more importantly, perhaps, several chapters of *Structural Anthropology*, including the seminal essays on linguistics and anthropology and the structural analysis of myth, also made their first appearance in English.¹⁴ This is not an idle point of bibliographical detail, of interest only to scholars of Lévi-Strauss. In a world where French theory has become an exportable commodity, a powerful contributor to the international circulation of ideas, the question of translation, of the quality and depth of translation, is a crucial one. When, as is the case with Lévi-Strauss, there is the additional complication of a *bilingual* formulation of theory, then one is entitled to take a moment to reflect on the matter. Lévi-Strauss himself is in fact sensitive to the possible problems of his intellectual transactions between English and French. In the preface to the French edition

¹³ See *Magazine Littéraire* 311 (June 1993), 18. In his 1972 interviews with Jean José Marchand, Lévi-Strauss says that he wrote the monograph in English in order to teach himself the language, as his post at the New School For Social Research required him to teach in English (*Archives du XX^e siècle*, part 3).

¹⁴ 'Language and the Analysis of Social Laws' (1951), 'Social Structure' (1952), 'Linguistics and Anthropology' (1953), 'The Structural Study of Myth' (1955). 'The Place of Anthropology in the Social Sciences' (1954) was first published both in English and French.

of *Structural Anthropology* published in 1958, he apologizes to the reader for what he considers to be the unevenness of the essays, from the point of view of their composition. This part of the preface, which takes up over half of the French text, is left out of the 1963 English translation, but it is worth quoting the passage to get an idea of Lévi-Strauss's own linguistic experience, and the difficulties he encounters when working between two languages, English and French. He writes:

When putting together this collection of essays, I came up against a difficulty of which I feel I must inform the reader. Several of my articles were written directly in English, so I had to translate them. As I worked through these texts, I was struck by the difference of tone and composition between those written in one or the other language. The result is a certain heterogeneity which, I fear, is detrimental to the overall balance and unity of the book.

This difference can doubtless be explained, in part, by sociological factors: one doesn't think and doesn't present a paper in the same way, when one is addressing a French- or English-speaking audience. But there are also personal factors. However accustomed I am to the English language, a language I've taught in for several years, my use of it is inaccurate and my range limited. I think in English what I write in this language, but without always being aware of it, I say what I can with the linguistic means at my disposal, not what I want. This explains the feeling of strangeness I get reading my own texts, when I have to transcribe them into French. Since the reader will most likely share my feeling of dissatisfaction, I thought it was necessary to give the reason for it. (AS1, i-ii, my translation)

It is easy to see why the translators left this passage out of the English translation. In a sense, it does not directly concern the English-speaking reader, who is interested only in the content of the translated text and not in questions of linguistic priority or provenance. It is, however, of particular interest to us here. Because although, in fact, only four or five out of the seventeen chapters of *Structural Anthropology* were first written in English, those chapters are among the most theoretically demanding and complex texts in the book. Lévi-Strauss's solution to the problem, as he sees it, is to make a very free translation of the English, paraphrasing some passages and extending and developing others. The result in the final English translation of *Structural Anthropology* is a strange hybrid of the original English text and the translation of Lévi-Strauss's French modifications. Inevitably, there are omissions, compressions, ellipses.

The problems Lévi-Strauss encounters when working in the foreign medium of English, and the problems he has in retranslating that intellectual experience into his native tongue, are a useful reminder of the somewhat analogous position of those of us involved in the mediation of his work. If, as he confesses above, Lévi-Strauss experiences a kind of defamiliarization when reading himself in English, then the present author has frequently felt a similar sense of strangeness when reading the different English translations of Lévi-Strauss's work. While