

Claude Lévi-Strauss  
*The Formative Years*

Lévi-Strauss is one of the major intellectual figures of the twentieth century. His theory of structuralism has been influential not only in anthropology, but across the entire field of the humanities and social sciences. This book looks at the formative period of his career, from the 1940s to the early 1960s, where he attempts to define both his own place in anthropology and the place of anthropology in the wider context of the human sciences in France. Through a close reading of key texts, Christopher Johnson provides an introduction to important aspects of Lévi-Strauss's thought, at the same time posing more general questions concerning the construction of theory and the different modes of conceptualization that inform theory. Johnson looks at the ideological and autobiographical dimensions of Lévi-Strauss's work, and demonstrates how the impact of structuralism as an intellectual movement has clearly been greater than the sum of its theoretical parts.

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON is Professor of French at the University of Nottingham and a member of the editorial board of *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory*. His previous publications include *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), and *Derrida: The Scene of Writing* (London: Phoenix, 1997).

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-0-521-01667-4 — Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years  
Christopher Johnson  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

# Claude Lévi-Strauss

*The Formative Years*

---

Christopher Johnson

*University of Nottingham*



Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-0-521-01667-4 — Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years  
Christopher Johnson  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521016674](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521016674)

© Christopher Johnson 2003

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2003

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-81641-0 Hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-01667-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

La génération à laquelle j'appartiens fut essentiellement préoccupée d'introduire un peu plus de rigueur dans nos disciplines; elle s'est donc efforcée, chaque fois qu'elle étudiait des phénomènes, de limiter le nombre des variables qu'il fallait considérer.

(Lévi-Strauss, 'Anthropologie, histoire, idéologie', 184–5)

(My generation was essentially concerned with introducing a little more rigour into our disciplines. So each time that we studied a particular set of phenomena, we tried as much as possible to limit the number of variables under consideration.)

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-0-521-01667-4 — Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years  
Christopher Johnson  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

*For my sisters, my elementary structure of kinship*

## Contents

---

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page viii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	ix
Introduction Before and after structuralism	1
1 The place of anthropology	12
2 The model of exchange	31
3 From kinship to myth	68
4 Structuralism and humanism	104
5 Anthropology and autobiography	148
Conclusion The will to coherence	180
<i>Bibliography</i>	192
<i>Index</i>	203

## Acknowledgements

---

Earlier versions of parts of chapters have appeared in the following publications: 'Lévi-Strauss and the Place of Anthropology', *Paragraph* 13.3 (November 1990), 229–50; 'Elective Affinities, Other Cultures', *Paragraph* 16.1 (March 1993), 67–77; 'Cinna's Apotheosis: *Tristes tropiques* and the Structure of Redemption', *French Studies* 48.3 (July 1994), 299–309; 'Authority', *Paragraph* 17.3 (November 1994), 200–6; 'Lévi-Strauss et la logique du sacré', in Christopher Thompson (ed.), *L'Autre et le sacré: surréalisme, cinéma, ethnologie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), pp. 249–59; 'La Leçon de philosophie: de Derrida à Lévi-Strauss', in Michel Lisse (ed.), *Passions de la littérature – Avec Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), pp. 125–39; 'The Writing Lesson Revisited', *Modern Language Review* 92.3 (July 1997), 599–612; 'The Voice of Lévi-Strauss: Anthropology and the *Sciences humaines*', in Seán Hand and Irving Velody (eds.), *Who Speaks? The Voice in the Human Sciences, History of the Human Sciences* 10.3 (August 1997), 122–33; 'Introduction', 'From Mauss to Lévi-Strauss' in Christopher Johnson (ed.), *Sociology and Anthropology, Modern and Contemporary France* 5.4 (November 1997), 405–8; 421–32; *Derrida. The Scene of Writing* (London: Phoenix, 1997); 'Structuralism, Biology and the Linguistic Model', in J. Wolfreys, J. Brannigan and R. Robbins (eds.), *The French Connections of Jacques Derrida* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 135–48; 'Ambient Technologies, Uncanny Signs', in *Technologies of the Sign, Oxford Literary Review* 21 (November 1999), 117–34. I would like to thank the editors and publishers for permission to reproduce the relevant sections of these publications.

I wish also to express my gratitude to the different institutions which, at the various stages of this project, have provided me with the freedom, facilities and stimulating environments necessary to its completion: Trinity College, Cambridge; the Humanities Research Centre at Irvine, California; the universities of Keele and Nottingham. I wish to thank the many individuals, friends and colleagues, who in their different ways have given me encouragement, inspiration and support, in particular Malcolm Bowie, Marian Hobson, Diana Holmes, Peggy Kamuf, Diana Knight, Judith Still and Michael Worton. I thank Jessica Kuper and the editorial team at Cambridge University Press for their sympathetic and expert guidance through the publication of this book. I thank the three anonymous readers whose informed comments and criticisms were so essential in the final stages of the project. Finally, I wish to pay tribute to the intellectual inspiration of a thinker whose work has always helped, and continues to help me to think, Jacques Derrida.

## Abbreviations

---

### Works by Lévi-Strauss in French

AS1	<i>Anthropologie structurale</i>
AS2	<i>Anthropologie structurale deux</i>
CC	<i>Le Cru et le cuit</i>
ELS	<i>Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss</i>
HN	<i>L'Homme nu</i>
IM1	<i>Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss</i>
MC	<i>Du Miel aux cendres</i>
OMT	<i>L'Origine des manières de table</i>
PD	<i>Paroles données</i>
PL	<i>De près et de loin</i>
PS	<i>La Pensée sauvage</i>
RE	<i>Le regard éloigné</i>
SEP	<i>Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté</i>
TA	<i>Le totémisme aujourd'hui</i>
TT1	<i>Tristes tropiques</i>

### Translations and texts in English

AM	<i>Anthropology and Myth: Lectures 1951–1982</i>
CLS1	<i>Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss</i> (Charbonnier)
CLS2	<i>Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss</i> (Eribon)
ESK	<i>The Elementary Structures of Kinship</i>
HA	<i>From Honey to Ashes</i>
IM2	<i>Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss</i>
MM	<i>Myth and Meaning</i>
NM	<i>The Naked Man</i>
OTM	<i>The Origin of Table Manners</i>
RC	<i>The Raw and the Cooked</i>
SA1	<i>Structural Anthropology</i>



x	List of abbreviations
SA2	<i>Structural Anthropology 2</i>
SM	<i>The Savage Mind</i>
T	<i>Totemism</i>
TT2	<i>Tristes tropiques</i>
VA	<i>The View from Afar</i>