Discussion

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DISCUSSION ¹

Philippe Erikson:

I want to thank all four of you for this wonderful panel, and especially for showing that, despite my somewhat mediocre organizational skills (regarding the late invitations of Manuela and Philippe), I am still, after all, a good predator, who tricked you all into this unforgettable intellectual feast. So again, many thanks.

We have a little time for a general discussion before we set up for the last presentation; so I'd like to open it up now.

Philippe Descola:

Although it may surprise some of you, I became aware rather lately that I was a structuralist. It happened long after I had completed my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Claude Lévi-Strauss, when I started giving lectures abroad, especially in the United Kingdom and in the United States. There, people would invariably qualify what I'd said as « structuralist ». A judgement that I found bizarre, as I had the impression that I departed from Lévi-Strauss on a number of issues. However, I realised after a while that this ascription was not undue in the sense that I, and probably a great number of French colleagues, shared a series of basic assumptions that can be defined, broadly speaking, as structuralist.

It is true also as Steven has said, and Manuela also, that these assumptions are not so widely accepted in other anthropological communities. Although Amazonianists, whatever their nationality, tend on the whole to be more sympathetic to them than anthropologists doing fieldwork in other parts of the world. Whether or not there is any connection, any direct connection, between structuralism and Amazonia is still an interesting question. Anne Christine and I ventured the hypothesis when we wrote the introduction to a special volume of *L'Homme on Amazonia* ², but Lévi-Strauss blatantly denied that there was any connection, intrinsic connection at least, between the emergence of structuralism and his Amazonian fieldwork.

Fernando Santos Granero:

While listening to the speakers, I found myself agreeing with what they were saying, in the sense that structuralism seems to have had little influence on US and British anthropology. And even though it has had more influence in Brazil and in

France, we have just heard one of Lévi-Strauss' most illustrious students tell us that he doesn't think of himself as a structuralist. This would suggest that structuralism hasn't had much of an impact on anthropology and has not produced as many structuralists as one might have thought. At the same time, however, I was thinking that all of us in this room, many of whom would not classify themselves as structuralists, have come here from far away to pay homage to Lévi-Strauss. So there must be something in Lévi-Strauss' work, and in structuralism in general, that has had an enormous influence on many of us. I think that this influence consists in a particular way of looking at Amerindian thought that has opened new venues and fascinating insights about Amerindian peoples; peoples who Lévi-Strauss described as « sad » in *Tristes Tropiques*, but behind whose sadness there was a fabulous and intricate intellectual world. Lévi-Strauss opened up this world for us and this is probably his greatest legacy.

Laura Rival:

A short comment and a question. As a new generation of anthropologists is rediscovering Claude Lévi-Strauss, this shouldn't happen programmatically... I mean all the partial connections should be restored and thought through and thought with. For example, in relation to what Steven Hugh-Jones told us: what makes my colleague Elizabeth Ewart's doctoral thesis impressive is not just that she is saying what Lévi-Strauss would say to Maybury-Lewis, and that this restores the truth of these societies, but that she's engaging very seriously with witchcraft, and with sorcery, and various sociological issues that can be best understood through empiricism and through functionalism. She's not trying to choose between the two.

The workshop that is going to run tomorrow and after tomorrow ³ will show all these partial connections; it will show precisely that it's not about programmatic solitude but about reopening ourselves to a very rich heritage of anthropology. French structuralists have turned back to the British functionalists when they have needed to, to Fortes in particular. Lévi-Strauss bridges French and North American anthropology; Maybury-Lewis British and North American anthropology; Nimuendajú German and... what? Brazilian? We are all combining North American, various European, and other traditions. We are all Americanists. I'm kind of well placed to know this. I was born in France, trained in North America and in England, and I now live and work in England, as a British Social Anthropologist!

This brings me to my question. It's mainly a question for Steven, it addresses Marilyn Strathern, but it's also a question for all of us in a way. I mean: Steven, do you think that Roy Wagner is a structuralist? [laughs]

Stephen Hugh-Jones:

Let me say that when I mentioned Marilyn Strathern, I was not in any sense trying to make a moral judgement (about the relative merits of structuralism vs other theoretical stances), but making a statement about my own surprise. When I took up Philippe Erikson's request, I thought immediately: « I'll have a lot to say, because *everybody* is a structuralist ». And yes, let's make it clear that a lot of people have been influenced by Lévi-Strauss, but what struck me, as I said, is that the number of people who have really engaged with that thought is relatively small.

But I actually agree. I don't think one needs to follow Lévi-Strauss to the letter at all. I mean, I don't. I have a radical disagreement with Lévi-Strauss on the subject of ritual, etc. I personally would not label myself as a structuralist. I think it's useful for certain things. Especially for things such as that which I think brings us all here together under SALSA and the International Congresses of Americanists: it's that it's a much more powerful way of integrating and comparing than other means. And that's really what interests me...

I think, yes, Wagner has certain very strong structuralist streaks in him, like in his argument when he says that in order to make convention destabilized you have to go through innovation and *vice versa*. This is a structuralist way of thinking. But as structuralism is so broad, in a sense, it doesn't seem to me...

Yes in a way it is, I think. I never actually asked Marilyn Strathern to what degree she was consciously imitating Lévi-Strauss, but it does strike me that her book *The Gender of the gift* is organised in a highly structuralist way. I mean her treatment of Western and Eastern Highlands as transformations of one another, container and contained, etc., etc.. But whether that came from Lévi-Strauss or rather that actually comes from Wagner, I can't say. A lot of it comes from Wagner.

But I think that to some extent he is. I think one of the reasons Roy Wagner is a structuralist is because he has this idea about looking at things in transformational ways⁴.

Philippe Descola:

About Wagner just a word. I think he's also a structuralist in the sense of his sharp critique of culturalism and at the same time it's a paradox that Sahlins is a structuralist while being at the same time a culturalist. So there are great varieties of combination in structuralism.

Carlos Fausto:

I once met Marilyn Strathern and did ask if she was conscious that she was using a sort of structuralist outlook in *The Gender of the gift*. And she said: « in which sense? » I responded: Well, you know, the relations, the inversion between terms and relations, these classic Central European speculations. She said: « No, it's all in Evans-Pritchard. Just read the last pages of the Nuer. It is there ».

So I opened the book, I mean, after so many years of teaching « Anthropological Theory 101 »... And it was there. Evans-Pritchard talking about relations, and relations between relations, etc., etc. And I think it says a lot about the existence of something that is structuralist, but not strictly speaking structuralist as a school. As a matter of fact, I would not like to be a structuralist in the sense of being part of a school. So this is one thing about Marilyn Strathern.

My second comment is about David Maybury-Lewis. A couple of years ago, when I saw him for the last time, he told me he had a hundred page manuscript that he wrote in the beginning of the seventies, when he had a sabbatical year, where he was elaborating all his disagreements with Lévi-Strauss. Unfortunately he never published it. He said: « That was the turning point for me and at that moment I was conscious that I was not agreeing anymore with Lévi-Strauss. »

Manuela Carneiro da Cunha:

I just wanted to add something to this discussion. I submit there is a reason why there is no structuralist school. Being a structuralist – and this discussion kind of illustrates the point – is not the equivalent of being a functionalist or a structural functionalist, as it is not just another school. As a matter of fact, there is no structuralist school, and I'm not surprised that Philippe did not think of himself as a structuralist. In a sense no one does, even as so many of us have been inspired by Lévi-Strauss. Even when structuralism was at its zenith, its main exponents never thought of themselves as belonging to the same school. Lévi-Strauss himself, for instance, never bought Lacan. Is Roy Wagner, or is Marilyn Strathern a structuralist? I don't think such questions can be answered.

The importance of Lévi-Strauss has to do with the innovative look he inaugurates and with the bringing together of disciplines that were kept separate. Apart from the general principle of the existence of an organization beneath empirical perception, what you learn from him is not to adhere to any set of postulates or rules of method (exchange, myth analysis, etc.), but rather to dare to look otherwise, to reorganise received wisdom: just think of *Totemism Today*, a book all about the debunking of traditional categories.

This being said, I totally agree with Stephen Hugh-Jones' appraisal of Lévi-Strauss as the greatest anthropologist *tout court* (full stop).

Philippe Descola [laughing]:

Full stop.

Carlos Fausto:

You remember Manuela, when we interviewed Marshall Sahlins in 1999, and he told us that story that happened just before May 68. He was invited by Lévi-Strauss to give a seminar at the Collège de France. It was one of the articles

of *Stone Age Economics* to be. And after he finished, Lévi-Strauss addressed the room and said: « you gave us here a very good example of structural anthropology ». And Marshall said: « oh sorry, professor, I thought that structuralism was about superstructure and I'm talking about infrastructure. So I don't understand what structural anthropology is ». And Lévi-Strauss, you know, with a good dose of irony said: « Well, you see... *C'est la bonne anthropologie* ». [laughter]

Harald Prins:

Regarding the who and what of structuralism, a quick note: I believe it was Marx who said at the end of his life: « if this is Marxism, I'm not a Marxist ». But reflecting on your earlier comment about the first breakthrough of Lévi-Strauss, I think it was in 1949, when he published *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. At the time, Lévi-Strauss was at the musée de l'Homme and expected to succeed Paul Rivet as its director. His Swiss friend Alfred Métraux, who was then spending a few months in Paris while completing a UNESCO project, wrote to his American wife Rhoda in New York City that this book made an incredible impact on the Paris intellectual scene.

It is really very interesting to see what Métraux, who knew Lévi-Strauss [L-S] very well and for many years, has to tell in his letter of 12 August 1949 ⁵: « In the evening I was invited for dinner by Lévi-Strauss who lives alone in his millionaire's apartment. He gave me his huge volume about relationship systems which made him famous in no time. He is very much the Lévi-Strauss I have known before he became cultural ambassador, so it was easier to talk with him. Rivet is retiring in a few weeks and he [L-S] hopes to get his [Rivet's] various jobs, but Rivet is accumulating so many blunders that L-S' chances are fading. He is obviously worried and pessimistic. [...] Yesterday I spent three hours with Rivet. He is getting very old and said much nonsense, but he is not harmless because his prestige at UNESCO and elsewhere is very high and the old gentleman is still extraordinarily active ».

Two days later, Métraux wrote about a trip he made with Lévi-Strauss to the Paris « flea market » where « junk » can be bought « from all over the world, from just plain and filthy rubbish to books and the most elegant furniture. [...] half of the vendors are Oriental Jews and the others Moroccans or Algerians. The flea market covers a few miles and you need at least three hours to see it all. Lévi-Strauss has discovered very valuable anthropological objects there and this beautiful morning trip was to get a beautiful Tonga club which was sold for 3\$... Yesterday I was shown [at the musée de l'Homme] an excellent movie on possession in West Africa [probably « Initiation à la danse des possédés, » a 22-minute black-and white film by Jean Rouch and produced by CNRS]... I had lunch at the Museum with the anthropologists and dinner... with Lévi-Strauss [and a few others]... Lévi-Strauss as you will see is blossoming. His position and his influence are strong and he is full of projects for the future. Among other things, he is

directing a new collection of books on anthropology. I promised a book on voodoo and another on South America... »

On 29 October 1949, Métraux wrote to Rhoda: « I am reading Lévi-Strauss' big work. It will remain, no doubt, a great classic of anthropology on the same level as Durkheim's books. It covers not only the field of kinship, but many essential elements of psychology. What a contrast with [George Peter] Murdock's book [*Social Structure*]. I understand that the reaction to it [Murdock's] is quite bad. L-S says that it is only a compilation which presents problems but does not attempt to solve any of them... The Museum [musée de l'Homme] is thriving under L-S. direction. He is feared though he inspires respect and confidence. Unfortunately chances of him staying at the head of the Museum are slight. The equivalent of the Smithsonian – the Museum of Natural History – wants to appoint a man [paleontologist Henri Vallois] who has not the faintest idea of anthropology... Tonight Pierre [Verger] and myself are invited by L. S. who will discuss with him the subject of his thesis ».

Two weeks later, on 12 November, Métraux reported to Rhoda that anthropologists Margaret Mead and Geoffrey Gorer had paid him a visit at his UNESCO office in Paris: « Margaret was in very good shape and seemed to enjoy herself... She was charming as she could be. Yesterday Lévi-Strauss gave a big party at his house for her and Geoffrey. He had summoned, as he himself says, "the elite of French intelligentsia"; unfortunately Sartre, who had promised to come, did not show up. Simone de Beauvoir was gracious and offered to review M[ead]'s last book and to publish a few chapters in *Temps modernes*, but the two women could not communicate because of the linguistic barrier. They soon formed two groups of admirers. I was pleased that MM [Margaret Mead] could talk with Lakan [Lacan] who is the most famous and the most active French psychoanalyst. He was the only one who had read MM's work. It was a very brilliant party and we regretted that she could not stay for dinner afterwards. MM was "sympathique" to everyone, but all were very surprised to see her in the flesh. They imagined her quite different, a sort of cold vamp, I believe and they were amazed to discover that she looked like a bourgeoisie who probably was a good cook... Please, darling, drop a few lines to Lévi-Strauss to congratulate him for the "Prix Pelliot" he received last week [for *Les Structures élémentaires*... at the Institut de France]. It is a great honor which gives him much publicity. He certainly deserved it ».

On 24 June 1950, now permanently stationed at UNESCO in Paris, Métraux wrote to Rhoda: « Last week also I heard a most exciting lecture by Roman Jakobson on Word and Meaning »... There was a point in his lecture when one felt that beyond linguistics there was a field in which mathematics, physics all met in some strange symphony. Though I don't think I understood everything, it was as if suddenly the veil of the future was lifted... After Jakobson's lecture, I went to a big reception at the Lévi-Strauss'. Most of the people who were there were those

whom he had invited when M. M. came last year. Merleau-Ponty, the director of *Temps modernes*, told me that he was very annoyed at the idea that anyone in the USA might think his journal communist, especially after the vehement campaigns of the Communists against it... It was really one of these parties such as only Paris can provide... By the way I accepted to give the course on field methods in anthropology at the Institute of Ethnology. I am substituting for Lévi-Strauss, unfortunately the remuneration is not very high, but what counts is the privilege. I have accepted with the [UNESCO] Department's approval... ».

Soon thereafter, building on this publishing success, Lévi-Strauss was appointed to a chair at the École des Hautes Études. In short, *Les Structures...* brought Lévi-Strauss to the attention of French intellectuals soon after he came back from the United States. During his many years of research and teaching abroad, he had incorporated so many different influences by that time in his thinking. That still intrigues us now. It was really like a total revelation of a new way of looking at things that now seems common.

Jonathan Hill:

I think there are many different structuralisms, even within Lévi-Strauss' works. Obviously there is the early Lévi-Strauss of exchange theory and *The Elementary Structures of kinship*, the period of classificatory theory (e.g., *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui* and *La Pensée sauvage*), and a later period of the *Mythologiques*.

But also, you have to distinguish clearly, as Philippe did, between this sort of radically, biologically, universalistic structuralism, which I know very few if any of us here would adhere to. I was almost squirming in my chair listening to some of the quotes. But on the other hand, when Philippe was talking about the emphasis on differences and exploring – I'd rather say improvising, innovating – with the differences that exist within and across cultures, Lévi-Strauss gave us a way out of rigidly empiricist and narrow linguistic approaches. At least for us American anthropologists, who were stuck in a narrowly semantic approach to meaning, he gave us a broader way of looking at semantic relations and classifications. Perhaps his shortcoming was that he didn't push structuralism beyond binary oppositions and relatively simple tropes, such as metaphor and metonymy. For example, if you just take binary oppositions like nature and culture, and turn them into a gradient of more-to-less cultural (or natural), then you've already shifted out of the « either/or » of binary opposition and into a qualitatively different type of semantics. And you can go beyond that to more complex and broader semantic relational meanings, such as the situational, contextual, emotional, intentional and practical. So I think in that sense we are probably all structuralists.

Philippe Descola:

It is what Lévi-Strauss attempted to do in the culinary triangle. The more complex interplay between categories, which triangle binary systems, with gradations between the oppositions. But retaining the opposition between nature and culture also led to problems in this particular analysis. Anyway, we should remember how we treat identity as anthropologists: what you are is not what you claim you are but what others perceive about you. It is the same with theoretical affiliations: even if you do not think that you are a structuralist, if you are perceived as a structuralist by others, then you are a structuralist by ascription.

Anne Christine Taylor:

Perhaps one more question and that will be the last...

Steve Rubenstein:

I'm happy too to take the position that there are many structuralisms and each of us will find our own way to draw inspiration from the vast corpus of Lévi-Strauss' work. But today, it is worth reflecting on what binds his work into one. I also share Jonathan's being disturbed by discussion of universals and I share his desire to find a way out. But today, I'd like to linger in that feeling of disturbance, because it's always been an issue for me and my own reading of Lévi-Strauss. And I think it forces us to ask a question: is there anything at stake in the variety of different kinds of structuralisms people today have suggested?

And if I understood Steve Hugh-Jones' presentation correctly, I think you (Stephen) are putting your finger on a very important tension, which is that between very local ethnography and this vast comparative project. And what I think is a stake in the comparative project, which is the search for universals, is *moral* issue. My reading of *Tristes Tropiques* is that there is a fundamental moral question motivating Lévi-Strauss' project – I won't use the word structuralism any more – but: « What does one do when one encounters someone different? » And my understanding of Lévi-Strauss' answer in that book is, that the answer to that question requires some kind of theory of humanity. Perhaps it is true, as Professor Descola points out, that Lévi-Strauss' own opposition of nature and culture is too restricted and we now understand that there is a need for a concept of humanity that is even greater than one derived from comparing different societies of *Homo sapiens*. But such a theory of humanity is still a response to this profound moral question, one that really does draw us to this comparative project.

I am calling attention to this motivating and underlying moral question really because I want to invite further comment from the panellists. But it seems to me from today's discussion that we're all caught in a tension – perhaps this is the tension that Lévi-Strauss signalled in that chapter⁶ on the play that he wrote, *L'Apothéose d'Auguste* – between remaining comfortably at home and feeling the compulsion to move outside one's self. We anthropologists can find comfort in

the very nuanced local ethnography of one group, because in our own way, that's our own confrontation with difference, and it is motivated by Lévi-Strauss's humanistic project. But remaining in the local still defers the discovery of that greater theory of humanity that the study of all cultures, all ways of being human, and the search for the universal humanity, could provide. I think that even though Lévi-Strauss felt the draw to return to the tropics, like the desire of Cinna to leave Rome again, he has moral and political reasons that always draws him back to a comparative project. And as I think about today's comments I see this continuing tension. Whereas when I read or assign even the most nuanced ethnographies, the best of them, I always wonder, « How can I use them... » – when I talk to students, when I talk to my parents – « ...to address a big moral issue that all people should be concerned with? ». I think Lévi-Strauss' sympathies are to go back to the field, and perhaps that's what makes us anthropologists. But of course instead he continued with that comparative project. But I think that this is indeed a disturbing dilemma, of what to do. I made my choices long ago (for ethnography in one locale rather than the quest for the universal), but you (Stephen Hugh-Jones, with your emphasis on the importance of the comparative project in Lévi-Strauss' work) are bringing them up again. The point I want to make is that this is not just a question of « Who is a structuralist? » and « What is structuralism? » but how we address this moral issue, the moral motivations of our work and moral implications of our work in our projects.

Stephen Hugh-Jones:

Can I make two comments on that? Not too long ago, many of you will have seen photographs in the press of some uncontacted Indians drawing bows and arrows at airplanes. Now in the 60's, had we seen this, we would have said: « Hum, I wonder who *they* are ». But now we know.

It would be rather like saying that someone had discovered another village in the Loire. So we already know it will have a church, we know it will have a *mairie*, a *boulangerie*, etc. We knew; you don't have to go to where those guys are to know they're Panoans, and if you know they're Panoans you know a lot of other things. You know what they eat, you know what their mythology will be about, etc., etc. Anthropology of Amazonia has come a *long* way. We do now know a lot. I mean we are all, and that's what brings us here, we are all in that comparative ferment. Because we believe that we have news to tell each other. That's what motivates us.

In one sense it seems to me that that is why I find that stuff is important. And that is not a moral issue. I personally do not think that anthropology stops at a tribe. It asks bigger questions.

So fieldwork is a part, but not the whole, of that enterprise. But I think the other thing that Lévi-Strauss himself says – and this is actually where I begin to part company with, or doubt, people like Strathern and Viveiros de Castro –, is that Lévi-Strauss once made the remark – and I can't remember where it is – that

if people really were radically different from each other, then field work itself would be impossible. So that there is something about the boring, quotidian, very often fly ridden, messy, and stinky business of sitting in an Amerindian village which, after two years, tells you: « actually these guys – and gals –, are very like me. I can understand them. So that in other words, I personally think, and that's where my morality resides, I don't believe that *we* are X and *they* are perspectivists; or that they are dividualists and we are individualists. I don't believe in that sort of binary thinking, because I think that I can be both. And I think that in my own fieldwork practice, that's what I learned, a lot about that. So I guess that's my answer to your question, that fieldwork is on the one hand a process by which we do one kind of comparison, which is really to try to understand something that is actually bigger than the Akwë Shavante or the Barasana. But on the other hand, there is another kind of comparison, something from which we learn a great deal about the limits and the possibilities of mutual understanding. And I think Lévi-Strauss addresses both those issues.

Philippe Erikson:

We now have two ways of concluding this event. Either shout all together, Amazonian style, or give a great hand to our panellists. [applause]

NOTES

1. The following comments have been transcribed from the recordings made during the session, and slightly edited by their authors. Rather than part of the discussion, Philippe Descola's first contribution is an excerpt from his oral presentation, to be published elsewhere (« The two natures of Lévi-Strauss », in Boris Wiseman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), and only added here to contextualize some of the other comments and questions.

2. Anne Christine Taylor and Philippe Descola (eds), *La Remontée de l'Amazone. Anthropologie et histoire des sociétés amazoniennes*, *L'Homme*, 126-128 numéro spécial, avril-décembre 1993, 600 p.

3. The following day, as a sequel to the SALSA marathon, Marc Brightman and Vanessa Grotti were organizing a Conference, also held at the musée du Quai Branly: *Humans, Animals, Plants and Things. Personhood in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia* (Paris, 22nd-23rd June, 2008).

4. In an e-mail written on Sept. 21, 2008, Jonathan Hills states that he then whispered into Laura Rival's ear that in the *Invention of Culture* Roy Wagner wrote that « [Lévi-Strauss] plays ethnosemantic tennis "with the net down" » (1981 [1975], p. 151), which is quite relevant for our understanding of how American anthropologists were receiving and reformulating Lévi-Strauss' structuralism back in the 1970s.

5. The quoted sections from Alfred Métraux's letters were inserted in the edited transcription on 17/9/2008. Copies of this correspondence were made available to me by my colleague Edgardo Krebs. Together with Sarah Fee, we are partners in the Métraux research project at the Smithsonian Institution.

6. *Tristes Tropiques*, chap. XXXVII.