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ISBN: 9780080970868

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Elsevier
**Structuralism**

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## Abstract

Structuralism is a mode of knowledge of nature and human life that is interested in relationships rather than individual objects or, alternatively, where objects are defined by the set of relationships of which they are part and not by the qualities possessed by them taken in isolation. Claude Lévi-Strauss was the spokesperson for structuralism in Anthropology, incorporating the work of many authors along the twentieth century. Three meanings of ‘structuralism’ will be distinguished, corresponding to different timescales: structuralism as a French intellectual movement of the 1960s, structuralism as a wider epistemological attitude and Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism which is a link between the two.

In a wider sense, structuralism is a mode of knowledge of nature and human life that is interested in relationships rather than individual objects or, alternatively, where objects are defined by the set of relationships of which they are part and not by the qualities possessed by them taken in isolation. Claude Lévi-Strauss was the spokesperson for a structuralist anthropology, but his structuralism incorporated the methods and ideas of predecessors and contemporaries such as Lewis Morgan, for whom the object of the investigation were “systems of relationships” and the “structure of [such] systems” (Trautmann, 2008). A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who focused on the structure of social relationships instead of individual customs, and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, who dealt with structural time rather than lived time, and the structural forms of clans instead of individual clans. Lévi-Strauss recognized these influences, as well as his debt to Marcel Mauss, the Leiden school and Marcel Granet for the structural analysis of kinship (Hénaff, 1998), and to Georges Dumézil regarding the analysis of myths. In the 1940s, the concept of structure was widespread in social anthropology, which is clear in the works by L. Murdock and C. Lévi-Strauss published in 1949 with the word ‘structure’ in their titles (Lévi-Strauss, 1967[1949]). However, in contrast with other anthropologists and sociologists who shared structural approaches to human phenomena, Lévi-Strauss explicitly attempted to formulate a structural method and demonstrate its performance through structural analyses conducted in different domains. We will distinguish here three meanings of ‘structuralism,’ corresponding to different temporal scales: structuralism as a French intellectual movement of the 1960s, structuralism as a wider epistemological attitude who took shape in early nineteenth century, and Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism which is a link between the two.

### French Structuralism

In the first sense, structuralism refers to an intellectual movement that reached its height in the 1960s in France, with no attachment to any organized group or specific institution. Instead, structuralism was a label for theses associated with R. Barthes, L. Althusser, M. Foucault, and J. Lacan in books following the publication of two seminal books by Claude Lévi-Strauss. These were The Savage Mind (1962) and The Raw and the Cooked (1964): both were chiefly responsible for placing the movement at the forefront of intellectual debate. This disparate group of maîtres à penser can be seen as representative of the French version of the linguistic turn in the Humanities. Faithful to its inspiration in F. De Saussure (rather than in C.S. Peirce or L. Wittgenstein, as in the noncontinental versions), French structuralism focused on ‘semiology’ as a science that would study ‘the life of signs at the heart of social life’ in areas such as literature (R. Barthes), philosophy (M. Foucault and L. Althusser), psychoanalysis (J. Lacan), and anthropology (C. Lévi-Strauss). French structuralism was also, in part, a reaction to Jean-Paul Sartre’s ‘philosophy of the subject,’ but it also represented a stance against the empiricism and antimentalism of Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Methodologically, French structuralism emphasized the system of signs (synchrony) instead of their history (diachrony), and the social character of such systems (langue) instead of individual performance (parole) (Saussure, 1967[1916]), pp. 30–33; Lévi-Strauss, 1950, p. xix), although this characterization has been questioned recently, through the publication of Saussure’s original writings (Maniglier, 2006). French structuralism also insisted on the connection between meaning and form or semantics and syntax, again according to Saussure’s doctrine of the inseparability of signifiant and signifié thus distinguishing itself from formalism (Lévi-Strauss, 1973, p. 139), and often described structure as systems of binary semantic contrasts, inspired in phonology. Lévi-Strauss distinguished his version ‘structuralism’ from the ‘formalism’ of Vladimir Propp’s transformational model of folk narratives, which he rejected, as well as F. Lounsbury’s structural approach, on the grounds of allegedly dissociating ‘form’ from ‘content,’ that is to say, dealing in the first case with folktales as sequences of actions and objects without the ‘bundles of semantic oppositions’ underlying them, and, in the second case, analyzing ‘kinship terminology’ without ‘marriage rules’ they are supposed to express (Lévi-Strauss, 1973, p. 139; 1967, p. xxx). N. Chomsky’s program of generative linguistics is similarly given short shrift (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, 1988, p. 160). Philosophically, French structuralists rejected the concept of an autonomous subject endowed with the attributes of freedom to act and to seek knowledge (as in Sartre, 1946), affirming the priority of structures over subjects (see Caws, 2009 for a reassessment of Sartre as a structuralist). This “déstitution of the subject” (Balibar, 2005)
is illustrated by Louis Althusser’s formula, “Ideology interpre-
lates individuals as subjects,” which condenses the idea that
individuals are made into subjects by ‘State apparatuses’ such as
family, school, and church. The ‘destitution of the subject’ as
a structuralist trope appears variously as the ‘death of the
author,’ ‘structural causality,’ ‘man is a recent invention,’ and
in Lévi-Strauss’ dictum that “myths think about themselves
among themselves ... independent of any subject” (Lévi-
Strauss, 1964, pp. 19–20). French structuralism proposed to
substitute ‘unconscious structures’ for the ‘subject’ although
the concept of structures that are innate to the human mind (or
’spirit humain’), or ‘immanent’ as opposed to self-conscious
(Lévi-Strauss, 1950, p. xxi), does not convey precisely what
they consist of or where they are to be located.

Although the rejection of the subject and the refusal of
history have been pointed to as diagnostic traits of French
structuralism, there are historically oriented versions of struc-
turalism, sometimes allowing for the creative action of subjects.
Hellenist Jean-Pierre Vernant, profusely praised by Lévi-Strauss,
is a major example (Vernant, 1986). Jean Piaget’s ‘genetic
structuralism’ characterizes cognitive structures as relatively
stable stages in the development of cognitive abilities which are
generated through the interaction between the organism and
the environment (Piaget, 1968); Pierre Bourdieu rehabilitated
the role of the acting subject, retaining the notion of a structure
as schemes for action (“principles of the generation and
structuring of practices and representations”) embodied in
a subject’s habitus; M. Sahlins argued in favor of a view of
structure phrased in the Boasian sense of “the symbolic rela-
tions of cultural order,” as both constraining human practice
and being transformed by it (Sahlins, 1985: vii). T. Turner’s
’recursively hierarchical’ systems of social production and
reproduction were proposed as a synthesis of Marxist and
epigenetic views of structure, influenced by Piaget’s and by
French Marxism (Turner, 1973). Clearly, there is more to
structuralism than is contained in the so-called French
structuralism.

Structuralism in Wider Sense

In the wider sense indicated above, structuralism refers to the
attitude toward knowledge that has roots within a philosop-
ical and scientific epistemological revolution that took place in
the late eighteenth century, represented by G. Leibniz and A.
Dürer (Petitot, 2009). In the transition from the eighteenth
century to the nineteenth century, W. Goethe formulated the
program of a science of ‘metamorphoses’ or ‘transformations,’
the goal of which would be nothing short of depicting the
underlying formal unity in wide domains of living beings and
human works, a seminal idea which was inspired by the
Kantian notion of a ‘transcendental schema,’ which purported
to explain how abstract concepts could subsume a virtually
infinite variety of particular empirical perceptions (pheno-
mena). Goethe’s program was invoked by biologist D. Thomp-
on (1992, p. 1032) who argued that similar life forms, such as
fish species, could be thought of as related to each other by
continuous transformations (Thompson, 1992, pp. 5–7, 1094),
although distinct phyla, such as fishes and worms, cannot.
Dürer, Goethe, and D’Arcy Thompson, as well as Kant,
were thus understandably acknowledged by C. Lévi-Strauss as
forerunners of structuralism as a science of ‘transformations.’ In
the 1960s, the Field Medal mathematician R. Thom proposed
that his theory of ‘morphogenesis’ was the appropriate tool for
depicting discontinuous changes of form in biological and
cultural systems, an idea which J. Petitot applied to Lévi-
Strauss’s analysis of myths (Thom, 1975(1972); Scubla, 1998;
Petitot, 2009). Along another line of thought, Goethe’s goal to
find a key with which “new plants might be devised ad itum”
would be realized in Chomsky’s concept of a generative
grammar (1966).”

Mathematics, which had long been defined as the science of
numbers and geometric shapes, came to be seen by the end of
the nineteenth century as the study of conceptual-practical
structures, the paradigm of which are transformation groups.
According to this changed view, groups of transformations
embody the notion of what is common in a family of objects,
namely, the structural properties which are conserved by the
transformations which constitute the group (Weyl, 2012,
pp. 170–171). The mathematical concept of a group of trans-
formations was extended to domains such as crystallography,
physics, biology, and psychology (Piaget, 1968). It was
however with a grain of surprise that it was realized that
‘elementary structures of kinship’ could be represented as
permutation groups, as did André Weil in his invited appendix
to Lévi-Strauss treatise (1967(1949)), which was the seed for an
extensive body of literature (e.g., White, 1963). Lévi-Strauss
came to see this use of modern mathematics to apprehend rules
governing marriage rules and kinship terminologies usage as
evidence of genuine mathematical ability among illiterate
people. It should be mentioned that André Weil’s receptivity to
Lévi-Strauss’s ideas was no accident, as he himself was a fore-
front member of the group of French mathematicians that,
since the 1930s, devoted itself to the task of reconstructing
mathematics as a theory of structures under the collective nom
de plume of Nicolas Bourbaki (1962). According to this research
program, groups are the simplest algebraic structure, expressing
symmetries and inversions; lattices and trees are examples of
structures of order, present in classifications and genealogies,
while topological structures involve the notion of continuity and
conservation of form.

The Structuralism of Lévi-Strauss

Lévi-Strauss’s scientific and literary output ranges from 1945 to
1991. Over the course of nearly half a century, Lévi-Strauss
produced three highly influential works, each of which dealt
with a distinct domain of ethnographical phenomena: kinship
(1945, 1949), classifications (1962a,b), and mythologies
kinship contains a sociological theory based on the concept of
exchange, while his theory of mythical thought hinged on the
notion of transformation. Coming between these works, The
Savage Mind was a study of classification, being a philosophical
and methodological interlude that launched Lévi-Strassian
structuralism into a wider intellectual arena not only as a social
theory but also as a philosophy of history and even as an
epistemic paradigm. It could be said that the ‘mother struc-
tures’ in the sense the previous section run through the theory

of marriage of The Elementary Structures of Kinship (permutation groups), the systems of classification of The Savage Mind (taxonomies and conceptual lattices), and the chains of mythical transformations studied in Mythologiques (mythical transformations, topological forms such as ‘Klein bottles’ and Möbius strips). However, there is more to it than that, for according to Lévi-Strauss’ persistent reminders, in the course of history events inevitably lead to the loss of structure – a melancholy view of history, which he expressed by borrowing from physics the metaphor of entropy, the assertion of ineluctable and irreversible change from ordered states toward disordered states of any system (Lévi-Strauss, 1967[1949]). This view is reasserted in his latest and post-humous writings (Lévi-Strauss, 2013). Lévi-Strauss’ analogical borrowing of scientific concepts, however, should be nuanced by the recent appreciation of his importance as a literary artist, influenced by Breton, Mallarmé, and Wagner (Mehlman, 2006) and as a original philosopher, rather than as a scientist strictu sensu (Balibar, 2005; Debaene, 2008; Viveiros de Castro, 2008; Wyseman, 2009).

**Kinship and Group Structures**

An early example of Lévi-Strauss’s structural approach, algebraic in spirit although phrased with the vocabulary of phonological linguistic, is his article on the ‘atom of kinship,’ originally published in 1945 (Lévi-Strauss, 1958). The ‘atom of kinship’ refers to a set of four interconnected relationships, namely husband/wife, brother/sister, father/son, and nephew/maternal uncle, one each associated with an ‘attitude,’ which Lévi-Strauss characterizes with a ‘+’ or ‘−’ mark. The structural approach consist here in seeking a law behind the patterns in the sets of ‘attitudes’ found in particular societies, rather than explaining each attitude by social, historical, or psychological causes. This is the proposed law: the husband/wife relationship and the sister/brother relationship have opposite signs, as do the father/son and the avuncular relationships. There are four models which satisfy this requirement: (+/−, +/−), (+/−, −/+), (−/+ , +/−), and (−/+ , −/+). This model provides an example of group structure known as the Klein group. For let S transform (+/−, +/−) into (+/−, −/+), and let T transform (+/−, −/+) into (−/+ , +/−); ST will then be the transformation which takes (+−, −+/) into (−/+, −/+) and will have the same effect as TS. We call the transformation that leaves (+−, −+/) unchanged the ‘identity’ I. The set of four transformations I, S, T, and ST is closed (any composition of transformations is again a transformation) and for each transformation there is an inverse transformation. Lévi-Strauss’ own language, the ‘family of models’ for attitudes within the kinship atom is represented as a group of transformations (Lévi-Strauss, 1958) which preserve as invariant feature the contrast between affinity and consanguinity (the husband/wife and the brother/sister relations have opposite signs, as the maternal uncle/sister’s son and the father/son relations do). The structure of the atom of kinship illustrates all the features that Lévi-Strauss listed as being required by ‘structural analysis,’ and which may be summarized as the specification of the transformations which generate a ‘family of models’ having in common the same ‘pairs of oppositions’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1958). It also illustrates the importance of the distinction between empirical data about social relationships and models built up on the basis of those relationships from which structural laws are obtained. Underlying the ‘atom of kinship’ model there is a social theory according to which kinship is not fundamentally a matter of consanguinity ties of siblingship and filiation, but necessarily includes alliance, either as affinity between in-laws in the same generation, as between brothers-in-law, or across generations, as between nephew and maternal uncle. The contrasted attitudes displayed by the ‘atom of kinship’ are explained as the necessary opposition between consanguinity and affinity in human social life, which ultimately express the contrast between nature and culture. This thesis is unfolded in Lévi-Strauss’s The Elementary Structures of Kinship. In Lévi-Strauss’s analysis, rules of marriage that prescribe marriage among cousins but forbids it among parallel cousins, as well as kinship terminologies which equate cross-cousins with spouses, are viewed as cultural expressions of an unconscious principle that requires the obligation to give sisters away in order to receive wives from others. In other words, rules and vocabularies are the conscious expressions of unconscious structures of reciprocity. According to Lévi-Strauss, ‘elementary structures of kinship’ exist in societies where people belong to descent groups, and where the choice of wife is governed by obligatory rules that determine the descent group in which a man can seek a wife. On a more specialized level, Lévi-Strauss classified these ‘elementary structures’ as two major types. In the first major type, or restricted exchange, women are exchanged reciprocally between paired descent groups, a global, or statistical, social process which the result, at the level of norms regulating individual action, of a rule of marriage according to which a man marries a woman classified as his mother’s brother’s and as his father’s sister’s (a bilateral cross-cousin). In the second major type, ‘generalized exchange,’ women exchange is unilateral, with two possibilities: matrilateral cross-cousin marriage (a man takes for a wife a woman classified as his mother’s brother’s daughter), or patrilateral cross-cousin marriage (a man takes for a wife his father’s sister’s daughter). Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage leads to cycles of exchange which require several generations to close, in contrast with the short cycles resulting from the patrilateral rule. Such consequences can be be taken as the global results of the strict working of the rules; they may also be seen as statistical effects of the existence of rules that affect the micro-level of individual behavior (Lévi-Strauss, 1967[1949]). Characteristically, such consequences are deduced under the assumption that rules are applied strictly in accordance to a model.

As in the case of the explanation of attitudes between uncles and nephews which motivated the theory of the ‘atom of kinship’, the explanation of the opposition between cousins and sisters leads theory of social life in which society is depicted as a fabric of exchanges of things and persons, either immediate or along longer circuits. This theory can be seen as an application to the domain of kinship of Marcel Mauss’ theory of gift exchange as a basic institution of social integration, which was already present in the work of the Leyden school and Marcel Granet (Hérnan, 2009, p. 395), and may be compared to economic models of social reproduction through exchange of goods (Rosman and Rubel, 2009).

The interpretation of marriage as exchanges among descent groups leads to the mathematical analysis of elementary
structures a dance of chairs in which lineages or clans interchange the roles of donors and receivers of wives, a clue taken by mathematicians since A. Weil as a sociological version of permutation groups. It should be noted that Lévi-Strauss does not assume that the real social world must obey the rules in a strict sense; as he made it clear in later writings, he only assumes that social rules, although not followed to the letter, reflect statistical phenomena towards a global picture described by the idealized structure. But the theory of elementary structures is not only formalism, since it also contains the idea that human kinship is based on the insoluble tension between the incestuous desire for autonomy and the cultural obligation of exchange. This tension is a universal human trait for Lévi-Strauss, expressed in the desire to reject the rule of culture and return to an imagined state of nature (Lévi-Strauss, 1967(1949)). This view of culture, where the influence of Freud is clearly seen, is an example of the pessimism that runs through all of Lévi-Strauss’s work like a melancholy metaanthropology: humanity does not have an internal trend toward betterment, but is a result of a nonoriented process throughout which certain structures crystallize in the shorter or longer term, only to dissolve inevitably under the influence of internal contradictions and demographic and environmental change (Lévi-Strauss, 1955). Lévi-Strauss’s kinship theory was maybe the part of his opus that fared worst after it formulated in the 1940s, in a empirical sense. His factual basis was contested early on by E. Leach (1961), while Lévi-Strauss himself noted in 1967 that ‘elementary structures’ as social systems for the regulation of marriages, implying unilinear descent according to his definition, were relatively rare in the world where cognatic systems are more frequent (Lévi-Strauss, 1967). The notion of cross-cousin marriage as the basic form of alliance was also subject to criticism for not accounting for cases as ‘Arab marriage,’ a prescribed union between paternal parallel cousins (Barry, 2000; Coelho de Souza, 2009). Recent research movements focused on modeling real social relations through graph theory can be seen as a mode of structural analysis by means of rigorous analysis and ethnography (Hamberger et al., 2011).

**Savage Thought: Structures of Order**

The broader impact of Lévi-Strauss’s work was not a consequence of his 1949 study of kinship, although it was at once reviewed by Simone de Beauvoir (who praised it, pace later feminist critiques) and received a detailed critique by Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as awakening the sympathies of philosopher Merleau-Ponty. Lévi-Strauss’s ideas broke through national and academic borders through La Pensée Sauvage, later translated as *The Savage Mind* — a multifaceted book containing general ideas about science, art, and the science of nonliterate peoples, a theory of totemism and classification systems, and a polemical, nonteleological view of history. Whereas in the decades between the 1940s and 1960s Lévi-Strauss introduced the structural method as an extension of the scientific use of models in the humanities, *The Savage Mind* emphasizes the idea that ‘savage’ or untamed thought is another form of scientific thought, which amounts to say, is capable of applying logical reasoning to sense perception. He pictured this idea through the famous analogy of the *bricoleur*, a tinker who builds structured object out of fragments found haphazardly and with no previous master plan. Such objects, be they myths or kinship terminologies, body paintings or musical pieces, technical artifacts or domesticated plants, are according to this view both historical objects and mental constructions, and therefore the same time contingent and subject to constraints. Lévi-Strauss extols the inventions and techniques of the ‘Neolithic revolution’ as lasting results of the workings of such ‘science du concret’ in the past, at the same time reminding us that this creative mind is currently active in traditional knowledge and art. *The Savage Mind* gave a detailed account of how this science of illiterate people was active in conceiving complex classification systems encompassing plants, animals, people, and cosmic phenomena. Classification systems are by no means mere sets of ‘binary oppositions,’ as in the ‘atom of kinship’ model, or permutation groups as in the ‘elementary structures’ form. They involve *order structures*, described by mathematicians as ‘conceptual lattices’ or as ‘formal ontologies,’ which attempt to show relations of inclusion and implication between categories (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 201; Parrochia and Neuville, 2013, p. 30). The investigation of ‘savage thought’ as wide-reaching modes of classifying the human and natural worlds was pursued by P. Descola (2005).

It has been said that *The Savage Mind* contains a cybernetic theory of social stability essential for structuralism: according to this interpretation, the classificatory ‘structures’ there described are regulatory devices to ensure social stability (Bloch, 1996, p. 531). This view is apparently anchored in Lévi-Strauss’s contrast between ‘cold’ and ‘hot’ societies, the first seeking to ‘annihilate time’ and retain structures, the latter valuing change and accumulation; however, as a theory of history, this view is contradicted by Lévi-Strauss insistence on ‘entropy,’ to inevitable degradation of the structure over time (Lévi-Strauss, 1955). One example is myths, which not only transform into each other, but may lose their structure and eventually die at the end of long transformational trajectories and in contact with other narrative systems.

**Myths: Transformations and Continuity**

Lévi-Strauss devoted his longest study to the structural analysis of the myths of the Americas, both in the *Mythologiques* (published in four volumes from 1964 to 1971) (Lévi-Strauss, 2008; comprising three independent little volumes originally published from 1979 to 1991). These analyses give rise again to a new way of employing structural analysis. Instead of finite models having the structure of groups, one is now confronted with myths connected by an open set of transformations. Thus, close to a 1000 myths that extend from the Chaco region of South America to Canada are viewed as part of chains of transformations, both historical-geographic and logical-metaphysical. Furthermore, in this work, Lévi-Strauss takes to the extreme his tendency to attribute the same dignity to the construction of myths as he does to scientific and artistic works: mythical thinking is the work of a collective author, persistently tackling themes of essential interest for the Amerindian mind, such as the relationship between the cosmic, terrestrial, and subterranean planes of life, as well as the opposition between animals and humans, cultural and natural objects, the
continuous and the discrete, the finite and the infinite. One can found an almost didactic example of Lévi-Strauss’s use of the ‘transformation’ concept in the opening chapters of The Jealous Potter, one of the “small mithologiques,” where Lévi-Strauss provides a detailed commentary on a set of myths from the South American Jivaro Amerindians that suggests clues to “the place of jealousy in myths on the origins of pottery,” connecting “an art of civilization, a moral sentiment and a bird” (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 32; Gow, 2009). This assertion is argued by Lévi-Strauss as follows. He first shows that myths recorded for the Jivaro area assert a connection between the art of pottery, jealousy and a bird, the Night-Hawk. These ‘empirically’ recorded connections (in myth narratives) suggest that there should be a bird linking pottery and conjugalism. Or, as Lévi-Strauss reconstructs the mythical reasoning at play: as a jealous bird (Night-Hawk) is related to the pottery-making ability of Woman, the Woman’s jealousy should be related to a pottery-making bird. The problem, says Lévi-Strauss, is that there is no such bird in the Achuar area – namely, a bird with the required in the set of myths available in the Achuar area. This situation ‘puts certain fundamental principles into play in the structural analysis of myth.’ And this is the fundamental principle: given a logically incomplete set of myths, we must seek a missing piece in another sets of myths, perhaps in nearby geographical settings, perhaps in another semantic context, in which the mythical reasoning comes to a closure. Let us illustrate this mechanism: Lévi-Strauss finds a conclusion of the logical sequence initiated in the Peruvian rain forest in myths recorded in the Chaco plains, where there is indeed a pottery-making bird, the Oven-bird. While the Night-Hawk is a jealous and lonely bird that cries on moonlit nights remembering his lost cosmic partner, the oven-bird is a happily married bird that lives in a house he built from clay together with his wife. In Lévi-Strauss’s terms, the Oven-bird is a ‘transformation’ of the Night-Hawk that preserves the logical structure underlying the explanation of the origins of pottery, while connecting two different ecological setting, that of the Peruvian pre-andean rain forest and that of the Chaco plains. In sum, the analysis of myths must combine ‘empirical deductions,’ that is, those which are based directly on the mythical material, and ‘transcendental deductions’ that make it possible to “close a cycle of transformations” (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 80).

Myths transform themselves in history (Gow, 2001) and are geographically connected by a process of dissemination that is, however, obliged to follow logical procedures (Carneiro da Cunha, 1973). It has been argued that the mythical transformations invoked by Lévi-Strauss are closer to the grammar of dreams and to surrealistic aesthetics than to formal logic (Viveiros de Castro, 2008). Instead of the turalism of binary pairs that form closed and finite groups, we find here, according to a post-modern interpretation of Lévi-Strauss’ views pioneered by Viveiros de Castro, a situation where “the subject is always a particular state of a system of transformations whose boundaries are radically contingent,” and in which the concept of structure “does not favor any desire for closure, completion or compactness” (Viveiros de Castro, 2008). These characteristics are particularly supported by Story of Lynx, the last work that Lévi-Strauss devoted to the analysis of myths (Lévi-Strauss, 1991). In it, the author explains that ‘binary pairs’ are just a particular example of ‘transformations’ that include inversions, equivalencies, symmetries, and contradictions (pp. 249ff.); that transformations occur along multiple semantic axes that include time and space, the body and stars, sexuality and cuisine; finally, that ‘transformation’ can take place ‘by degrees,’ that ‘unstable dualism’ is the rule, that mythological systems are in a state of ‘perpetual imbalance,’ and that mythological transformations are therefore open (pp. 306–316). Furthermore, mythological transformations do not appear as the product of a mythical mind floating in space, but as the work of myth builders whose work must respect the historical boundaries imposed by the settlement of the Americas. Mechanical and symmetrical group structures can occur locally, but in the overall analysis, they give way to irreversible historical processes such as the colonization of the America.

**The Legacy of Structuralism**

Structuralism was the target of criticisms that demanded either a return to history to the detriment of ‘synchrony,’ a return to ‘thick ethnography,’ preferably to the pursuit of doces, or a rehabilitation of the active and revolutionary subject from his alleged position of an ‘effect’ of structures (Turner, 1973, 2009). The influence of structuralism remained strong among specialists in lowland South America, where Lévi-Strauss had his original ethnographic experience. Vigorous research programs on the social structure of indigenous societies of Central Brazil were conducted in dialogue with his theses although in a critical vein (Maybury-Lewis, 1979). Carneiro da Cunha pointed to the role of mythical structures dealing with messianic movements in Amazonia (1973) and of the connection between structure and the persona; S. Hugh-Jones (1979b) and C. Hugh-Jones (1979a) have shown how a close ethnography of ritual and body practices could be framed in structuralism terms, while P. Gow demonstrated the possibility of combining a historical-biographical approach with the structural analysis of myths (Gow, 2001, 2009). E. Viveiros de Castro is a foremost example of Lévi-Strauss’ influence on contemporary South American anthropological thinking, combined with a Deleuzian ‘post-structural’ twist (Viveiros de Castro, 1992), while P. Descola has developed a wide-ranging theory of sociocosmologies rooted in the structuralist heritage (Descola, 2005).

In a more general sense, what is left of structuralism in the twenty-first century? Perhaps the notion that the world of natural and human phenomena can either be scrutinized in depth toward the complexity of particular objects – whether a painting or a novel, an equation or an animal species, a year in history and a village in the country, a concept or a musical piece – or analyzed in pursuit of generality and abstraction, placing the individual thing so speak within a set of variations on a same theme. In this sense, both ‘French structuralism’ with its mentalist tradition and literary style and ‘British structuralism’ with its adherence to empirical sobriety are as many varieties of the encompassing nineteenth-century epistemological strive for generalization and model building which made its marks in sciences, humanities, and arts along the twentieth century, and was since then not so much refuted as assimilated to the point of becoming a set of truisms in domains such as social network.
analysis, having been thus incorporated into common sense, structuralism may be as well be forgotten.
Translated by H. Sabrina Gledhill.

See also: Anthropology and History; Archaeology, Theory in; Cognitive Anthropology; Culture: Contemporary Views; Exchange in Anthropology; Kinship in Anthropology; Primitive Society; Psychological Anthropology; Time, Anthropology of.

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