

Claude Lévi-Strauss, RIP

Searcher After the Savage Mind—and Ours

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist who died last year at the age of one hundred, was for decades a certified celebrity in his homeland. In his final months, a new collection of indigenous implements in the Musée d'Orsay was named for him, and his centenary generated many retrospectives at universities across the globe. Following his death, obituaries and remembrances appeared in all the world's leading newspapers.

At first glance, Lévi-Strauss might seem an all-too-typical mid-century anthropologist. His writing is heavily reliant on Marx and sometimes obscure to the point of meaninglessness, especially when he appropriates the jargon of Sartre or the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. His reclusive manners and his curiosity about *le sauvage* marked Lévi-Strauss as the Rousseau of the twentieth century. He was withering on the topic of modernity, fully the stereotype of the Frenchman who finds horror in the prospect of an anodyne global monoculture.

Lévi-Strauss sought out Amazonian societies that seemed almost timeless,

untouched by the outside world and its conventions of diversified, wage-based labor, urbanization, and commercial agriculture. His resulting works, especially the four-volume *Mythologiques*, are as exact as any logic textbook. The customs he observed were taken down with the rigor of a lawyer, although customary practice was not often uniform and, while Lévi-Strauss could sometimes boast that in the 1930s he became the first white man to see a village in the Amazon's forest interior, even these remote parts of the world had frequently felt the reverberations of the moderns. (In this vein, there are many droll stories. One among them is this: In the 1830s, the missionary Pierre-Jean De Smet, S.J., became the first priest to arrive at the Flathead Indians' lakeside homeland in modern-day Montana, only to find a group of Indians who knew all about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—from Algonquin employees of the Hudson Bay Company, who had been coming and going in the area long before any actual white man was seen there.)

Yet, breathless before this unknown world, Lévi-Strauss purported to

discover deeper meaning in all things mundane, like the manner of planting manioc or the etiquette governing a child's interactions with his maternal aunt in an exogamous society. Inevitably, Lévi-Strauss's method strikes the reader as a bit too precious. Today's perhaps more jaded anthropologist prefers as subjects people stuck between worldviews: the Pentecostal wage-laborer in Nairobi whose grandmother problematically keeps up old rituals, or the Laotian peasant whose traditional agronomy has been modified by government regulation of the crops he may plant, the water he may use, and the compensation he can receive for the harvest. Lévi-Strauss was, by contrast, a purist searching for worlds of rules other than his own.

Unfortunately, in place of Lévi-Strauss's detailed but overreaching classifications has come much the opposite: a vanilla "multiculturalism," which acknowledges and is premised upon enduring and important cultural difference, but which, in spite of this, rarely advocates for a serious interrogation of the differences that divide cultures. This multiculturalism has given us little real insight into the human condition; rather, it has become a strategy to achieve harmony in the school or workplace, or a political criticism of a caricature of "the West." In practice, multiculturalist sensitivity tends to render other cultures as mere foils of Western civilization. Ideologies and cultures with lives of their own are thus transformed into cheap proxies, tools for Westerners to

criticize themselves. Such is the fate of indigenous Americans in our pop culture, who through *Pocahontas*, *Captain Planet*, and *Avatar* become spokesmen for fashionable Western notions about ecology. More perilously, it is how many Americans conceive of Muslim fanatics, treating their behavior as a mere reaction to U.S. foreign policy or Western culture without attempting to understand it within the comprehensive and alien theological world in which the genuine Islamist operates. The multiculturalist tendency to play down those aspects of another society which a Westerner would find unbecoming is an indication that, far from respecting other cultures, we distort them to fit our own models of reasoning and theology. This denial of the Islamist's or the Native American's agency, integral to multiculturalism's myopic critique of the West, ironically contributes to the very syndrome the ideology purports to abhor: cultural imperialism.

Lévi-Strauss was, in this respect, no multiculturalist. Sincerely held belief, he well understood, is important to and defining of one's identity. His cultural geography was a tapestry rich with moralities woven together, separated, and mutated by the force of history. It was a historian's job to tell the story of one space over the course of time, he said. But it was the anthropologist's job to glimpse instantly the world's cultures, as they lay spread out across space by history's great migrations, and to probe them for their themes and common elements in the here and now.

Here is how Lévi-Strauss described, in *The Savage Mind* (1962), the most significant commonality he perceived, which was more epistemological than doctrinal:

It is forgotten that each of the tens or hundreds of thousands of societies which have existed side by side in the world or succeeded one another since man's first appearance, has claimed that it contains the essence of all the meaning and dignity of which human society is capable and, reduced though it may have been to a small nomad band or a hamlet lost in the depths of the forest, its claim has in its own eyes rested on a moral certainty comparable to that which we can invoke in our own case.

Here, Lévi-Strauss offered a sober and beautiful—one might even say conservative—rendition of multiculturalism. At its base, his corpus is an attempt to grapple with the problem of discerning a universal morality, though he clearly thought the uncton with which divers moralities were held throughout the world was an indicator of a type of universality.

Since multiculturalism in its present form is so fatuous, those Westerners who champion a morality in the form of a universal natural law unfortunately tend to ignore the real problems presented by the extant moral diversity of the world. Particularly, they fail to give a credible explanation for why their intuitions are in fact, or ought to be,

universal. Much Catholic intellectual firepower, for instance, has been spent in the Thomistic service of converting our own history's "is"—especially on matters of sexuality—to an "ought." This approach is countered by Lévi-Strauss's method, which begins with a much wider "is." On the subject of sexuality, for instance, he would note the stability of societies in which polygamy flourishes, or various other practices and customs that would seem to belie the universality of what we might prefer to consider natural law.

The dilemma posed to any claim of universality by the world's extant cultural diversity had been considered well before Lévi-Strauss. By the late 1700s, the imperial powers of Europe were being forced to cope with their vassals' differing conceptions of everything from law and order to land tenure. Both Edmund Burke in his India speeches and Alexis de Tocqueville in his private letters and parliamentary reports from Algeria speak of the difficulty of reconciling European values with the ones found in these novel possessions. But, equally, what they did discern in these foreign lands was not a moral vacuum, nor a system totally at odds with their own. This, in the end, was why Burke found Warren Hastings to be unconvincing when lawyers for the East India Company ex-governor tried to excuse his plundering and corruption by alleging that it was merely the way the tyrannical *nabobs* ruled. Or why Tocqueville lambasted the absolutism of French rule, which dissolved many Islamic cultural institutions like

madrassas and *wagfs* (charitable foundations) and, in Tocqueville's view, eroded the base of Algeria's civil society and made the colony less, not more, governable. Eventually, both the British and French empires capitulated to the difference that separated them from their subjects.

So, to return to the anthropologist's central question: What is the thing that unites humanity, which Burke and Tocqueville both assumed, if the force of history has made man's cultures so alien to one another?

Lévi-Strauss thought he had found the answer in what he called "primitive thought." This was not a derogatory term, nor was it meant to imply simplicity, but rather how people in pre-modern, subsistence societies ordered their lives. At the heart of "primitive thought," Lévi-Strauss postulated in *The Savage Mind*, is the organic taxonomy embodied within the amazingly complex vocabularies most indigenous peoples have to describe their natural environments. The "systematic nature of relations" within these vocabularies revealed an "internal coherence and [a] practically unlimited capacity for extension." Yet "primitive thought" was not just a system of naming. Man's own communities were arranged by the traits observed in nature, particularly in animals. What is clear from the mound of Lévi-Strauss's evidence, if not his overbearing analyses, is that man's relationship with nature was complex to the point where, to give one of his examples, a band of Plains Indians took on the name of

the subcutaneous fat of the black bear, and sought a way of living that would emulate that substance's traits.

In relying on this taxonomy-turned-morality, Lévi-Strauss figured that man in his natural environment was not as fractious as the differences of the modern world would suggest. Instead, he believed man's attempts to organize his environment revealed a "great unity of method and homogeneity of doctrine which constitutes the fully normal state of our intelligence." Lévi-Strauss was intrigued by the common words between languages, and his *Mythologiques* purported to follow a myth from South America to Alaska. His method in this respect has been popularized by writers like the anthropologist-explorer Thor Heyerdahl and the author Peter Matthiessen, whose New Age travelogues have followed everything from shamanism to millet beer in these customs' journey over the Bering land-bridge.

Religion was, to Lévi-Strauss, a "humanization of natural laws." It might be colored by revelation, but its commandments shared the imperatives of nature, chiefly reproduction and social closeness. A person of an Aristotelian persuasion might find he shares with Lévi-Strauss the premise that natural law is, in fact, natural, and deducible over time by some process of human reason.

Lévi-Strauss made plain just how much of pre-modern thought was devoted to organizing procreation and social relations—a process where man "observes, experiments, classifies, and

theorizes.” An endogamous society, restricted to marrying within a clan, often was bound to a complicated set of exclusions that were followed to prevent retardation or other congenital defects. An exogamous society had mechanisms in place to ensure that the foundations of one clan’s particular rule were not undermined through miscegenation. With regard to social relations, Hillary Clinton’s paraphrase of African villagers’ thoughts on the matter is, we must admit, correct: It does take a village, or at least most peoples throughout history have thought so.

These natural imperatives, Lévi-Strauss thought, were written into religion and myth at their conceptions. These are meager starting points of a universal law, of course—one might say reproduction and social closeness are

mere tactics of self-preservation. And even these have unfortunate exceptions forced upon humans by their habitat, such as the hunter-gatherer who must make the cruel decision to abandon a newborn for want of resources. But these are clearly the rare exceptions to a much wider natural-moral rule, which a broad spectrum of societies has ratified through their various cultures. Lévi-Strauss, when he died, was a true multiculturalist—one who could not deny the diversity of culture or the sincerity of the beliefs that lead to cultural difference—but, nonetheless, a man who believed that underneath it all lies a singular humanity.

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