

## ȘTEFAN MARIȘ<sup>1</sup>, ROMÂNIA

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### Claude Lévi-Strauss și reconstrucția antropologiei

#### Rezumat

La începutul secolului trecut, una dintre cele mai importante preocupări ale științelor umaniste a fost aceea de a rezolva problema calității lor științifice, care a fost direct legată de metodele utilizate. Reformarea metodologiei a devenit, astfel, un obiectiv esențial al modernizării epistemologice. Spre deosebire de lumea științifică anglo-saxonă, unitatea metodologică a devenit în Franța un obiectiv important al înnoirii intelectuale abia pe la mijlocul secolului. Pornind de la lingvistică, structuralismul se constituie într-un demers de contracarare a defazării epistemologice locale, ca o variantă franceză a unui proiect unificator ce își propunea să dezvolte o știință generală, semiologia, care să regrupeze toate științele umaniste în jurul studiului limbajului sau semnului. Primul care a formulat un asemenea program unificator a fost Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009). Antropologul francez, în anii sejurului său în Statele Unite, a intrat în contact cu lucrările unor autori precum F. Boas, A. Kroeber sau R. Benedict, unde erau expuse o seamă de idei de bază ale antropologiei culturale americane. În esență, antropologii americani susțineau că diferitele culturi sunt definite printr-un anumit model iar numărul tipurilor de cultură posibile este limitat. Pornind de aici, Lévi-Strauss și-a început demersul său de schițare a modelului promovat de structuralism ce ajunge, în cele din urmă, să se impună în fața altor forme de expresie.

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<sup>1</sup> Centrul Județean pentru Conservarea și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale Maramureș, România/The County Center for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture/ [cpmm@rdslink.ro](mailto:cpmm@rdslink.ro)

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## **Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Reconstruction of Anthropology**

### **Summary**

At the beginning of the last century, one of the most important preoccupations of humanistic sciences was that of solving the matter of their scientific quality, which had been directly linked to the methods of investigation used. The reform of methodology became, thus, an essential aim of the epistemologic modernisation. Unlike the case of the Anglo-Saxon scientists, methodological unity became in France a major objective of the intellectual renewal only towards the end of the century. Starting from linguistics, structuralism becomes an endeavour of fighting against local epistemological lack of synchronization, as a French variant of a unifying project, that wanted to develop a general kind of science, semiology, which might re-group all humanistic sciences around the study of language and of the sign. The first to formulate such a unifying project was Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009). The French anthropologist, during his years spent in the United States, came into contact with the work of such authors as F. Boas, A. Kroeber or R. Benedict, in which they exposed certain basic ideas of the American cultural anthropology. Essentially American anthropologists maintained that the various cultures were defined by a certain model, and the number of possible types of culture was limited. Starting from here, Lévi-Strauss sketched the model promoted by structuralism, which would finally impose its methods.

## Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Reconstruction of Anthropology

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the first researcher who tried to unify all humanistic sciences in a common project, started from the premise that anthropology was prisoner in a pre-scientific state of stagnation (if not a crisis per se), and the solution could not be any other but an appeal to linguistics. According to the French anthropologist, only linguistics could be labeled as science from among the entire assembly of humanistic fields of research, as it was the only one that had succeeded in knowing the nature of the facts to be analysed, and in finding a positive method. This special role that C. Lévi-Strauss attributed to linguistics derived from two categories of factors, signalled by the author in his studies „Analiza structurală în lingvistică și antropologie”/Structural analysis in linguistics and anthropology/ and in „Limba și societate”/Language and society/, reunited in the anthology *Antropologia structurală*<sup>2</sup>/Structural Anthropology/. Firstly, this role of linguistics is determined by its object – language – which constitutes itself in the only social phenomenon that can be studied scientifically (using scientific parameters), due to its two essential characteristics: a) its being situated at the level of subconscious thought (which means that the influence of the observant over the object to be observed is minimal); b) its early appearance in the development of mankind (thus offering the scientists long series of statistic data). Secondly, this role is consolidated by the method imposed by the hard nucleus of linguistics – structural phonetics. Consequently, in the opinion of the anthropologist, structural phonetics represented within the framework of social sciences what nuclear physics represents for exact sciences, constituting itself as a valid instrument that was capable of doing away with naturalistic and evolutionist models<sup>3</sup>.

Starting from the analysis of the complex relations between language and culture, C. Lévi-Strauss remarked the fact that language is both a product and a result of culture, and also a condition of culture, in the sense that culture has a similar structure, being constructed with the aid of certain oppositions and correlations of a number of basic elements. In other words, this similarity is induced by the fact that both are parallel modalities of a fundamental activity of the human spirit, the symbolic function, which is situated at the non-reflexive and non-historical level of the subconscious. The basic idea of structural anthropology is that the subconscious constitutes the universal framework of the human and the social, cultural acts being similar to language acts, the expression of its symbolic function. The consequence was the thesis of structural analogy of social and cultural forms. The various sequences of the social life (systems of kinship, rules of marriage, etc.), as well as myths, beliefs, political ideology, art, or fashion have the same nature: they are systems of behaviour, or symbolic languages, that is, they are projections on the level of conscious and socialised thought of the universal laws that coordinate the subconscious activity of the spirit<sup>4</sup>.

By connecting structural laws with the subconscious, structuralism harmonised its linguistic basis with another typical doctrine for the attitude of questioning traditional philosophy, that is, psychoanalysis, which, coming against the pretensions of the conscience of being the basis for meaning, had undermined the classical theory of the conscious self. C. Lévi-Strauss, unlike Freud, eliminated the appeal to affects, emotions and pulsations, as in his opinion the subconscious was trans-personal and always empty of meaning. Even since his study „Introducere: istorie și

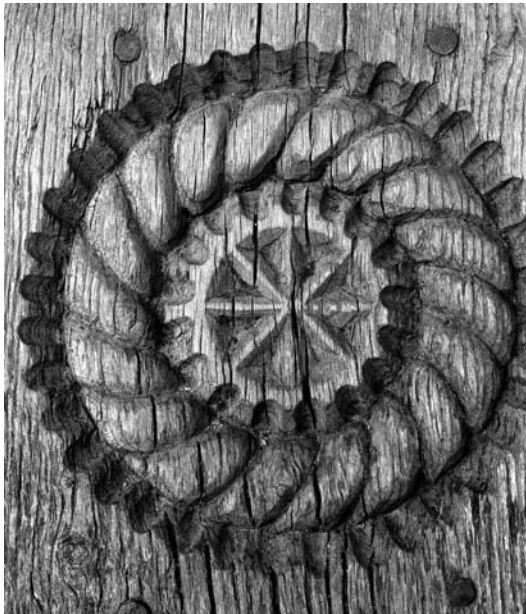
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<sup>2</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologie structurală*, Editura Politică, București, 1978

<sup>3</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *op.cit.*, pp. 40-45

<sup>4</sup> *idem*, pp. 75-85

etnologie”/Introduction: history and ethnology/, the anthropologist declared his opposition to biologism, indicating the specific of ethnology in approaching social phenomena as subconscious symbolic systems<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the subconscious postulated by structuralism is not a pulsational subconscious but, rather, a „Kantian”one: categorial, combinatory, and purely formal, without any reference to the observing, thinking subject; this is why structuralism developed an anti-reflexive philosophy, as well as an anti-idealistic and anti-phenomenological one. Between the observer and the system a non-historical relation is established, which excludes the „hermeneutical circle”, or the historicity of the comprehension relation. This is why the subconscious order postulated by structuralism was susceptible of objective treatment, independent of the observer, and, consequently, structural anthropology was considered to be a science, and not „philosophy”. Structural analogy of social and cultural forms, as well as the designation of the subconscious as their common basis resulted in the interpretation of society as a whole, starting from a theory of communication, and the applying of structural linguistics to cultural forms.



Simbol solar de pe poartă maramureșeană;  
foto: Felician Săteanu



Cruce celtică; foto: Felician Săteanu

According to Lévi-Strauss, in order to understand the real, one has to reduce one type of reality to another. In other words, what is observed in social life only supplies one with a false appearance, an illusion of that reality. In order to correctly describe the social, one must sketch models. These models, though, are not conscious, so social actors do not have the capacity to communicate them to us. The members of a society are not conscious of the rules, the principles governing their social lives. When asked, a member of a traditional community, will explain certain rites, or customs in a simple manner, saying that this is how his father and his forefathers used to do, and will not be able to give a more complex answer. Conscious models are only rationalizations, legitimations of certain practices, and tell us nothing as to the profound explanation of social life. Exactly like the talking subject who is incapable of explaining the mechanisms of language, the social actor cannot reveal the profound nature of social practices.

<sup>5</sup> *idem*, p.8

Consequently, the task of anthropology would be that of constructing subconscious models, being forced to include in its analysis the subconscious aspects of collective phenomena, unlike history, which is satisfied with revealing the conscious aspects of social phenomena.

In the case of myths, the structural analysis applied by C. Lévi-Strauss intended to surpass both symbolist theory (which declared myth as a separate object from its environment, trying to identify a hidden meaning for each isolated mythic sequence), and functionalism (which approached the social function of myths in their specific contexts). Considering these theories, the anthropologist maintained the fundamental ambiguity, or the specific character of myth articulated at three different levels. Firstly, myth belongs to the sphere of speech, and secondly, to that of language. At the third level – of a linguistic nature, but different from the first two – it displayed the same character of an „absolute object”<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, the anthropologist included the study of myths in a symbolic system, but, nevertheless, he developed the notions of system, combination and structure, fragmenting myth into minimal constitutive units, called „mythemes”, which he then grouped in „packs of relations”, or paradigms, read in an analogous manner as one would read musical scripts of an orchestra. Contrary to the particularist vision of American anthropologists, his endeavour was concentrated on an internal decoding of the discourse of various myths, seen in relation one to another, and analysed within the context of their autonomy from the functions and conditions of communications, in such a way as to identify a final common structure<sup>7</sup>. In this manner, by a structural analysis, he considered that he could get to the rules of transformation that aided to the gliding from one variant to the other of a myth, through operations similar to those of algebra. There was only one step further to the affirmation that myths were reluctant to external determinism, to contingent constraints, their analysis representing the optimum path towards the invariants of the human spirit, to the cultural universals, that is, the necessary and obligatory rules for life in society<sup>8</sup>. In order to establish the relation between the universality of „culture” and the particularity of „cultures”, C. Lévi-Strauss also launched the metaphor of the game of cards, which represented a historical and civilization „given fact”, contingent distribution, implying interpretations and particular rules of the game, respectively, as well as different games that take place with the same cards. The role of anthropology ended when, after the identification of the cards and the establishing of the rules of the game, it was able to describe all the games, and all the possible games. In this manner, structural anthropology maintains that it can „drill” the universal basis of Culture, at that very point where the break from Nature intervenes.

The employment of structural analysis in anthropology had a series of methodologic consequences, which can be considered as paradigmatic features of structuralism at the same time. Thus, to the rejection of the explanatory appeal to the conscience of the human subject, he added the critique of the efficiency of the historical endeavor in understanding the cultural sequences and in the turning upside down the relations between system and history. If for historicism „to understand” pre-supposed to identify the initial point and the direction of the evolution, for structuralism the systemic organizations were firstly understandable, as arrangements in a given state. As to history, it was supposed to take a secondary role, as an alteration of the system, and thus, it got to the point where it was excluded from the relation of the observing mind with the system, during the process of comprehension. Although history was not completely excluded from Lévi-Strauss’ demonstration, it was part of the register of simple contingency: the dichotomies brought into discussion

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<sup>6</sup> *idem*, p. 250

<sup>7</sup> *idem*, p. 250

<sup>8</sup> *idem*, pp. 275-285

(nature/culture, form/content etc.) places the event in the sphere of contingency, and the structure in that of science. This is where his determination came in identifying and classifying the „invariants” (that is, those basic cultural elements, identical from one culture to another ), beyond the diversity of the varieties discovered. Within such an attempt that has in view history/ temporality, we can also identify an essential feature of the structuralist paradigm: the rejection of historical teleology and the prevalence given to the present – but an immobile present, in which the past and the future are dissolved in static temporality. The preference of structuralism for syntax in the detriment of semantics, is another essential particularity of the laborious attempt to understand cultural fact. The consequence was a rejection of the signified, or, rather, an undervaluing of it, to the gain of the significant. Lévi-Strauss was the one to formulate the canonic thesis of structuralism according to which the code precedes the message, being independent from it, the subject being ruled by the law of the signifying.

One last important consequence of the use of the linguistic model was the exclusion of the human subject, which was identified as an epistemological obstacle; instead of him, the rule, the code, or the structure was favoured. As to myths, if in the beginning Lévi-Strauss maintained that they had „no author”, in the end, the anthropologist affirmed with great insistence the methodological necessity to bracket the subject, in order to have access to the structure of the myth. In fact, the critique of the subjectivity and of humanism represented another essential component of the structuralist paradigm.

To sum up, we might conclude that structuralism offers a central position to the subconscious, the signifying and to synchrony rather than to the conscious, the signified and diachrony, rejecting the epistemological relevance of the subject, of the referent and of history. Thus, the modality is that of relational thinking, avoiding substantialism, and frequently transforming middle formalism in its very aim. Finally, structuralism identifies in language the essential dimension of culture, and in its analysis the key to philosophy and to humanistic sciences.

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