OBITUARY

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009)

Leading anthropologist of his generation.

Claude Lévi-Strauss had only the slightest experience of ethnographic fieldwork, and had no formal training in anthropology. Nevertheless, his ideas transformed the discipline, and profoundly influenced the other human sciences. He died on 31 October.

The son of an artist father, and the grandson of a rabbi in Strasbourg, France, Lévi-Strauss was educated in law and philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1935, he joined a French contingent at the new University of São Paulo in Brazil. He embraced the opportunity, because he had a very particular ambition. Jean-Jacques Rousseau once suggested that an expedition should be sent to the Americas to study human nature in its essential state, uncorrupted by civilization. A devotee of Rousseau's philosophy, Lévi-Strauss was determined to execute the master's plan.

During his university holidays, Lévi-Strauss made expeditions to study remote Amerindian settlements, but almost all of this work was done at telegraph posts where Indians were in contact with government agencies and traders. Only towards the end of his travels did he make brief contact with an isolated band living in the old style, but naturally enough they spoke no Portuguese. "Alas! They were only too savage," Lévi-Strauss reported. "They were as close to me as a reflection in a mirror; I could touch them, but I could not understand them."

This adventure might have been no more than an interlude. But shortly after Lévi-Strauss returned to France, the German army invaded the country and he became an exile in New York. At a loose end, he wrote up his Brazilian field notes, became an informal member of the anthropology circle at Columbia University and spent long days combing the anthropology shelves in the New York Public Library. "What I know of anthropology I learned during those years," he later remarked.

Although his American colleagues were steeped in regional ethnography, they were notoriously suspicious of theoretical abstractions. Lévi-Strauss, however, was determined to use observations of hunter-gatherers as the basis for a theory of human nature, like a more empirical Rousseau. Such a soaring ambition required a new theoretical framework. Inspiration came from a fellow exile in New York, the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson. Following the path-breaking contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure, linguistics was in the throes of a theoretical revolution. Lévi-Strauss concluded that it would show the way to a new, generalizing, structural anthropology.

Jakobson was particularly interested in

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phonemics, the branch of linguistics that deals with the communication of meaning through sounds. He claimed to have split the atom of linguistics, the phoneme. The phoneme had been viewed as the smallest significant unit of sound in speech, but according to Jakobson it was itself a bundle of features made up of pairs of contrasting elements. So, for instance, English speakers invest the contrasting b and p sounds with meaning (the words 'bill' and 'pill' are obviously different to our ears), whereas in other languages the distinction may be unmarked and unheard. Lévi-Strauss argued that systems of classification are constructed on a similar pattern of binary oppositions.

Returning to Paris in 1949, Lévi-Strauss found employment at the Museum of Man and then the École Pratique des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne. His massive doctoral thesis, published that year, argued that the imposition of a taboo on incest marked the break between a natural and a cultural order, obliging men to exchange sisters with other men, and so creating family and kinship networks. In the simplest (and implicitly oldest) systems, these networks are structured by a binary classification of relatives into two classes: unmarriageable kin and marriageable affines.

In 1959, Lévi-Strauss was appointed to a chair at the College of France in Paris. He now began to publish his most influential studies, which dealt with systems of thought. *The Savage Mind* (1962) argued that Native Americans, and other hunter-gatherers from Australia to Africa, operate a "logic of the concrete" — they order images taken from the world around them in a series of binary oppositions. This home-made natural science provides metaphors for social relationships. In many languages, for example, the Sun and the Moon are associated with male and female characteristics. Paired species of birds and animals are contrasted in terms of colouring, feeding habits, or some other defining features, and are then associated with other paired objects (Australian Aboriginals, for instance, associate the Sun with the crow and the eaglehawk with the Moon). Such categorizations symbolize the social contrasts between men and women, or between pairs of human clans or occupations.

In his masterpiece — a collection of four volumes on American mythology, beginning with the *The Raw and the Cooked* in 1964 and culminating with *The Naked Man* in 1971 — Lévi-Strauss demonstrated how systems of classification are put to work in myths that are at once epics, moral treatises and accounts of the world. He proposed that the initial premises of myths (say, that women are lunar, men solar) are played with in subsequent versions to yield new premises. These transformations follow implicit rules that allow only a sort of logical progression, in the form of the inversion of the initial terms, or a series of substitutions by which one binary pair replaces another. As he put it: "The kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and ... the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of things to which it is applied."

Lévi-Strauss notoriously claimed that he had a neolithic intelligence, that his thought was intuitively sympathetic to that of hunter-gatherers. His grand theory rested on a binary opposition between nature and culture (taken, of course, from Rousseau), and so between the small-scale, technically simple societies that existed during the first 150,000 years of human history and modern civilization, which rendered the simpler societies obsolete. He believed that humanity in its natural condition was adapted to the environment, whereas civilized societies endanger the environment and obliterate cultural variation. This deeply pessimistic view was conditioned by the Amazonian idyll of his youth, and the European catastrophe of the Second World War that followed. But he also believed that people everywhere ultimately thought in the same way, although about different things, and that the clash of cultures is necessary for human adaptation.

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